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The Bison - Human Battle: A Study on the Bio centric Aspects of Lijo Jose Pellissery's *Jallikattu*

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Abstract:

Human beings and animals have been coexisting from the early ages. Though nature was considered more powerful during the former times, eventually at some point human beings started assuming power. They began to establish power structures to govern themselves and the world. Biocentrism is an ethical theory advocating equal moral value for all living beings. This paper analyses the movie, *Jallikattu* with cross references to the theory of biocentrism and its different aspects examined by Paul W Taylor, in his book, *Respect for nature*. (1986)

Jallikattu (2019), directed by Lijo Jose Pellissery stages an incident where a buffalo, brought to slaughter, goes astray and causes chaos in a remote village. Animal husbandry and animal slaughter are ingrained into the daily activities of the village and is also their major form of sustenance. By vividly displaying the events ensuing the escape of the buffalo, the movie visualizes a community of men vehemently trying to bring the animal under their control. Taylor supports the theory of biocentrism by advocating that any living organism, like human beings, have an independent autonomous choice over itself. They occupy the center of their self by their own right. The villagers portrayed in the movie exhibit a wide range of human oddities representing the anthropocentric ideology. The movie transposes these anthropocentric beliefs by

exposing the vulnerability of the humans in the face of an unchained animal. Hence, the paper explores the diverse biocentric elements portrayed and its impact on human actions and their nature, as depicted in the movie.

Keywords: biocentrism, non-human, conflict, secondary, anthropocentrism.

Introduction

Humans and animals were in continuous combat from the ancient ages itself. Though it was based on part of their food and survival. But later when the civilizations started developing, the human species witnessed their needs gradually shift to a form of 'want' where by human beings assumed themselves as superiors and began to capture animals just for power acquisition or entertainment and to fulfill their amenities. This anthropocentric stance eventually disrupted the balance in the environment itself. It was exploring this standpoint, Paul Warren Taylor introduced the theory of biocentrism in his article "The Ethics of Respect for Nature" in 1981 in the journal "Environmental Ethics". He later developed the theory in his book "Respect for Nature" in 1986.

Biocentrism is an ethical theory that advocates equal moral positions for all living animals in this earth. The word 'biocentrism' derives etymologically from two Greek words 'bios' (life) and 'kentron' (center). (Have, 2022) According to Taylor, everything that possesses inherent worth possesses it equally and all living entities are goal-directed, and whatever is goal-directed has a good of its own. And whatever has a good of its own merits respect. (Attfield, 2013) He says that every living animals has an inherent worth and the worth is equal for all of them. Also each of these animals are driven by a goal and if they have such goals they would have its goodness in them and if they have such goodness in them they deserves to be respected. He adds on by saying that all parties should be treated equally unless there is some morally relevant and morally significant difference that would justify different treatment. (Attfield, 2013) Even though each animal has different objectives in life, according to Taylor they all deserves to be respected and treated equally unless there is a considerable variance in their moral nature. As a counter to this statement Peter Singer argued that there is no morally relevant and morally significant difference between humans and sentient nonhuman animals that would justify treating all humans one way and sentient nonhumans in a very different manner, and therefore that some of the ways in which we treat nonhuman animals are immoral. (Attfield, 2013) Being an egalitarian Singer argued for

equal treatment for all living beings by asserting that there is no such a thing called moral difference and the way humans treat the sentient animals is what is immoral.

According to Tom Regan's opinion sentient animals should be treated as ends in themselves and not merely as means-to-our-ends, which requires recognizing their rights. (Attfield, 2013) Every living animal is born with a moral purpose and that is essentially to meet their ends for each day. Humans on the other hand began to see animals as a commodity to satisfy their needs so that they can meet their ends. Regan says that to comprehend this difference of objectives needs a concrete understanding on animals' rights.

