

## **Rethinking Species Hierarchy: A Study of Jack London's White Fang (1906) from Zoocritical Perspective**

**By**

**Dr. Nikhilesh Dhar**

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Onda Thana Mahavidyalaya, Bankura, West Bengal

Email: [dharnikhilesh2012@gmail.com](mailto:dharnikhilesh2012@gmail.com)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1952-6427>

**Bapin Mallick**

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Dr B.R. Ambedkar College, Nadia, West Bengal

Email: [bapin0022@gmail.com](mailto:bapin0022@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

Human beings have elevated themselves to a position of dominance, asserting their superiority over other species by virtue of their perceived higher level of civilization and rationality. In this way, humans have started to create an identity for themselves as the epitome of creation, and their inherent qualities are deemed superior to those of any other terrestrial entity. Hence, they have assumed a position of superiority, attributing themselves a sense of dignity while withholding such recognition from nearly all other living organisms. Throughout history, there has been a pervasive lack of equitable treatment of animals by humans, resulting in a prevalent pattern of exploitation and abuse inflicted upon them. The present paper explores the relationships between humans and animals as depicted in Jack London's *White Fang*, with a focus on the superior position of humans in our society and how this dominance has been employed to exert control over animals by silencing the voice of the other (nonhuman). It also analyses the degree to which human beings have been successful or unsuccessful in managing or suppressing their innate animalistic tendencies. This study also tries to foreground the relationship between humans and animals by deconstructing the binary of nature and culture with a view to advocating the importance of all organisms in the biosphere.

**Key Words:** Speciesism, Zoocriticism, Dualism, Culture, White Fang, Jack London

### **Introduction**

The evolutionary progress of human beings has resulted in significant changes and transformations in the ecosystem of the Earth. Human beings pose a significant threat to several living species as well as to the planet's ecosystem, resulting in the potential for mass extinction of species, loss of biodiversity, climate change, and global warming. The significant threat to the planet's biodiversity is primarily attributed to the extensive exploitative activities undertaken by humans. The actions of humans are resulting in the degradation of environments which are essential for the survival of various plants and animals. The anthropocentric mindset held by humans exerts control over the natural world, leading to a critical depletion of natural resources as a result of their excessive consumption and other practices. Anthropocentrism is a philosophical perspective that places humans at the centre of reality, resulting in the subjugation of animals and ultimately leading to ecological catastrophe and the widespread extinction of numerous species. The role of anthropocentrism in the extinction of animals and other species has been demonstrated through the powerful articulations of various writers. Animals are inherently unable to evade anthropocentrism due to their coexistence within

**Published/ publié in *Res Militaris* (resmilitaris.net), vol.12, n°5, December Issue 2022**

contemporary human society (Baker, 2001). The current state of affairs between humans and non-human creatures is a reflection of the overarching narrative of the superiority of humans over nonhuman animals. The examination and elucidation of the relationship between humans and animals, particularly in the context of ecological crises and a human-centered worldview, necessitate scholarly investigation.

Zoocriticism is a burgeoning scholarly movement that focuses on the exploration of the interaction between humans and animals. It involves the analysis and interpretation of literary texts as a means to gain insight into the intricate nature of human-animal interaction. This particular method provides a perspective on the natural world that places emphasis on animals and their coexistence with humans.

The term "zoocriticism" was first introduced in the field of literature as a cultural theory in the introductory section of the book titled *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, and Environment* (2010), authored by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin. Huggan and Tiffin assert that "zoocriticism" is a scholarly approach to literary inquiry that encompasses not only the examination of the representation of animals in literature but also addresses the complex matter of animal rights. This book explores the concept of "zoocriticism," which involves the examination of several analyses that intersect within the framework of environmental humanities and animal studies as applied to postcolonial literary texts. Zoocriticism can be traced back to the field of animal studies, which is an interdisciplinary domain that incorporates elements from philosophy, zoology, and religion. The term under discussion is relatively new to the realm of literature, yet it has already attracted the interest of critics and writers. The convergence of zoocriticism and postcolonial critique is relatively less extensive in comparison to the more firmly established field of ecocriticism. Consequently, it may be regarded as a somewhat incongruous integration within the broader framework of ecocriticism.

