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**“Mowgli belongs to my pack, Shere Khan”:
Reading the Human-Animal Liaison in Jon Favreau’s film *The Jungle Book***

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Abstract:

This paper aims to attempt an ecocritical analysis of Jon Favreau’s Disney animated film *The Jungle Book* (2016). It also tries to foreground how Favreau has created a space within the film, where an amalgamation takes place between the animal and human world, thereby establishing a harmonious relationship between the two distinct species. The paper tries to show how Favreau’s film subverts the notion of speciesism. According to Peter Singer “Speciesism” is a tendency in which the members of a particular species care for the members of their own species ignoring the members of other species. Favreau’s film defies socially constructed concepts of ‘animals’ and ‘humans’. The film follows the Utilitarian principle of equality (proposed by Jeremy Bentham), giving equal moral status to the animals and human beings. Although there can be overlapping spaces between the two different species, the film shows that the animals and human beings do not lose their distinctive identities. The film is perceptive in its characterization and beautifully explores the inherent connection between man and Nature.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Speciesism, Utilitarianism.

I

Ecocriticism as Cheryll Glotfelty puts it in her Introduction to the collection of essays entitled *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* is: “[t]he study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). But today ecocriticism has widened its scope. Rightly does Paula Willoquet Maricondi in his Introduction to the collection of essays entitled *Framing the World: Exploration in Ecocriticism and Film* points out: “[e]cocriticism has expounded beyond the area of literary analysis to embrace the study of other forms of cultural production, including theoretical discourse, music, photography, virtual environments, and films and video” (1). Maricondi further states: “Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interactions, negotiations and interconnections between the human and the non-human” (1). In this film *The Jungle Book* (2016), we can see how a man-cub (Mowgli) and the animals of the Jungle are involved in peaceful reciprocal interactions. Glotfelty significantly points out that: “In most literary theory ‘the world’ is synonymous with society – the social sphere. Ecocriticism expands the notion of ‘the world’ to include the entire

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ecosphere” (xix). Favreau’s *The Jungle Book* also includes the entire ecosystem comprising of both the human and non-human worlds. The film is about a congruous and congenial relation between a man cub Mowgli and the animals of the jungle. Through this strong bonding Favreau has tried to show that the boundary between humans and animals is arbitrary and moreover irrelevant.

II

From Literary to Cinematic Ecocriticism

The term Ecocriticism was probably first coined in 1978 by William Rueckert in his essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism”. Cheryll Glotfelty in her introduction to the collection of essays entitled *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* points out that ecocriticism according to Rueckert is: “[t]he application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature” (xx). Rueckert’s definition is restrictive while Glotfelty’s definition which she gives in her Introduction considers “all possible relations between literature and the physical environment”(xx). Ecocriticism today has widened beyond the area of literary analysis. Greg Garrard says in the First chapter of his book *Ecocriticism: The New Critical Idiom* that ecocriticism:

[h]as turned towards a more general cultural ecocriticism, with studies of popular scientific writing, film, TV, art, architecture and other cultural artefacts such as theme parks, zoos, and shopping malls. As ecocritics seek to offer a truly transformative discourse, enabling us to analyse and criticize the world in which we live, attention is increasingly given to the broad range of cultural processes and products in which, and through which, the complex negotiations of nature and culture takes place. (4)

Karla Armbruster and Kathleen Wallace’s collection of essays, *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, reflects on the perspective of many practitioners of ecocriticism: “One of ecocriticism’s most important tasks at this point of time is expanding its boundaries . . . to address a wider spectrum of texts” (2). Maricondi says that: “Ecocriticism helps us to identify works that have an environmental orientation” (2), that is, that fit the three criteria outlined by Lawrence Buell in *The Environment Imagination*:

(1) works in which the non-human is not mere backdrop for human action but helps us situate human history within natural history; (2) works that do not single out human interests as the only significant interest; (3) and works whose ethical orientation includes human responsibility and accountability toward the environment and the non-human sphere. (7-8)

According to Maricondi: “Ecocriticism acknowledges that the world is composed of the social sphere and the ecosystem, that the two are interrelated, and that the former cannot be considered outside the context of the latter” (3).

