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Animal Narratives in Human Perspective: An Anthropocentric Reading of *Ratatouille*

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Abstract:

Homo sapiens are the ones who have advanced cognitive skills to understand and comprehend the universe in rational terms. Human beings have the intelligence and the ability to understand and adapt to complex social structures. In films and literature, human beings depict animals from a human perspective, making fauna an integral part of their existence. The film *Ratatouille*, an American animated comedy directed by Brad Bird and produced by Brad Lewis, primarily revolves around the inspirational maxim: ‘Anyone can cook.’ The rat named Remy is directly or indirectly inspired to cook by Auguste Gusteau, the head Chef, and ends up helping another chef in a famous restaurant in Paris. This paper explores the portrayal of animals through a human lens, creating fertile ground for anthropocentric interpretation and analysis.

Keywords: Anthropomorphism, Anthropocentrism, Social Class, Superior, Inferior.

Introduction

Anthropocentrism in animal narratives is a well-established phenomenon. The depiction of animals experiencing human emotions has long been a prominent narrative technique in various creative discourses. The creation of interesting storylines that revolve around human values, with animals as secondary characters or plot devices, leads to the distortion of animal behaviour, thereby reinforcing dominant human ideologies. In the film *Ratatouille*, Remy can sense the taste and aroma of a variety of cuisines. Remy enjoys his food, realising the extreme pleasure it offers. Food is one of the primary requirements for survival. It brings happiness and a sense of contentment to both the rich and the poor. The drive for nourishment is a fundamental human instinct that transcends all differences. Whether for a human or an animal, food serves the same purpose for both. Humans offer food with tempting flavours and scents, while for animals, food serves solely to satisfy their nutritional needs and hunger. Claude Lévi-Strauss remarks in his prominent work *The Raw and the Cooked: Mythologique*:

We thus begin to understand the truly essential place occupied by cooking in native thought: not only does cooking mark the transition from nature to culture, but through it and by means of it, the human state can be defined in all its attributes, even those that, like mortality, might seem to be the most unquestionably natural. (164)

Remy, the famous rodent from *Ratatouille*, is not the first animal to make history in Hollywood. As Stanley Brandes and Thor Anderson write in their article “*Ratatouille*: An Animated Account of Cooking, Taste, and Human Evolution”:

...the kingpin of the Disney empire of animation is none other than Mickey Mouse.

This is not the place to give Mickey Mouse his due, other than to state that this character, when viewed together with the rats in *Ratatouille*, makes it impossible to

underestimate the rodent as a cultural icon. These creatures constitute a longstanding and central part of an animation film tradition. Obviously, the popular success of their roles in large part reflects the film makers' multiple technical and artistic merits. (278)

Animals consume food in whatever form they get and make no efforts to alter its delicacy and make it more delicious. Remy, the rodent, unlike the non-human instincts in animals, always tries to explore his food by seeking out new combinations and varieties. Human–non-human dynamics in the movie highlight the anthropomorphic strains evident throughout the film. Remy, the rodent inculcates the qualities and intricacies of a professional Chef, thereby prioritising anthropocentric ideologies.

Remy can interact with human beings and communicate his feelings and emotions with everyone around him. Remy displays anthropomorphic features but fails to get the recognition he deserves. Unlike the other rodents, Remy can walk on his hind legs. During a food-finding expedition with his brother Emile, Remy walks upright on his two hind legs. The conversation between them is as follows:

Remy (to himself): He doesn't understand me, but I can be myself around him.

Emile: Why are you walking like that?

Remy: I don't want to constantly have to wash my paws. Do you even think about how we walk on the same paws that we handle food with? Do you ever think what we put in our mouths?

Emile: All the time.

Remy: When I eat, I don't want to taste everywhere my paws have been.

Emile: Well, okay, but if Dad sees you walking like that . . . he's not going to like it. (5.19 - 5.42)

Remy lives in the attic of an old farmhouse in the French countryside where a lady frequently watches the cookery show of a famous cook named Gusteau. Remy obsessively watches those episodes every day and internalises the tips and tricks of taste and smell suggested by Gusteau in his television shows. The rustic yet captivating farmhouse scenes were filmed using technically challenging crane shots, which were emerging during the early days of Hollywood. The camera approaches the house, zooming its windows. A rat, sheltered by an open book, rushes into the centre screen. Here, the action is captured using a freeze frame, and the rat begins its opening monologue:

Remy: This is me. I think it's apparent I need to rethink my life a little bit. What's my problem? First of all, I'm a rat. Which means life is hard. And second, I have a highly developed sense of taste and smell. Flour, eggs, sugar, vanilla bean... Oh! Small twist of lemon.

Emile: Whoa, you can smell all that? You have a gift.

Remy: This is Emile, my brother. He's easily impressed.

Django: So you can smell ingredients? So what?

Remy: This is my dad. He's never impressed. He also happens to be the leader of our clan. So, what's wrong with having highly developed senses? (To Django by running towards him) Whoa, whoa, whoa! Don't eat that!