Taylor asks to take each individual's standpoint seriously and only then judge how it is to be treated, whether it be a human, nonhuman or plant. Here he considers each species as each individual who has their own views, for him it is this perspective is what one need to be considered while treating them. Taylor strongly holds that humans cannot let selfish desire get in the way of moral decisions about the environment. (Taylor, 2021) Human beings tend to imagine themselves as the dominant species and likely to have the control of other species in their hands. According to him, there is a natural process in this environment that is cycle where each animal fulfills their moral responsibility and human beings are standing in the way and disrupting the whole process. He lays out his ideas of biocentrism in four main components. First of them, is that humans are thought of as members of the earth's community of life, holding that membership on the same terms apply to all non-human members. For him, human as well as nonhuman living beings are all the members of the same Earth community and hence same importance and value should be given accordingly. Next, he says that the Earth's natural ecosystem as a totality are seen as a complex web of interconnected elements. Here he explains that each living organisms including human and nonhuman living beings are elements in the complex web of ecosystem and all of them plays an important role in it. He then says that each individual organism is conceived of as a teleological center of life, pursuing its own good in its own way. Each organism has a purpose in its life and only when the purpose is fulfilled will one know the significance of its existence. He also says that the idea that humans are superior to other species is a groundless claim, and must be rejected as an irrational bias. (Taylor, 2021) Human beings and other nonhuman living beings all have equal moral space in this universe. No species is superior in this biotic domain, taking over each other's space will only invite distress. This is the idea that the movie *Jallikattu* put forwards.

“*Jallikattu*” (2019) a movie directed by Lijo Jose Pellissery unfurls the story of the people in a rustic village in Kerala where a bison which was brought to slaughter goes astray and how it creates a pandemonium in the area. The movie portrays how an animal's space has been taken over by human beings by behaving no different than any other animals and eventually how the animal regain its own space in the domain. This paper will be explaining the anthropocentric ideology of human beings and how it has been tackled over by biocentrism with cross reference to the movie “*Jallikattu*”.

The idea of anthropocentrism and arrogation of space

Anthropocentrism is the concept that argues human beings are the center and most important entities in the world. Human civilization has brought significant changes in the approach of man towards animals. The plain where they coexisted got shifted to where human beings started dominating over the other living organisms. This idea of superiority is what can be seen in the opening scene of the movie where main characters *Kaalan Varkey* and *Antony* (meat shop owner and his assistant) tying up the bison to slaughter. The bawling of bison can be heard when it is deprived of the freedom of movement. The way in which all of its four legs are tied and the character yelling to keep the tied knot as tight as possible so that in the pain it will not move and can be slaughtered easily shows the level of insensitivity of human beings. The intensity of insensitivity can be later understood from the scenes where it shows a day in *Kaalan Varkey's* meat shop where almost everyone in the village comes to buy the meat demanding for specific parts of the animal cut in particular manner. The consumption of meat in the area is irrespective of caste or religion as everyone has the craving for meat every day. It is as if it has been part of their lifestyle where every morning they go to the shop buy meat then go for prayers and then go home and have it. This has been clearly shot as the viewer can understand it is the daily routine of the people in the village. Another scene where in which *Antony* catching fish in his leisure time for entertainment demonstrates how normalized it is in the area to capture another living being and use it for his selfish needs that is exactly what Taylor pointed out as something one should not attempt to do.

Later in the movie, after the bison has gone astray when hearing the complaint about the violent bison and the things it has destroyed on its way the immediate response of the Sub Inspector of the region was to shoot and kill it somehow. It was without any reluctance that the inspector

responded to the issue and from that can be understood the disregard for animal or any form of life.

The next instance is that of the people who have gathered around the churchyard where the bison has ruined all the crops and a character who is one from an affluent family of the locality telling that “All this land was a forest, my dad usurped it and then donated to the church”, here it can be seen that this person is proud enough to say that the people in his family are the ones who seized the forest and space of other living beings and also he is unbothered about the surroundings as well. The assumption that he still owns the land and it was this land that bison destroyed makes him furious and it can be seen at the end of the scene he fumingly yelling that “We are not able to go out”. The unwillingness to relieve the intruded space even after the bison disturbing the peace of the locality can be understood when the women who were working outside their houses were reluctant to get inside and protect themselves. It displays the staunchness of the villagers to not give up the space they have arrogated even if they are in danger. The lifestyle of the local citizens is blended in meat consumption in such a way that no one there can think of a meal without meat. It can be noticed with the dialogue when a character says “Without beef can it be even called as a meal?”