Maricondi also points out that:

Cinematic ecocriticism or eco-cinecriticism must engage with how visual representations position nature and natural features, how these are framed by the lens of the camera or shaped by the editing process. Nature in ecocinemas is socially constructed by a number of factors: the capabilities of the cinematic technology, the filmmaker's objectives, the economics of the entertainment industry; the prevailing concepts of nature, and the perceived tastes of viewers. (7-8)

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Maricondi further states that:

The term eco-cinemas has gained currency to describe films that overtly engage with environmental concerns either by exploring specific environmental justice issues or, more broadly, by making nature, from landscapes to wildlife, a primary focus. As a category of media, eco-cinemas cuts across genres and modes of production, encompassing full-length and short fiction, animations, documentary, and experimental films/videos that actively seek to inform viewers about, as well as engage their participation in, addressing issues of ecological import. (9)

These films thus play a vital role in propagating environmental awareness and consciousness. Maricondi says: “Eco-Cinemas in a more philosophical way can compel us to reflect upon what it means to inhabit this planet or to be a member of the planetary ecosystem or ecosphere and most importantly understand the value of this community in a systematic and non-hierarchical way” (6). Consciousness raising is its most important task.

Maricondi also says that: “Eco-cinemas thus can make a contribution to bring about a needed cultural change that is more likely to promote a bio-centric world view, one that enlarges our conception of global community to include the non-human life forms and the physical environment” (7).

III

A Brief Plotline of the film *The Jungle Book* (2016)

The Disney animated version of *The Jungle Book* (2016) directed by Jon Favreau drew its inspiration both from Rudyard Kipling’s timeless and wonderful collection of stories as well as from the 1967 animated Disney Film. After Walt Disney turned Kipling’s *The Jungle Book* (1894) into an animated hit in 1967, the story of Mowgli, the human child raised by wolves, became an essential part of the children’s library. Almost fifty years later, director Jon Favreau with the scriptwriter Justin Marks reteamed with Disney to carry out their interesting task of remaking the 1967 film. *The Jungle Book* (2016) is an all new, live-action epic adventure about Mowgli. A thirteen year old newcomer, Neel Sethi stars as Mowgli. The young actor is full of energy. Mowgli is a character who is brave, courageous and confident, which Neel Sethi has successfully produced onscreen. The story of the film is mostly true to Rudyard Kipling’s collection of stories *The Jungle Book* (1894). The ‘man-cub’ Mowgli was left alone in a dense and dark jungle after his father was killed by the battle scarred tiger Shere Khan (Voiced by Idris Elba). Mowgli was found by the wise panther Bagheera (Voiced by Ben Kingsley) years ago who brought the child to a pack of wolves headed by the noble leader Akela (voiced by Giancarlo Esposito) and mother wolf Raksha (voiced by Lupita Nyong’o). It is Raksha who brings him up along with her other little cubs. She feeds him and

gives equal attention and care to this man-cub Mowgli. She is a nursing mother to Mowgli, who loves him, nurtures him and is intimately attached to him.

But the dry seasons approach and a water truce is called. All the animals and birds of the jungle come together to the peace rock to quench their thirst. Mowgli also comes along with Akela, Raksha, Bagheera and other little cubs to drink water. Shere Khan smelling the presence of a human being nearby demands that Mowgli should be given to him as per the law of the jungle. He also threatens Akela that he will attack and kill the wolves if they do not surrender Mowgli. To save Mowgli, and sensing that the jungle is no more safe for him Bagheera and Akela decides to take Mowgli to the village where human tribes live. Mowgli has to leave the home (the jungle) he has always known to be his own and embarks on an adventurous and captivating journey of self-discovery where he meets the lazy and laidback bear Baloo (voiced by Bill Murray), the mysterious serpent Kaa (voiced by Scarlett Johansson) and the Gigant opithecus not Orangutan King Louie (voiced by Christopher Walken). Akela will be killed by Shere Khan in an act of revenge for not offering Mowgli as a lunch to him. Mowgli will come back, give a tough combat to Shere Khan and will remain forever with his wolf-mother Raksha, his stern mentor and father figure Bagheera, Baloo and other animals of the jungle.

Matt Zoller Seitz, the Ediot-in-Chief of RogerEbert.com had made a remarkable review of the film *The Jungle Book* (uploaded on 15th April, 2016) where he says that: “Perhaps it’s not accurate to call this CGI animated version, a live-action film as much of it has been graphically and technologically generated” (par 2).

Favreau with his visual effects supervisor Rob Legato used technology to transport the audience to a wholly new world. Seitz says that Favreau: “[m]erged a live-action kid with a virtual environment thereby elevating the film to a different level of scrutiny. The voice work is excellent, the actors who do the voices for the animals are vitally important to bring the characters to life. The CGI wizardry is overwhelmingly and enchantingly successful in the portrayal of the animals, who appear to be equally real by the time the film comes to an end” (par 3).

