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Entangled Species: A Posthumanist Reading of Sara Gruen's Select Novels

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Abstract:

Anthropocentrism situates human beings at the centre and nonhuman animals at the periphery. The advent of posthumanist thoughts and Animal Studies renewed attention on nonhuman animals and prompted scholars to analyse literary texts representing nonhuman animals with new perspectives. Sara Gruen's novels- *Riding Lessons*, *Flying Changes*, *Ape House* and *Water for Elephants*- feature nonhuman animals living and interacting with humans. This paper attempts to understand, through a posthumanist perspective, how Gruen rejects human exceptionalism. This paper argues that Sara Gruen's narrative provides evidence of humans "becoming with" animals dismantling human-centeredness. It attempts to prove Gruen's objective to make readers realise the necessity of care in nonhuman animals. It locates the "contact zones" where interspecies dialogue facilitates the meaning-making process and contributes to a shared history. Through a close reading of the novels, this paper proves that humans and nonhuman animals are essentially entangled species. The research undertakes the posthumanist approach exemplified in Donna Haraway's seminal work *When Species Meet* and engages in a close reading of the novels to substantiate the arguments.

Keywords: Entangled species, contact zones, nonmimetic sharing, posthumanism.

Introduction

In recent years, the perception of human-animal relationships significantly changed. Anthropocentrism pushes nonhuman animals into the periphery while favouring the desires of humans. Anthropocentrism nurtures human exceptionalism by positioning humans above nonhuman animals. Anthropocentrism privileges the desires of humans over nonhuman animals. It ignores the capability of nonhuman animals to communicate and have a mind of their own to function. Anthropocentrism regards nonhuman animals as objects.

Recent developments have witnessed the advent of posthumanism after moving away from an anthropocentric perspective, which dismantles human-centredness and advocates for a renewed interest in studying nonhuman animals as subjects. Posthumanism challenges the objectives of anthropocentrism and bridges the human/animal divide. An alternate perception of analysing human-animal relationships is essential to understanding how writers like Sara Gruen represent human-animal relationships in her novels. Posthumanism refutes the consideration of humans at the centre and emphasises nonhuman animals- robots, animals, and material objects. This paper studies the posthumanist approach of Donna Haraway to analyse the literary texts of Sara Gruen, as her prime focus is on relationships between humans and nonhuman animals.

About the novels:

Sara Gruen, born in 1969, is a Canadian American novelist whose primary focus is human-animal relationships. Sara Gruen's novels *Riding Lessons*, *Flying Changes*, *Water for Elephants*, *Ape House* and *At the Water's Edge* reflect her love for animals. Artistic merit of Sara

Gruen's novels rests in her presentation of diverse human-animal relationships – humans and horses, humans and bonobos, humans and chimpanzees, humans and elephants, and humans and cats. Novels *Flying Changes* and *Riding Lessons* focus on human and horse relationships, with special reference to equestrian sports, through the character of Annemarie Zimmer. They shed light on animal cruelty, such as horse slaughter. *Water for Elephants* offers a perspective of humans and their relationships with circus animals. The novel follows the journey of Jacob Jankowski, who works at a circus and faces the difficult task of euthanising animals apart from working together. *Ape House* presents bonobos researched in The Great Ape Language Lab by humans and follows the story of the scientist Isabel Duncan and her efforts to save nonhuman animals. Sara Gruen's novels are ideal for studying the human-animal relationship as she refrains from giving a human voice to nonhuman animals. Sara Gruen's novels are a perfect fit for this body of research as there are no anthropomorphic characters.

The existing body of research has studied Sara Gruen's novels in isolation. *Water for Elephants* has been studied from an ecocritical perspective and as a dystopian fiction. A study on the representation of human-animal relationships from a posthumanist perspective in Sara Gruen's novels is yet to be done. This is why this research takes Donna Haraway's postulation of posthumanist ideas in *When Species Meet* about human-animal relationships. This research takes Haraway's key posthumanist concepts- *contact zones*, *becoming with*, *nonmimetic sharing*- to demonstrate humans and nonhuman animals as "entangled species". This paper locates the "contact zones" presented in each novel and delves into the shared history of humans and nonhuman animals. It shows how humans are in the process of "becoming with" nonhuman animals by coexisting and coworking together. The paper highlights the diverse human-nonhuman animal relationships presented in the novels and underscores the need for care, which

is a determining factor in dismantling human-centredness and contributes towards the subsistence of entangled species.