Zoocriticism is a theoretical framework that encompasses the concept of speciesism, which involves the critical examination of the exploitation of other sentient species by humans. Speciesism is a concept that exploits the absence of language and logic in animals to establish a division between humans and animals. This dichotomy bears resemblance to Edward Said's Orientalist dichotomy, which categorises individuals into white and non-white groups based on racist ideologies (Said, 1978). Literary texts often feature several instances where animals are portrayed from multiple perspectives. Nevertheless, it is widely perceived that the majority of these depictions lack a comprehensive animal perspective. The majority of textual depictions of animals tend to relegate them to a subordinate position in relation to human beings. These representations restrict the portrayal of animals to either being reliable companions to humans or serving as useful tools in some capacity. The use of animals in literary works is a prevalent convention; however, the representation of animals for the sake of themselves is notably scarce. Throughout history, animals have seldom been seen as equal companions to humans, instead being subjected to mistreatment, even in cases where they serve as co-workers or other valuable tools.

Zoocriticism encompasses several viewpoints on the subject of nature and its resources, with a particular focus on the sentient beings within it. This approach entails the examination of narratives through the lens of a constructed protagonist or animal agent, focusing on their behavioural and emotional repertoire. The subject matter in question is under the purview of contemporary cultural and transdisciplinary animal studies. Zoocritical perspectives offer a notable discourse about animals that might be characterised as "zoonarratives." Zoonarrative is characterised by its unique distinction from other forms of literary fiction, as it posits that the comprehension of animal text necessitates the recognition of animals as active agents,

crucial for the interpretation of the text (Barcz, 2017). This philosophical discourse tries to raise awareness regarding the global ecosystem by critiquing anthropocentrism and environmental issues as they pertain to animals. The ability to see and perceive the ways in which experimentation with perception and shape is concentrated in the sensory presence of animals is facilitated by this phenomenon.

Immanuel Kant provides a notable elucidation of the distinction between human beings and animals. Kant has delineated a distinction between humans and animals by virtue of the inherent presence of rationality in the former. Immanuel Kant posits that human beings possess rationality and the capacity for reasoning, distinguishing them from non-human organisms. The animal lacks rationality. The existence of rationality within human nature and its absence within animal nature underlie various dichotomies between humans and animals, including distinctions such as moral and non-moral status, ends and means, and personhood and thingness. Immanuel Kant asserts:

Now I say that the human being and in general every rational being exists as an end in itself, not merely as a means to be used by this or that will at its discretion... Being the existence of which rests not on our will but nature, if they are beings without reason, still have only a relative worth, as means, and are therefore called things [Sachen], whereas rational beings are called persons because their nature already marks them out as end in itself. (Kant, 1988)

## Objectives

1. The research aims to examine different dimensions of the human-animal relationship as portrayed in London's *White Fang*.
2. The objective of this study is to analyse the utilisation of animals as narrators in literary works with a view to dismantling the binary between the human and animal worlds.
3. The focus will be on investigating the reasons why animals and humans may harbour feelings of suspicion towards each other.
4. The paper also raises some vital issues to investigate the concept of human dominance and its impact on the environment, as depicted through the powerful articulation of Jack London.
5. This study also aims to gain a better understanding of the relationship between humans and animals by offering an alternative discourse.

London's *White Fang* (1906) depicts the interdependence between animals and humans for their mutual survival. The novel presents a comprehensive examination of diverse facets pertaining to the talents of animals. It demonstrates that wolves and dogs, despite lacking the capacity for abstract reasoning, possess the ability to reason and acquire knowledge. The novel also demonstrates the remarkable ability of animals to perceive and decipher verbal, facial, and bodily cues exhibited by humans. In the novel, animals are utilised not only for labour but also for sports and entertainment. Hence, the examination of the correlation between humans and animals holds significant relevance within the scope of this study.

The attribute of animality is not exclusive to quadrupedal creatures; humans also exhibit certain characteristics associated with animality as they are classified as animals. The distinguishing characteristic of humans is their ability to exercise control over their innate tendencies, mostly due to the influence of societal norms and the impact of their cognitive capabilities to a certain degree. In contrast, animals are commonly referred to as "animals" due to their inherent irrationality and unbridled aggressiveness, which distinguishes them from human beings.

The relationship between humans and animals is of ancient origin. For centuries, humans and animals have coexisted on Earth, fostering a profound interrelationship. Indeed, both human beings and animals can be seen as complementary entities. The interdependence between human beings and animals is evident in all aspects of daily life. While humans rely on animals for various purposes, animals also occasionally derive benefits from the care provided by humans. However, it is important to note that this relationship is predominantly advantageous for humans since they tend to be the primary beneficiaries. In general, animals do not rely on human assistance. The perception of non-human animals regarding human beings is contrary to what humans typically anticipate. Despite the growing recognition of animal welfare and the emerging fascination with animal cognition, animals continue to be predominantly regarded as mere commodities for human exploitation. The utilisation of animals in several domains, including factory farming, entertainment, and testing, reflects a prevailing perception of animals as inanimate entities rather than as sentient beings with self-awareness and subjective experiences. The evolution of mankind has been the subject of numerous interpretations and explanations. In relation to the findings pertaining to human evolution, Robert John Braidwood, a scholar in the fields of archaeology and anthropology, expressed the following viewpoint:

New discoveries and new techniques for the interpretation of the evidence of mankind's past appear almost daily. The newer finds and techniques necessitate reconsideration of older evidence. Slowly but surely we move toward fuller understanding of those beings whose history holds the greatest fascination for all of mankind-men themselves. (Braidwood, 1948)

The existence and evolution of human beings span a significant period of history. All species that have undergone evolutionary processes originating from a shared progenitor are categorised collectively under the taxonomic classification known as "genus" (with the plural form being "genera"). The creatures commonly known as lions, tigers, leopards, and jaguars belong to distinct species that fall under the genus *Panthera*. The *Homo* genus, commonly referred to as "man," gave rise to the species known as *Sapiens* (Harari, 2015). According to the hypothesis of human evolution, *Homo sapiens*, the modern human species, is believed to have descended from *Homo erectus*, Neanderthals, and apelike forebears that existed millions of years ago. Through millions of years of evolutionary processes, humans have reached their current stage of development. The historical evidence of evolution substantiates the existence of a biological link between human beings and ape species.

Cognitive capacity, or the utilisation of mental faculties, is frequently identified as the fundamental distinction between humans and animals. Human beings perceive themselves as the exclusive possessors of cognitive abilities. Nevertheless, recent scholarly investigations, exemplified by the research undertaken by Kristin Andrews, have highlighted the existence of substantiated perspectives that provide an alternative framework of cognitive processes and varying levels of cognitive development applicable to both humans and other animals. Consequently, these perspectives raise important inquiries that warrant additional investigation.

Humans have asserted their superiority over other creatures in the animal kingdom by attributing themselves to logic, beliefs, and certain unique talents such as language for communication, which they do not acknowledge in non-human animals. In relation to animals, the principles of behaviourism disregarded the acknowledgment of animals' mental states, such as beliefs and desires, in favour of concentrating solely on outwardly apparent behaviours and the circumstances that prompted them. According to Dennett (1995), cognitivism posits that certain animals possess minds similar to those of human beings. The argument from analogy

and the argument from inference to the best explanation are the two most common types of arguments put forward in support of the notion that animals possess minds.

In *White Fang*, the author Jack London effectively portrays the relationship between human beings and animals in a manner that is grounded in realism. The novel portrays an accurate depiction of the interplay between two distinct species inhabiting the Earth, both facing similar challenges and adversities in their respective lives. The narrative opens with an amazing account of hunting, murdering, and struggling for survival in a spruce forest in Northland. It foregrounds how humans and animals are forced to experience an unforeseen danger that tempts them in the thick, freezing forest. Wild animals exhibit aggressive behaviour towards domesticated dogs, perhaps posing a threat to both the animals and their owners. Bill and Henry, who share a mutual friendship, are peculiar individuals embarking on a journey through the winter forest of Northland. Bill and Henry proceed towards McGurry while riding on a sled, which is accompanied by a long and narrow oblong box. Within the confines of the container lie the mortal remnants of an individual who has succumbed to the relentless aggression of untamed lupine creatures. The transportation of the coffin across the desolate and frigid terrains of Northland serves as a poignant metaphor for the diminished prospects that characterise their existence in the untamed wilderness. The depiction shows the delicate and untamed nature of life. During the course of their expedition and while engaged in outdoor camping activities, the individuals involved saw a perplexing phenomenon whereby their canine companions were gradually disappearing over successive days. The presence of wild animals poses an increased risk and instils a sense of mortality in individuals. The act of taking lives, whether of human beings or animals, by both factions exemplifies the primal nature inherent in both humans and animals.

All living things, from humans to animals, share a common desire to either kill or avoid being killed. The narrative explores the interdependence between the survival of humans and the mortality of wildlife, suggesting that either the sustenance of mankind relies on the demise of untamed creatures or, conversely, the continued existence of wild animals hinges upon human mortality. This observation demonstrates the interdependence between these two terrestrial species. The imposition of the notion of human superiority over other creatures is fervently upheld, perhaps leading people astray due to the pride associated with being regarded as the superior life form on Earth. The prominence of *Homo sapiens* as a species commonly referred to as "superior animals" has potentially engendered significant challenges for both non-human animals and the overall ecological balance of the world. The actions of human beings are resulting in alterations to the natural environment, driven by the pursuit of growth and development. These changes pose a significant threat to the existence of various life forms and contribute to a worldwide environmental crisis. The presence of human beings in the habitats of non-human animals frequently poses risks and threats to the animal world. The narrative of human encroachment, traversing the woodlands of Northland and establishing temporary settlements, engenders a perilous predicament, namely the onset of scarcity for the indigenous fauna inhabiting the land.