Django: What's going on here?

Remy: Turns out that funny smell was rat poison. Suddenly, Dad didn't think my talent was useless.

I was feeling pretty good about my gift, until Dad gave me a job.

Remy: Clean. Clean.

That's right. Poison checker. Cleanerific. Cleanerino. Close to godliness. Which means clean. You know, cleanliness is close to... Never mind. Move on. Well, it made my dad proud. (1.53-3.18)

The narrative proceeds, and since there is no direct heir to Gusteau's assets, his head chef, Skinner, inherits them under a specific condition. If no prospective heir emerges after Chef Gusteau's death for the next three years, Skinner will legally acquire ownership of Gusteau's properties and belongings. Meanwhile, Linguini, claiming himself to be the illegitimate son of Chef Gusteau, comes in to take over the assets. At the same time, Remy gets separated from his clan, reaches the famous restaurant, and happens to meet Linguini.

Remy soon indulges in cooking with Linguini and makes delicious dishes like the old talented Chef Gusteau used to make. Customers are excited to visit the restaurant whenever Remy tries new dishes. They begin searching for the chef's identity, the ingredients, and other recipe details. Linguini hesitates to disclose the real secret behind the exquisite display of delicacies; however, Remy is spotted by some workers in the restaurant, and they try to remove him, believing that a rodent's presence could damage the restaurant's reputation. Unfortunately, Linguini is entrusted with the responsibility of killing and disposing of Remy, the rat.

Linguini and Remy come to inhabit parallel lives, each marked by abandonment, as Linguini suffers the loss of family through death and Remy experiences rejection and displacement, leaving neither with a place they can truly call home. Linguini takes Remy to his house and provides him with food and shelter. In the morning, Remy prepares tasty dishes for Linguini. Linguini is surprised to know how a rat can cook and make dishes like humans. Remy

shares his story with Linguini and tells him that he can help prepare delicious dishes, having learned extensively from Gusteau's cooking channel.

Linguini and Remy decide that Remy should hide in Linguini's hat to avoid contact with the human world. Linguini interprets Remy's instructions through the intricate movements the rat makes by tugging on strands of his hair. Thus, the taste and flavour of Linguini's dishes spread worldwide. People from far-off places gathered at the restaurant to taste the dishes prepared by Linguini, unaware of the secret behind the creations. Stanley Brandes and Thor Anderson write in their article "*Ratatouille*: An Animated Account of Cooking, Taste, and Human Evolution":

Although Remy's sensibilities are inherently human, they become developed and enhanced only via a connection with food and eating. For one thing, Remy can read. In fact, he is the only rat in the film who can and does read. It is largely via the written word – specifically reading *Anyone can Cook!* – that Remy learns the culinary arts. At one point in *Ratatouille*, when Remy is showing his brother Emile Gusteau's cookbook, Emile asks, astonished, 'Wait . . . You read?' Emile takes that revelation as constituting a potential danger to Remy. (280)

Linguini desired fame and popularity; therefore, he never revealed that a rodent was helping him prepare his delicacies. Linguini's attempt to conceal Remy's identity reflects his fear of losing fame and recognition in a homocentric social structure. The apprehension of losing one's name and fame prevents Linguini from exposing Remy's pivotal role in his successful journey as a popular Chef. The imbalance in human–nonhuman dynamics is evident in Linguini's conscious efforts to conceal Remy's identity from the public.

Remy gets a home or a safe place to dwell in at the cost of Linguini's rising fame and popularity. Linguini's popularity in the public domain is progressing rapidly. Linguini's inferiority

complex, along with his constant fear of losing his job and girlfriend, prevents him from speaking the truth. To Linguini's dismay, Skinner spills the beans, knowing that Linguini lacks the talent to create such mouth-watering dishes. However, Remy initially manages to escape from Skinner's brutal clutches. Skinner makes several attempts to trap Remy, and eventually, his efforts pay off. Remy is caught and caged.

Towards the fag end, Linguini finds himself in an adverse situation and is forced to reveal the whole truth about their personal and professional companionship. As they part ways, Remy's parents warn him about the pretentious human world, explaining how selfish and crooked their lives are. They look upon their benefits and are seldom worried about other creatures. The characterisation of Remy and Alfredo Linguini also reveals the cultural implications of human and non-human spaces. Remy is portrayed as culturally backward as it belongs to "Animalia", while Alfredo Linguini is displayed as culturally upward as he belongs to the genes of "Homosapiens".

The film clearly reflects an anthropocentric approach. Remy's proficiency in cooking is never acknowledged, while the focus remains on how humans can exploit a rodent's talent to their advantage. Remy is a victim of commodification. Remy is a tool for Linguini's popularity. Alfredo Linguini initially lacks recognition among his co-workers in Auguste Gusteau's Restaurant as he hails from the lower strata of society. His opinions and culinary talents are not appreciated and well received by his fellow chefs. Linguini joins the restaurant as a garbage boy, but once his identity as the son of Auguste Gusteau is revealed, his status in the restaurant leaps. His culinary talents are recognised, as Auguste Gusteau is known for his high-flown lineage as a member of a wealthy family. Hence, a momentous leap in his career forever changes his social status and recognition among the public.