Posthumanism and Donna Haraway

The idea of posthumanism questions the supremacy of human beings. Cary Wolfe, in his introduction to *What is Posthumanism?* asserts that posthumanism opposes the “fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy” generated from humanism (Wolfe xv). One of the key exponents of this posthumanist idea is Donna Haraway, who published an essay named “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s”, popularly known as “A Cyborg Manifesto”, in 1985 and *When Species Meet* (2008). Haraway discusses blurred boundaries and thwarts constrained separation of human/machine, nature/culture, male/female, and human/animal. Her work, *When Species Meet*, is directly concerned with how humans and nonhuman animals are entangled and participate in the process of meaning-making. Donna Haraway's research ranges from studying cyborgs to apes and dogs. The representation of nonhuman animals in the ordinary spaces- laboratory, zoo, farm, factory, and fields makes Haraway's work relevant. Nonhuman animals live in domestic spaces, besides precarious living in industries and scientific experimental facilities.

Entangled Species and Textual Interpretation

This research delves into entangled "species" rather than entangled "animals", the distinction of which needs clarification. The terms “companion animals” and “companion species” have different meanings. The term "species" is a loaded word with diverse political connotations. The term “endangered species” alludes to speciesism where all life forms other-

than-human are considered Others by the rational man (Haraway 18). The term "endangered species" is used in contemporary discourses to refer to African American Men in the United States of America which indicates racism. The term "animal" refers to companion animals such as dogs, cats, and horses. Companion species includes companionate animals with political connotations. The term "entangled species" refers to inseparable ways in which human and nonhuman animals evolve and become what they are. Moving away from anthropocentrism Sara Gruen moves away from anthropocentrism and presents humans and nonhuman animals as entangled species where both coexist and influence one another.

Contact Zones

Human-animal interactions are seen in the spaces of interaction. Humans and nonhuman animals interact in "contact zones" (Haraway 4). Mary Louise Pratt's work "Arts of the Contact Zone" mentions the concept of "concept zone". It refers to social spaces where interaction between different cultures manifests, resulting in a discursive contestation over hegemonic culture (35). In these social spaces, the profound resonance of power impacts cultural interactions. This can be seen in the history of slavery which left an indelible mark on human culture. The society was plagued by racism which emanated from white supremacy. In interspecies interaction, "contact zones" become pertinent as contesting forces of human culture interact with nonhuman animals.

In the novel *Ape House*, there are multiple "contact zones"- the laboratory, the house of Amanda and Ape House (the media house) - where humans and nonhuman animals interact. Laboratory animals in scientific research have a close relationship with scientists. Nonhuman animals are treated by humans in contrasting ways. Some characters are not sympathetic towards nonhuman animals, while some treat them with care and compassion. Haraway proposes to

investigate these lives as entangled lives. Nonhuman animals in the laboratories should not be studied in isolation. The history of animals in scientific research points towards a shared history of violence and cruelty. A study of the gaze of the animal is necessary. The laboratory becomes a “contact zone”, which creates knowledge and suffering simultaneously. Haraway calls for an ethical consideration of nonhuman animals by considering them as embodied beings. The laboratory is a space where the humans exercise power. The life of nonhuman animals depends on human intention and regard for ethics. It is problematic to ignore the human/nonhuman, subject/object, victim/perpetrator divide. Human and nonhuman animals coexist in locations where the latter are coworkers contributing to knowledge production. They are entangled species that spontaneously respond to each other. Bonobos living inside the laboratory interact with the human characters – Celia, Isabel Duncan, John Thigpen, and the scientists. The bonobos and the humans coexist and help each other in knowledge production as they are “entangled species”. The laboratory is a contact zone where differing ideologies regarding human-animal relationships interact. The scientists, one of whom is Isabel Duncan, rise in the top hierarchy of scientific research with the help of the bonobos. Posthumanist thought contests human exceptionalism. Sara Gruen presents the bonobos, bringing a change in the lives of humans, particularly Isabel Duncan. Isabel Duncan cares for these bonobos and sympathises with them. The activities in the media house named Ape House, where the bonobos are enclosed and telecast for televised content, suggest that the cognitive capabilities of bonobos make Ken Faulks a capitalist. In each of the two instances of contact zones, we find that the lives of the bonobos change the mindset of Isabel Duncan and Ken Faulks differently. Humans and nonhuman animals are embodied bodies which coexist in contact zones, influencing one another drastically.