Another instance where one can find the disparity of human beings as a community is when a person decides to file a complaint to the higher officials, he makes another person write his complaint letter for him. In the scene the person who is writing the complaint is addressing the bison in its most formal name “*Mahisham*” which is usually connoted only in the religious texts with utmost respect and during this event happens one can find the radio news announcing that there would be harsh punishments that would be given for the ones who kill or do any harm to the animals comes under bison species. So in this instance, one can find the hypocritical nature of human beings where on one hand they advocate cruelty against animals but on the other hand, deliver talks on and animal rights and when it comes to their own personal spaces they assume their superiority and act on their selfish needs.

The arrogate mentality in the village people is again exhibited through another conversation between the church priest and his relative where the person describes how he is illegally hunting wild animals for recreation by bribing the government officials. The slackness about trespassing the woods and killing the animals in it expose the disregard of human on the

space and life of any other living beings. One can understand how bizarre the situation through the way they carry on the conversation and how they are able to take it lightly without any misgivings. The situation gets worse when the priest orders meat from another person as the regular supplier's bison went off track and he demands the meat to be particularly fresh. This points out the fact that how much ever distress they are in they will not alter their habits and they do not mind insisting for it too.

The seizure of space continues when the whole village started invading the forest in search of the bison that went astray. Though it all started when they tried to seize the liberty of another living being's life it never stopped there, it went on by intruding to much more living beings' space. Finally, one can find that when the bison accidentally falls in to a well *Antony* claims that he is the one who trapped the animal inside. This is again a display of humans never ending thirst for domination. It is uncanny to find that even after they trap the bison inside the well, people in the village tend to drop whatever they had in their hands as a weapon to bout the animal inside the well on top of the animal's body. This points out the element of innate ruthlessness of human to make another animal suffer as a punishment for trying to recoup its own space in this environment.

The callousness of the human beings carries on through visuals where the villagers tries to settle down in and around the premises of the well and decides to cook chicken that has been captured from a nearby house. The movie explicitly shows how they slay the chicken by twisting and breaking its neck alive. The malicious characteristics of the human beings is what that has been revealed through these graphic visuals. The brutality goes on when they dip the almost dead chicken in boiling water to remove its feathers, in this one can notice that the people gathered around would be singing folksongs and doing this deed. This denotes how they are enjoying the process and finding this as a form of entertainment. Ultimately they see taking liberty over another animal's life as a travesty. Intrusion of space can also be seen in the scenes where the villagers cut down and the burn the woods that belongs to the nature as well as other living beings.

Retrieving the biotic domain

As said by Taylor each animal is directed by a moral goal in its life and meddling with one's goal can lead to disrupting many other connected components in the ecosystem because it is all a part of a complex web of interconnected elements. The similar instance can be seen in the

movie where when the bison goes around the village violently and burns the haystack that is something man has made for his convenience from the nature. From the perspective of a cattle that is something that could be easily eaten but here in the film it makes its presence known by burning hay itself. This gives the idea that the bison is not exactly looking for a habitat rather it is trying to retrieve something that has been taken away from it by making a point through burning the haystack. It can be understood that the point has been made through the dialogue delivered by a villager where he yells “Don’t we have to live here?” making it clear that the peace of mind of the inhabitants of the village is disturbed. From the occurrences that comes after is a proof that this an anomalous circumstance that is happening there. When the daylight stroke the village it was found that it had wrecked the milk supply of the community. Human beings has been rearing cattle from the ancient ages itself and it was mainly for its dairy. One factor humans forgot throughout this farming process is that the milk that has been produced by any animal is made exclusively for its progenies, no other animal has the right to take over on that right of animals. This right is what the bison has reclaimed by destroying the milk shops in the locality.