Matt Zoller Seitz, further says that:

[t]he movie bears you along on a subdued current of enchantment, climaxing in a thunderous extended action sequence that dazzles while neatly tying off every lingering plot point and gathering up all the bits of folklore, iconography and Jungian dream symbols that have been strewn throughout the story like Hansel and Gretel’s breadcrumbs. (par.2)

The concluding remarks of Matt Zoller Seitz is also important, he says:

In every way, this quietly majestic film should be considered a triumph. The familiar, picaresque story of a young boy raised by forest creatures but fated to re-join Man has been re-imagined as a funny, scary, affecting family adventure with mythic heft but a refreshing lack of swagger. It was made with the latest in movie-making technology but has the ethical values and wide-net story telling sensibility of an Old Hollywood classic. (par.10)

IV

Reading Jon Favreau’s Film *The Jungle Book* (2016)

The recent Disney animated film *The Jungle Book* (2016) directed by Jon Favreau offers us needed perspectives on the relationship between the human and the non-human beings. The beautiful relationship that exists between Mowgli, the man-cub and the other animals of the jungle could be analyzed from an ecocritical perspective. Rightly does Serpil Oppermann

observes in his essay “Theorizing Ecocriticism: Toward a Postmodern Ecocritical Practice” published in 2006 in the journal *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (13.2) that ecocriticism has no “field defining theoretical model in place, beyond its aim to promote ecological awareness, to bring ecological consciousness to the literary texts and other cultural productions, and to understand the place and function of humans in relation to the non-human world” (105).

Ecocritics are concerned with the crucial relationship between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’. Nature comprises of both the human and the non-human world as well as the trees, birds and animals. And culture stands for the civilized human race. In chapter 13 of his book *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* Peter Barry significantly points out:

[e]cocriticism rejects the notion that everything is socially and/or linguistically constructed. For the ecocritics, nature really exists, out there beyond ourselves, not needing to be ironised as a concept by enclosure within knowing inverted commas, but actually present as an entity which affects us, and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it. (243)

Nature therefore cannot be reduced to a concept. Barry further states that “Ecocriticism, then, repudiates the foundational belief in constructedness which is such an important aspect of literary theory” (243). Similarly, in Jon Favreau’s film *The Jungle Book* (2016) we find that the film also rejects the socially constructed concepts of ‘human world’ and ‘animal world’. Mowgli, a man-cub is fostered by the female wolf Raksha. She feeds him and takes care of this human child along with her other little cubs. It is the wise panther Bagheera who found the abandoned Mowgli outside a cave and brought this small child to the pack of wolves, headed by the noble leader Akela. Bagheera knew that this man child could be sheltered, secured and safeguarded in this wild dense jungle only under the guidance of Akela and Raksha.

The deep bonding that Mowgli shares with Raksha and other wolves is touching. Raksha is a nursing mother to Mowgli. When a caution of threat comes from Shere Khan, Raksha and Akela desperately try to emphasize the fact that Mowgli has been raised as one of their own family members. Raksha claims: ‘The cub is mine, mine to me’ and Akela says: ‘Mowgli

belongs to my pack Shere Khan'. This deep and profound relationship between animals and human beings as shown in this film hints at the fact that human beings are part of the larger Nature and are inseparably connected with Nature. An ecological balance exists in nature only because of the harmonious relationship that prevails between the different levels of the ecosystem. As the animals are concerned about Mowgli, we notice Mowgli also does not want to endanger the lives of these innocent animals.

Through this reciprocal relationship of love, concern, care and affection that exists between Mowgli and the animals, Favreau's film shatters the binary between the human and the animal world. At the time of separation Raksha is mournful but she insists that wherever Mowgli may go, he should always remember that Raksha is his mother and Mowgli her son. This mother-son relationship thus overcomes the insuperable line of distinction between the animal and the human world.

Barry says that: "Ecocritics believe that the existence of overlapping areas or intermediate states between 'nature' and 'culture' does not destabilize the fundamental difference between the two" (244). In Favreau's film *The Jungle Book* we find an amalgamation takes place between the human world and animal world but the animals and human beings retain their individual identities. In the film an in-between space is created where the two distinct species of animals and humans co-exist and share a symbiotic, congenial and harmonious relationship.

Mowgli's practical sense and intelligence marks him as a human-child. Mowgli has assimilated himself in the animal world but at certain times, he uses his ingrained ingenuity to solve problems beyond the capabilities of his animal friends. He builds an elaborate rappel and pulley system to help the lazy slacker Baloo to get the honey from a cliff-side beehive that he has been coveting for years. He also uses his intelligence to rescue the small elephant which falls into the gutter. The idea here expressed by Jon Favreau is that human beings are not necessarily destined to subjugate and destroy nature but human beings and animals can share a cordial relationship of mutual respect and dependence. Mowgli uses his intelligence not at the cost of harming nature but in order to protect and preserve nature.