Alfredo Linguini acquires high status in society with the assistance of Remy. However, his apprehension of losing his name and fame leads him to assert control over Remy's inherent potential as a talented chef. Remy deserves recognition in society for his exceptional culinary skills, but Linguini ultimately succeeds in casting Remy aside. Linguini's anthropocentric attitude prevents him from appreciating Remy's potential virtue. Remy believes that Linguini will stand by him through thick and thin. Linguini displays the inherent tendencies of human beings as and when the situation demands. This becomes evident when Linguini dismisses Remy's thoughts and emotions during a moment of crisis, revealing a shift in their power dynamic and highlighting human disregard for non-human agency.

The film exhibits the transcendence of reality, eventually unveiling the truth behind Linguini's unprecedented success. The customers at Auguste Gusteau's restaurant initially believe in Linguini's authentic talent for cooking, but as the movie progresses, the secret behind his culinary skills is revealed. This revelation is hard for the public to accept, yet as time passes, they come to terms with the exposed reality. In rational terms, it is hard to lean into the captivating story of *Ratatouille* as a rat plays the lead role in the movie. However, the film's realistic depictions, cinematography, cast and crew, enchanting camera angles, and other mesmerising artistic elements turn it into an extraordinary experience that captures the viewer's attention. The characters are unrealistic, but the narrative and the settings are realistic. The film brilliantly portrays animals through an anthropocentric lens, adding a unique narrative style to the storytelling.

Ratatouille is a seminal animal narrative that highlighted the intricacies between human and animal relationships. The emotional connections, along with their accompanying complexities, enrich the narrative and deepen the viewer's engagement with the film. It is an awe-inspiring transition from the world of animals and humans to a shared space where both groups coexist hand

in hand. The movie reflects human desires along with their dreams, thereby oppugning the audience to reanalyse their perspectives. Remy serves as a paragon, illuminating the intricate and often overlooked dynamics of human-animal collaboration. The earnest trials and tribulations Remy experiences reveal the heartfelt circumstances. Every being in the universe shines with its own uniqueness. The potential for inter-species awareness is exquisitely delineated in *Ratatouille*. *Ratatouille* is a robust and unflinching exposure of the societal touchstone and prejudices that incorporated the upsides and downsides of human-animal interactions. The authentic divulge of treatment and perception of animals in the universe. The movie intensely enumerates the coexistence of all the species in the world and how they cooperate with each other in their means of survival. The movie is not only an ore of mere entertainment but also an authentic chronicle of the synchronicity between animals and human beings, and the aura they share with each other. The actions of each influenced one another, both unintentionally and intentionally. The movie represents animal narratives from a human perspective, while the anthropocentric approach shifts to an anthropomorphic one as the story progresses. Remy embodies a human being's aspiration to capture achievements in life. Remy is the voice of the voiceless in its clan. However, Remy's father, Django, and other fellow members or rats in Remy's clan live up to the conformations of the society. They live under societal expectations and restrictions that limit their lives. They internalised societal norms and prejudices. The clan is living under the four walls of society. They are experiencing 'Hikikomori' syndrome to a great extent, but Remy rises beyond its horizon. Remy overcomes numerous hurdles in his society, despite experiencing a sense of otherness and subalternity among human beings. Whatever the circumstances, society holds its own bias against organisms other than human beings. The movie sets out blurring boundaries between human beings and animals towards its latter half. Remy is a metaphor for marginalised and alienated talent. It is

on the fringes of society where human beings are in the mainstream. Hence, Remy is cast out in favour of the personal welfare of human beings. Non-human intelligence diminished its prestige as it outweighed human talent. Anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism play their peak role in its application in the life of the organisms. Human beings are always in a rat race to make ends meet. Life is a rollercoaster of happiness as well as pains and pangs. It is the case of human beings as well as animals.

Conclusion

Ratatouille explores the dualistic cultural construction of rodents in today's world. In this film, the rats exhibit a tendency to learn and become civilised, which is evident in the transformation of Django's vermin colony from garbage-picking creatures into a well-settled and organised group willing to assist Gusteau in his kitchen. Remy is the manifestation of this evident transformation from animal to human. All along the film, Remy evolves and emerges as a completely different breed of creature, demonstrating inborn traits and acquiring new ones aligned with humanity. Remy even becomes a pet to Linguini. Linguini provides the little creature food, water and a safe shelter. Linguini feels shaken when Remy decides to part ways with him. On several occasions, Linguini laments Remy's sudden disappearance. After all, it is Remy's passion for cooking that inspires him to internalise and manifest civilised behaviour. The traits of bipedalism, cleanliness, and the habit of reading symbolise anthropomorphic qualities in Remy. Thus, *Ratatouille* offers an anthropomorphic reading leading to anthropocentric discourses in animal narratives.

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