Following this incident stages a dispute within the villagers accusing *Kaalan Varkey* for his carelessness in handling the bison and can see the same villager screaming “Life has become impossible here.” This displays how far the psyche of the villagers has been deranged as the day to day life of the rustics got interrupted. The plight of the community is made clear through the announcements that has been made all over the village asking everyone to remain inside their houses as a ferocious bison has gone astray and has already ruined all the crops and destroyed the shops in the area. They proceed by declaring that the animal has disturbed ‘their’ peace of mind. This exposes the idea that everything was balanced and fair before the incident happened. It is the self-centeredness of human beings that has been shown through this episode. The fact that humans are the least bothered ones about other living beings seizes their moral worth as a living being.

In the first full appearance of the bison, in front of the villagers the animal goes directly to the political party flag post in the area to demolish it as it is an embodiment of a human organization. Here, the bison was giving out a signal that in the further actions it would be dismantling every manmade institutions and believe systems that has been built by the human beings. This has been proved through the subsequent scenes where the bison destroys the tea shop, a common place where all the people used to gather and gossip about each other. This is presented

through the dialogues rendered by the tea shop owner where he describes that all the inhabitants of that village has settled there either because they did not have any job in their native or they have muddled up in some kind of immoral activities and has been terminated from their own places. He then goes on explaining how *Kaalan Varkey's* father ended up in that village doing an immoral activity and how he died falling in a well when gone in search of a bison that went awry. From the tea shop the beast ran into a bank and tore down everything in the vicinity. Bank being symbol of a system that man has made for himself, by knocking it down could be an allusion to the destruction of all the establishment that made by man. Later in the scene one can find a group of political leaders arguing on the demolition of their party flag. The fragility of the human made organization could be understood through this incident where a piece of cloth decides the harmony between people.

Through the people in the village innately believe in anthropocentrism, they still sport an internal realization that the place they live now belongs to animals and they are the intruders of the domicile. This is displayed through the conversation between an old man and young villager. He says that the place they are living now was a thick forest when his father came to settle and the place was filled with wild animals. He then started cultivation by ploughing the land and eventually people began to come there and settle. He then says that "Even though now all of us are here this place belongs to animals." Here the negligence even after realizing that they do not own the space they exists denotes the staunchness of human mind and unfaltering attitude. At some point one can find that the total distress has affected the human psyche to such a level that the human beings itself starts to behave like animals. There are scenes in which they violently tries to manhandle the sub inspector and burns the officer's jeep. A total anarchy was staging on in the locality at this point of time.

Reaching the end of the movie happens the bison-human battle where the bison is chasing down each one of them including *Antony, Kuttachan* (the person who came to shoot the animal) and the sub inspector. Here the beast is subduing each person who represents each characteristics of human beings. The act denotes the underlying truth that how much ever an animal tries to take over the biotic space of another animal at the end of the day the imbalance would be resolved naturally.

Non-maleficence and non-interference as a farce

According to the theory of biocentrism, the good of all living beings creates responsibilities on the part of human beings, summarized in the four basic duties of biocentric ethics like non-maleficence, noninterference, fidelity, and retribute justice. (DesJardins) In this, non-maleficence and non-interference plays the crux of the whole theory. The principle of non-maleficence holds that there is an obligation not to inflict harm on others. (Jahn, 2011) This explains that as a living being in this world one should have the responsibility not to harm any other living beings. The aspect of noninterference justifies that one should not interfere in any political or moral matters unless invited. Both of these aspects plays a vital role in the ethical theory of biocentrism as it denounce the intrusion of space of all living beings.