Bill and Henry are traversing the central region of Northland, encountering numerous calamities and hazards. The individuals are endeavouring to ensure their personal safety, as well as the safety of their sled dogs, in light of the presence of wild wolves in their vicinity. These wolves exhibit a keen interest in the individuals and their dogs, likely driven by hunger. The wolf pack often appropriates fish and domestic dogs as sustenance, occasionally resorting to fatal attacks on humans. *White Fang* was busy questioning, investigating, and gathering information about the Man throughout the time that Kiche was restrained in a separate area of the camps. "The more he came to know them, the more they vindicated their superiority, the

more they displayed their mysterious powers, the greater loomed their god-likeness”(London, 2014).The capabilities and actions of humans have consistently demonstrated remarkable resilience and enigmatic qualities. In the context of *White Fang*, it might be argued that the characters held a position of reverence comparable to that of deities. *White Fang* perceives people as the deities of governance, both establishing and transgressing societal regulations.The Indians have been doing whatever they choose with regard to their dogs and wolf dogs. In this context, Jack London argues:

He belonged to them as all dogs belonged to them. His actions were theirs to command. His body was theirs to maul, to stamp upon, to tolerate. Such was the lesson that was quickly borne in upon him. It came hard, going as it did, counter to much that was strong and dominant in his own nature; and, while he dislike it in the learning of it, unknown to himself he was learning to like it. It was a placing of his destiny in another’s hands, a shifting of the responsibilities of existence. (London, 2014)

The narrative characterises the group of wolves as "land sharks" due to their predatory behaviour, as they approach the encampment with a ravenous disposition and encircle it. The acts of violence and aggression perpetrated by males or wolves symbolise the inherent brutality exhibited by both species towards one another. The natural world is depicted as both a testament to their animosity and their bond. This link has demonstrated that both humans and animals are driven by their innate instincts and are influenced by the forces of nature. The representation of the she-wolf embodies the inherent tension between the innate desire of animals to be tamed by humans in order to fulfil their need for companionship, and their instinctual drive to engage in predatory behaviour for the purpose of self-preservation and the pursuit of a life characterised by autonomy. She has encountered challenges in her efforts to secure the well-being of both her immediate family and herself. Both she and *White Fang* have exhibited comparable emotions and sentiments to those experienced by humans. However, human beings have regarded their sentiments and emotions as invalid and unimportant. She consistently maintains a positive outlook for the organisation and provides assistance from a human perspective. The protagonist's movement towards the campgrounds of man symbolises her need for human companionship and also signifies the disregard exhibited by humanity.

In this story, the bond formed between the travelers, *White Fang*, and the other wolves shows the actual nature of the bond between humans and animals. The portrayal of the attachment between travellers and *White Fang* offers a highly authentic depiction of the dynamic between humans and animals. Following a traumatic encounter with a maternal lynx, *White Fang* and his mother, She-wolf, integrate into human culture, specifically a collective of indigenous individuals. It is worth noting that She-wolf had previously fled from her former owner to seek refuge in the wilderness. Currently, she is facilitating the reunion between her master's society and her offspring, *White Fang*. *White Fang* experienced a state of perplexity as his innate wild instincts compelled him to flee from the presence of humans while simultaneously being constrained by the fact that he was already integrated into the society of his mother's previous owner. This could be attributed to his innate affinity for human culture.

The correlation between humans and animals might be likened to the concept of the "master-slave dialectic" proposed by George Wilhelm and Friedrich Hegel. *White Fang* is consistently employed by the man residing on the island in the capacity of a subordinate labourer. The individual engages in the act of transferring an object from one hand to another with the intention of satisfying the desires or needs of their superiors. Beaver escorts the individuals to the Indian camp, where they encounter Lip-lip as well as other canines and their offspring. The ownership of numerous dogs by the characters Kiche and *White Fang* in the

novel demonstrates the perceived dominance of humans over non-human creatures. Once more, the animosity between Lip-lip and White Fang symbolises a conflict including not only survival but also the pursuit of authority, control, and supremacy over one another.