Reverse Gaze

Donna Haraway appeals to study the reverse perspective of animals- how animals see humans. Humans ought to value the gaze of nonhuman animals as they are “entangled species”. The gaze of the animals helps to understand animals’ feelings and responses to human interactions. It makes nonhuman animals “subjects” rather than objects. Donna Haraway's posthumanist concerns come to the fore with her critique of Jacques Derrida's notion about the "animal" in *The Animal That Therefore I am*. Derrida moves away from an anthropocentric position to view animals as subjects capable of asserting their individuality. Her criticism is that Derrida refrains from engaging with how animals reciprocate. Derrida keeps informing his readers about how ashamed he was in front of his cat being caught naked. He missed asking crucial questions: How did the cat feel? How did it respond? Haraway is impressed with Derrida’s arguments but points out that Derrida did not engage with the animal’s invitation to “other-worlding” (Haraway 20). Haraway is concerned about the interchange between humans and animals in interspecies dialogue. Sara Gruen shows that human characters pay attention to the animal’s gaze. They try to understand how the animal tries to communicate. In the novels *Riding Lessons* and *Flying Changes*, Annemarie Zimmer minutely observes the bodily movements of the horses- Harry and Hurrah- to engage in a mutual or interspecies dialogue. A connection between humans and horses is possible only when the bodies reciprocate and communicate. These novels highlight equestrian sports where horses are trained by humans to participate in sports. The humans in *Ape House* attempt to decode what the bonobos try to communicate. The humans make the bonobos learn American Sign Language to comprehend the gaze of the nonhuman animals (bonobos)- Lola, Bonzi, Mobongo, and Sam. While teaching sign language to the bonobos in the Great Ape Language Lab may sound anthropocentric, it is not to

deny that these are contact zones where the gaze of the animals is most vividly studied. The gaze that Donna Haraway mentions is the gaze of understanding. An understanding of the gaze of the animal suggests that humans and nonhuman animals are entangled bodies.

Rejection of Cartesian Dualism for interspecies dialogue

Scientific research that is not concerned with animal welfare uses Cartesian dualism as a foundation to justify animal experiments. The Cartesian dualism formulated by Jacques Derrida points towards demarcations- mind-body and human-animal. The approach is essentially anthropocentric, as animals are machines and objects of study. Scientific research advocates the study of animals from a distance. Scientists remain invisible and observe the animals remotely to avoid affecting the findings. Anthropocentric stance restrains what Haraway calls “becoming with” animals (Haraway 36). Haraway advocates an interactive dialogue between humans and animals. Haraway applauds the decision of Barbara Smuts, a bioanthropologist who worked at the University of Michigan and studied bonobos in Kenya, to refrain from being invisible in scientific research. Interaction between Smuts and the bonobos in the enclosure results in the bonobos interrogating her as a social subject- a curious questioning of whether she is friendly or hostile to the bonobos. Isabel Duncan's experimentation on the bonobos in *Ape House* points towards the rejection of Cartesian dualism. In *Ape House*, Isabel Duncan interacts with the bonobos inside the scientific facility. Isabel refrains from distancing herself as a mute spectator to the cognitive development of the bonobos. Humans teach the bonobos to use electronic devices to order things of their choice. Humans treat the bonobos as subjects, as they are not kept in complete isolation. Isabel's participation in the animal experimentation physically resembles the method of Barbara Smuts' scientific research, whom Donna Haraway praises in *When*

Species Meet. Isabel acknowledges the nonhuman animals as subjects by spending time inside the laboratory. Isabel Duncan mentions that the bonobos make noises whenever humans enter the enclosure. Bonobos interpret Isabel Duncan as the bonobos are selective about humans.

The nonhuman animals in *Ape House* act as coworkers in knowledge production. Isabel Duncan adopts an approach which Haraway mentions as “nonmimetic sharing”, which alludes to an engagement with nonhuman animals in an instrumental relationship without objectifying them (Haraway 75). Species are entangled when “nonmimetic sharing” enables coexistence between humans and nonhuman animals. When the killing of nonhuman animals is done for the wellness of humans, killing is justified by humans and accepted as doable. Animal killing is not objectionable unless it harms humans. Isabel Duncan adopts nonmimetic ways to engage with the bonobos. The act of conducting scientific research on bonobos is animal experimentation. Isabel Duncan is accused of exploiting bonobos as well as sympathising with them. She panics when they are tranquilized after the bomb blast in the laboratory.

Shared History

The process of humans “becoming with” animals- evolving together to become what they are- validates humans and nonhuman animals as “entangled species”. Humans and nonhuman animals share a common history. A shared history is created while interactions between humans and nonhuman animals take place. In the context of Sara Gruen’s novels, shared histories are domestication, animal experimentation, and animal sports. A shared history connects the threads of human and nonhuman animals and implies their coexistence. It also shows how nonhuman animals have shaped the lives of humans. The shared history in the human-animal relationship also refers to the violent history, care, and exploitative adventures of humans. Donna Haraway

emphasises on the history of coexistence and mutual dependence to consider humans and nonhuman animals as “entangled species”. Domestication has led humans to use animals for survival and experimentation. Domestication resulted in the formation of companion animals. Animal experimentation has resulted in the killing of nonhuman animals but at the same time proliferated human knowledge.