The movie *Jallikattu* portrays how the invasion of space of one animal over the other has led to an uninvited chaos in the environment. From the opening scene of the movie one can observe how two human beings have intruded in the personal freedom of an animal with utmost cruelty. Invasion of space of another living being has become a form of recreation for the people in this village. The act of catching and hunting wild animals for enjoyment are a few examples of this. The movie displays the aftermath of a possible scenario where a nonhuman animals tries to regain its biotic space that they have lost. It also exposes the hypocrisy of human beings where on one side they stand and advocate for animal's rights and on the other hand they consume the same animal to quench their craving for meat. The unquenched thirst for meat is another important aspect in the movie. The inhabitants of the village are obsessed with the ingestion of flesh that they are incapable of thinking about a day without meat. This can be understood from the scene where *Kuriachan* (a villager) describes elaborately on how the beef curry should be provided for his daughter's engagement function. It can be found that he gets disappointed when comes to know that the beef he was supposed to get will not be supplied because it was the supplier's bison that went astray around the village.

More than the interference on a living being's space the movie focuses on the ways of intrusion that has occurred and thus gives a picture of how bizarre the reality is. In another occasion one could find a character explains his lineage proudly enough that his father was the one who started invading the forest and donated to others. One thing that can be noticed throughout the movie is that the interference of the space is normalized to such extend that people are not aware

what they are doing is wrong. The people in the village though have recognized that the place they subsist belong to other living beings, they are not willing to accept when another living being who is rightfully belong to the domain tries to intrude in their affairs. During the announcement they addressed it as “the bison has destroyed ‘our’ peace of mind.” This denotes the inherent sense of self-centeredness in human beings; they tend assume that they are the center and the most important species alive and other ones are supposed to tune themselves according to their needs. The biocentric facets of noninterference and non-maleficence is displayed as a farce when it comes to the movie and it has been exceptionally shot in the frames where the footprints of both the man and the animal has shown after the catastrophe that happened near the well. The image could be considered as the epitome of the above aspects. The climax scene is also appreciable in terms of these stand points as in the aerial shots where all the villagers gushes into the site where the bison lies invading the forest with fire batons in their hands implies these same aspects with the aid of brilliant visuals.

Conclusion

Human beings and nonhuman living beings coexisted in this world from the primeval times itself. Each species had its own biotic space at that time and thus coexistence was not problematic during those ages. But eventually as the human civilizations started getting flourished clashes began to edge between human and other living beings. In one way or the other human beings started to cross their line of space and started arrogating others'. It is at this juncture the conflict of these beings became prominent. As the civilization progressed with the advancement of technologies, human beings started to presume that they are the center and the predominant species in the world. Alongside they began to undertake the authority of other species. This gradual shift of the power positions in the environment made human beings believe in the idea of anthropocentrism. It was this idea of superiority that commenced the whole battle in between man and animal. Although with the advanced technologies human beings were able to keep them at par in a controlled state and use them for their own requirements. It is in this situation the movie *Jallikattu* takes place.

In the movie it can be observed that the village community thrives by ingesting animal meat. A day in the life of the rustics will not pass without devouring on flesh. The bizarreness of the situation ensues when the bison goes out of human control. But here in the movie even after

trying so hard with all the modern techniques and equipment they had they were not able to seize the beast. It can be found that the moment the animal gets out of their control the mode of the human beings change to an animal like uncivilized nature. This is a proof of the fact that as long as things are under the humans control they can behave in a cultured manner but the moment things get out of their hands all the refined masks of sophisticated individuals tears down and will start to behave in barbarian manner. At this point there would be no difference between the civilized humans and animals, from then on it is the battle between two kinds of animals. This is exactly what is trying to portray through the human characters in the movie. In the movie it could be found that the human beings started to fight within themselves for the meat like any carnivorous beasts. There are many instances where *Antony and Kuttachan* fighting for supremacy and thus to claim the beast. At last in the climax of the movie all the people in the village spurts like vicious beasts where the bison lies to possess the flesh.

The movie as a whole has exposes the aftermath of a possible circumstance on what happens when human beings continues to take control over other living beings without giving its own biotic space. The movie also reveals the frightening reality that human beings are just masked animals who behaves in civilized manner. But if this goes on there are chances that other living beings might take over their lost space and that could only end in catastrophe.

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