The novel depicts several elements of the relationship between people and animals. The current state of existence has led both humans and animals to a heightened level of extreme behaviour, characterised by wild and aggressive tendencies. In the narrative, Jack London skillfully portrays the untamed environment inhabited by both humans and animals. The narrative elucidates the arduous endeavour for survival within an isolated landmass known as "Northland." The pursuit of sustenance by wolf-dogs and human beings often places them in a precarious predicament, wherein the outcome may include either the act of killing or being killed. White Fang depicts several instances of interspecies conflict, showcasing the interactions between untamed and domesticated creatures engaged in both cooperative and adversarial encounters. In this literary work, Jack London effectively portrays the dichotomy between the untamed and domesticated aspects of both human beings and animals. The tale illustrates the inherent connection between animals and humans through their shared affinity for the natural environment.

The novel *White Fang* also serves as an illustration of the genuine dynamics that exist within the relationship between human beings and untamed creatures. The illustration depicts the process through which humans domesticate untamed animals and utilise them for labour. The life of the female wolf, who serves as the progenitor of the character White Fang, exemplifies humanity's triumph over untamed fauna. The female wolf, at one point, sought refuge in the wilderness, distancing herself from human society. However, she ultimately found it necessary to return to the human community in order to secure sustenance, protection, and the continuation of her species.

Throughout history, there has been a symbiotic relationship between humans and animals. The interdependence between humans and animals represents a significant feature of their relationships. The prevailing interdependence between humans and animals has predominantly favoured human beings, whereas the benefits animals may have gotten from humans have been comparatively limited. Within the context of human-animal relationships, it is evident that humans have consistently held a position of superiority, exerting dominance over various living forms on the planet. Human beings exhibit a greater degree of dependence due to their multifaceted utilisation of animals in their daily existence, whereas animals, to some extent, rely on humans. Among the various animal species, it may be argued that companion animals exhibit a somewhat higher degree of dependence on people. This can be attributed to the fact that pets are domesticated, hence relying on their owners for sustenance and protection. While some individuals and animal rescue organisations may argue that domesticating pets or other animals serves the objective of ensuring animal welfare and security, the majority of pet domestications mostly revolve around fulfilling human needs and desires. Many individuals want to keep pets due to the unique, appealing, and affectionate qualities possessed by these creatures, hence seeking to acquire a sense of pride associated with their ownership. The utilisation of animals, both as commodities and as collaborators, has been extensively observed in the context of human interaction. The phenomenon in question has served as a catalyst for fostering collaboration and facilitating the generation of essential commodities, such as sustenance. Throughout history, the relationship between humans and animals has predominantly been characterised by humans assuming the role of exploiters rather than cooperative co-workers. The interaction between humans and animals has been a commonplace occurrence in human existence.

In many nations around the world, animals, including cows, pigs, snakes, and elephants, are worshipped while simultaneously being used as sacrifices before deities. Throughout antiquity, the cow has been revered as "Laxmi," the deity of wealth and prosperity in the Hindu religion in the Indian subcontinent. The pig holds a position of reverence as a sacred creature in the religious beliefs of ancient Egypt. In Thailand, white elephants are revered and thought to embody the essence of deceased individuals. The interaction between humans and animals has had a profound influence on human society. Humans and animals share a disposition that is both submissive and aggressive. Humans possess a heightened awareness of the violent tendencies exhibited by animals; however, they tend to overlook the presence of similar inclinations within their own nature. It is inherent in humans to engage in acts of slaughter and exploitation. The inhumane treatment of animals in slaughterhouses serves as a poignant illustration of the primal tendencies inherent in human nature. The dichotomy between humans and animals is a significant aspect of living organisms. The existence and ecological balance of the environment necessitate a mutual understanding between these two opposing entities. The interaction between humans and animals is characterised by a significant impact resulting from the exploitation and enslavement of animals by humans. The novel *White Fang* also portrays the manifestation of human power over both wild and domesticated animals. The tale delves into the untamed nature of wolves and dogs while also examining the harsh realities of human behaviour, including instances of mercilessly torturing dogs and forcing them to battle for survival. The advancement of human civilization is a process that still requires significant progress to be achieved in reality.

## References

- Baker, S. (2001). Guest Editor's Introduction: Animals, Representation, and Reality. *Animal & Society*, 9(3).
- Barcz, A. (2017). *Animal Narrative and Culture: Vulnerable Realism*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Braidwood, R. J. (1948). *Prehistoric Men*. Chicago Natural History Museum.
- Harari, Y. N. (2015). *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*.
- Kant, I. (1988). *Groundwork of Metaphysics of Morals*. Cambridge University Press.
- London, J. (2014). *White Fang*. Scholastic Children's Books.
- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.