Bryan Norton distinguishes between narrow and broad anthropocentrism and declares that we should not be narrow in our approach towards nature, we should rather practice weak or broad anthropocentrism. Nature cannot protect itself it is the duty of we human beings to protect nature. Biologically we alone can change and conserve nature. Role of human beings is important. Human beings can perform more protective, meaningful, responsible, and careful ways of operation to preserve nature for future generations. This voice of sanity and practical wisdom is also propagated by Jon Favreau in his film *The Jungle Book* (2016).

Favreau's film also offers a counter discourse to the notion of Speciesism. Richard D. Ryder first coined the term in 1970 in a privately printed pamphlet, titled "Speciesism". The term was popularized by Peter Singer in his book *Animal Liberation* (1975). He used the term in the title of his book's fifth chapter: "Man's Dominion ... a short history of Speciesism". Speciesism according to Peter Singer is an attitude common to both humans and non-human beings in which they have a tendency of caring only for the members of one's own species in

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terms of values, rights or special consideration and thereby ignoring the members of other species.

In Favreau’s film we see how the animals of the jungle subvert the notion of Speciecism, they keep their lives at stake in order to save Mowgli who belongs to a different species. Ignoring the threat of Shere Khan, Akela and Bagheera decides that Mowgli should be sent back to the village of man tribe. Akela knows it very well that this decision may prove dangerous to the pack of wolves but still he chooses to save Mowgli from being devoured by Shere Khan. As a consequence Akela has to sacrifice his own life. When Shere Khan comes only to find that Mowgli has been sent away from the jungle, he attacks and kills Akela. Thus Favreau’s film subtly poses a challenge and rejects the concept of Speciesism.

The study of the relationship between animals and human beings from the point of view of the philosophical consideration of animal rights began primarily from Peter Singer’s revolutionary book *Animal Liberation* (1975). Greg Garrard in chapter 7 of his book *Ecocriticism: The New Critical Idiom* entitled “Animals” points out that:

Singer drew upon arguments first put forward by Utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), who suggested that cruelty to animals was analogous to slavery and claimed that the capacity to feel pain, not the power of reason, entitled a being to moral consideration. Singer gives the label ‘Speciesism’ to the irrational prejudice that Bentham identifies as the basis of our different treatment of animals and humans. (136)

He further states that:

The Utilitarian principle of equality states that everyone is entitled to moral consideration, irrespective of family, race, nation or species, and for Singer, if a being suffers there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration. . . . Singer contends that the suffering of a human should not automatically count for more than the suffering of an animal. (137)

In Favreau’s film *The Jungle book* (2016) we find that animals and human beings are entitled to equal moral consideration. The binary between animals and humans is erased in the film by the fact that the animals do share the potential capacity for suffering along with the human child Mowgli. It is not only Mowgli who suffers from the threat of being killed by Shere Khan but all the animals are equally endangered. Shere Khan’s question: “How many lives does a man-cub worth?” puts the safety and security of both the animals and Mowgli at risk. At the brink of separation from his foster mother Raksha if Mowgli suffers because he has to leave the jungle and the animals whom he has always known to be his own family, surprisingly we find Raksha is also deeply wounded. It is almost unbearable for her to send Mowgli away from the jungle as she considers Mowgli to be her own cub. She suffers from a sense of anxiety and a fear of detachment from Mowgli. Thus Favreau has tried to equally depict the sufferings of both the human child and the animals of the jungle. The Utilitarian principle of equality is thus followed and maintained in the film. Favreau has simultaneously voiced the sufferings, anxieties, difficulties and problems experienced by both the animals and the human child. There is no biasness or prioritization so far as the portrayal of sufferings

are concerned. He gave equal attention to the animals as well as the man child. But however it is also probably true that comparisons of sufferings between members of different species cannot be made precisely. Precision is not essential. We have to consider the value of life; a life is a life, whether it is a human life or an animal life.

This liberationist depiction of animals by Favreau may be criticized by a few critics who parallel it with the practice of anthropomorphism where human beings have a tendency of ascribing human attributes to the animals. Obviously, we cannot interpret the behavioral aspects of animals depending completely on a human pattern which is inappropriate but we can interpret some basic emotions of grief, happiness, rage, fear, anger or suspicion by minutely observing the basic everyday feelings of the animals.