In *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway mentions animals used in sports. Analysing these animals aids in understanding the shared history of domestication from an alternative perspective. Establishing a deep-rooted connection with animals results in the transformation of both parties. There is a power structure at play where humans train animals for entertainment or sports. The training ground acts as a “contact zone” for entangled species. The representation of nonhuman animals used in sports brings an alternative perspective to the grand narrative of domestication as a brutality of animal exploitation. According to Donna Haraway, the relationship between humans and nonhuman animals in the domestic spaces is not homogeneous. Animals used in sports are taken care of and referred to or treated as subjects. Most nonhuman animals used in sports are named, which adds a personal touch to the relationship with animals. To understand the process of “becoming with” animals, the mutual understanding and changes which occur during training between humans and animals are worth studying. In the narratives, attention should be given to the reference of nonhuman animals as “who”. The use of the relative pronoun “who” to refer to nonhuman animals indicates the humans “becoming with” nonhuman animals.

Ethical Considerations

Donna Haraway believes in the coexistence between humans and nonhuman animals. Humans form only a negligible part of all the life forms on earth. Only an anthropocentric perspective allows us to care about the human population as the dominant life form. To consider humans and nonhuman animals as “entangled species” mandates caring for nonhuman animals. Caring for nonhuman animals is a way of coexisting and “becoming with” animals. In spaces where human intervention is apparent, Haraway calls for caring to negotiate with animal suffering. Caring eliminates human centredness, but does not prevent the exploitation of nonhuman animals altogether. She says:

To share the dogs’ suffering, or that of participants in today’s experiments, would be not to mimic what the canines go through in a kind of heroic masochistic fantasy but to do the work of paying attention and making sure that the suffering is minimal, necessary, and consequential. (Haraway 82)

Haraway’s intention of considering species entangled necessitates the introduction of ethics in scientific research. Haraway says:

Human beings’ learning to share other animals’ pain “nonmimetically” is, in my view, an ethical obligation, a practical problem, and an ontological opening. Sharing pain promises disclosure, promises becoming. The capacity to respond may yet be recognized and nourished on this earth. (Haraway 84)

The character Dan mentioned in *Riding Lessons* and *Flying Changes* considers nonhuman animals as embodied bodies. He takes steps to save horses from horse slaughterers. Similarly, Jacob Jankowski empathises with the horse Silver Star and euthanises him to relieve him from his pain in *Water for Elephants*. In certain instances, human characters, such as Ken

Faulks in *Ape House*, seem to ignore the ethical considerations of nonhuman animals. He prefers to show the sexual activities of the bonobos on television to make a considerable profit. Sara Gruen deliberately showcases this dual way of interacting with nonhuman animals, as humans and animals contribute towards the shared history. She advocates ethical considerations for nonhuman animals as they are “entangled species”. Humans should be concerned with the well-being of nonhuman animals, which serve as labour to satiate human needs. The labour animals-animals working in circuses, farms and the entertainment industry- work not by choice. Humans enclose nonhuman animals into cloistered working spaces. Haraway draws attention to labour animals and interrogates how they relate to humans. A symbiotic human-animal relationship thrives when there is care and mutual responsiveness, particularly about animals used as labour. In *Water for Elephants*, Uncle Al's life trajectory depends upon the animals in the circus. According to him, he has saved the animals from hunger and brought them to his circus. His care for the animals brings them into the “contact zone” of the circus, where Uncle Al's existence of animals safeguards the financial status of Uncle Al.

Conclusion

Sara Gruen's novels quintessentially demonstrate humans and nonhuman animals as “entangled species” where they interact in “contact zones”. These interactions might be exploitative as well as caring, depending upon how humans approach nonhuman animals. Gruen refutes the Cartesian dualism of the human/animal divide and proposes the interspecies dialogue existing in human-animal relationships. Her representation of humans and nonhuman animals highlights the shared history of domestic and animal exploitation. Aligning with posthumanist thoughts, Gruen appeals for an inclusive approach where the ethical considerations for

nonhuman animals are considered by humans. However, it is difficult to conclude whether Sara Gruen advocates an outright cessation of animal exploitation. Animal experimentation continues, but there is a need for ethical consideration of nonhuman animals.

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