Initially when Ecocriticism came into existence, the ecocritics particularly the Deep Ecologists seemed to be blindly critical of the human world. They never considered human beings as a part of nature. But now critics and writers have started talking about the other side of the coin. Ramachandra Guha believes that the issue of environment should be approached from a different perspective, we need to give a fresh look at ecocriticism by not excluding but including the human beings in our ecocritical discourses.

Jon Favreau's film *The Jungle Book* (2016) is a classic example of the argument that human beings should be considered a part of the natural world. *The Jungle Book* (2016) successfully depicts the cordial, harmonious, and compatible relationship between human beings and the animals. Mowgli, as a representative of human world is presented as a part and parcel of nature. He is inseparably connected with nature. The unity of man and nature has been celebrated in the film. The ending of the film reaffirms Ramachandra Guha's primary argument that human beings are inextricably linked with nature. He ultimately returns to the jungle, which he considers to be his home where he feels secured and sheltered. The relation between man and animals here is not one of domination or suppression, but one of love, care, concern, mutual respect and interdependence.

The kind of life which Mowgli leads is similar to that of the aboriginal people or the barbaric predecessors of mankind who lived harmoniously in the midst of nature. Mowgli very much like them does not have the minimal means of survival, withstands the harsh and extreme conditions of environment bare bodied and peacefully co-exist with animals. These native people like Mowgli survive by completely depending upon nature, they live in nature and with nature. They consume natural resources in such a way that neither those species nor human beings are endangered. A kind of balance is maintained by them. Mowgli also thrives on the natural resources but is equally concerned about protecting nature. The native people handle nature in a more meaningful and scientific way. We need to learn something from these native people. We should adopt certain practices performed by them to deal with nature in a more careful and sensible way. We need to rectify our means of treating the animals as well as nature. We should indulge in a stable and peaceful relationship with nature, as it is only by embracing nature as a part of our own self we can control and regulate the rapid destruction of nature. It is by means of our collective attempt we can ensure a happy communion with nature and make this world a better place to live in.

V

Afterword

Jon Favreau’s film *The Jungle Book* (2016) is thus not merely a CGI animated film about a human-cub raised by wolves. It should not be treated as only an adventurous story of Mowgli, the film is loaded with multiple connotations and interpretations. *The Jungle Book* (2016) can be analyzed from an ecocritical point of view. It is an ecocinema where the central focus is on nature and its components. *The Jungle Book* (2016) explores a congenial relation between man and animals, to significantly situate human beings as a part of nature. Nature comprises of both the human and non-human animals. Human beings can share a relation of mutual dependence with the animals. The film subtly generates an environment awareness and consciousness among its viewers. It reminds the audience of their primary link with nature. Damage done to nature also means a damage done to human beings, because in terms of food chain or in other ways we all are connected in this universe.

With his film *The Jungle Book* (2016) Favreau has managed to create an exceptionally wide circle of concern by inviting his audience to consider themselves as being a part of one huge ethical community (including the non-human environment), without recklessly anthropomorphizing nature. He has created a universal community through his film which includes both the human and non-human environment. He has been able to strike a balance between the two environments, primarily because of the ecological interconnectedness between man and nature. Human beings are a part of a larger ethical community comprising of both environments.

The serious problems which are threatening the universe namely ozone layer depletion, global warming, deforestation, pollution and the endangering of rare species of birds and animals are all because of man’s indiscriminate exploitation of nature and natural resources. Human beings have alienated themselves from nature. Modern man does not consider themselves as a part of nature. Today we only use nature for our own personal benefits, without giving anything in return. The film seems to celebrate the primitive way of life where men lived blissfully in the midst of nature, adjusting and co-operating with the animals of the jungle. *The Jungle book* (2016) delicately hints at the lack of responsibility and action on our part to protect and preserve nature. We often forget that it is not only the animals and birds who are endangered but the entire world is endangered. We human beings are equally endangered. Destruction of nature presupposes a destruction of mankind. According to Rachel Carson, human beings should learn to “appreciate the fact that they are part of the entire living world inhabiting this planet, and that they must understand its conditions of existence and so behave that these conditions are not violated” (11).

Ecocinemas like *The Jungle Book* (2016) thus aims to have an impact upon the audience’s environmental values and behaviour and also wants to inspire the viewers to take personal and political action. We can conclude with the pertinent observation of Maricondi: “Raising consciousness through the study of films is not enough to bring about a social change, but

awareness and understanding are necessary steps in the process of transforming perceptions and motivating social actions”(8).

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