



A Study on the Life of Anthropomorphised Beings -Through Barbara Gowdy's *The White Bone*.

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ABSTRACT

Barbara Gowdy, the Canadian novelist diffuses the boundary between animals and humans in her novel *The White Bone*. She narrates the story from the perspective of animals, particularly elephants. She portrays the life of elephants with the same intense human emotions and feelings. These animals act no less than human beings thereby she is successful in making her readers sympathise with the animals. The idea of viewing animals as rhetoric beings is persistent throughout the novel and the paper aims to analyse their behavioral pattern. The theory Zoopoetics study the inherent capacity within any animal that enables him to think and innovate. The paper attempts to study the novel under the light of Zoopoetics to prove that the animals are capable of communication and they are rhetoric beings. The theory as defined by Aaron M Moe can be used to explore and analyse the agency of non- human animals.

Keywords: Zoopoetics, Anthropomorphism, Elephants, Safe Place.

Barbara Gowdy, the Canadian novelist was born on June 25, 1950 in Windsor, Ontario, Canada. She is a member of the Order of Canada and a three times finalist for The Governor General's Award. She is also the winner of Marian Engel Award and the Trillium Book Prize. She has also been long listed for The Man Booker Prize. She has written various novels including *Helpless*, *The White Bone* and *The Romantic*. She has suffered severe back ache and has fallen into depression as a result in the novel *Helpless* she creates character that strives to escape from the physical pain and emotional clutches. Her writings are criticized mainly for the 'dark', 'disturbing' and 'frightening' themes.

The novel *The White Bone* was published in 1999. Barbara Gowdy narrates the story of African elephants in this novel. The interesting aspect in the novel is that the story is narrated in the perspective of an elephant. The novel is an account of the struggle faced by the natural world against the human atrocities and environmental changes. In the novel, one can see animals continuously struggling to survive against the destruction made by the humans. Since the story is told from the perspective of animals, the readers are deeply moved by their misfortunes and ill treatment in the hands of humans.

Gowdy throws light upon the selfish impulses of humans through the elephants. The animals feel that the earth was a happy place before the descent of human beings. The elephants are mercilessly killed for their tusks and feet. Their natural habitat is spoiled by the 'hindleggers' and they are forced to migrate from their home place in search of a better 'safe' place away from the dangers of humans. The readers are given a deep and elaborate description on the elephant's code and conduct, their memory, their communication and their rituals of courtship, mourning and celebration. Each elephant has a special talent, for instance, there are excellent mind talkers and trackers in each herd of elephants.

The elephants in this novel are in a constant search for a safe place. Their habitat is destroyed by the hindleggers and their life is also in a threat. They are continuously hunted for their tusks. In order to escape from the tortures of hindleggers they search for the safe place. The myth of white bone prevails among the elephants and when the She-S family is slaughtered, the remaining members of the family set out to search the white bone that will lead them to The Safe Place. Mud is the protagonist in the novel whose birth family is She-M and she is adopted by the She-S family. Date Bed, the mind talker of the She-S family is separated from the family during a slaughter and she is seen searching for both the white bone and her family. The other surviving members of the

family are She-Snorts, She-screams, She-Soothes, Bent and Swamp along with

Hail Stones, the only surviving member of She-D family. They are also seen searching for Date Bed as well as the white bone. Tall Time, the bachelor bull, who loves Mud is also searching the white bone.

Zoopoetics in the broadest sense refers to the presence of non – humans in a literary text. Zoopoetics was first used by Jacques Derrida. The term analyses the human attributes that are present in non humans. Aaron. M. Moe has given an extended definition on Zoopoetics in his essay “Zoopoetics: A Look at Cummings, Merwin & the Expanding Field of Ecocriticism”. He has used Zoopoetics as an approach to study the poetry of Cummings and Merwin. In this essay Moe has given that Zoopoetics can be studied best when it is set to explore and analyze the agency of non human animals. He establishes "three premises for this agency: nonhuman animals dwell imaginatively, rhetorically, and culturally on the earth" (Moe 30). The paper is set to analyze the behavior of animals on the basis of these three premises.

Animals are seen capable of thinking, teaching, imagining, learning and pretending throughout the novel The White Bone. The elephants live with a set of code and conduct and they try hard to adhere to the rituals. One such ritual is the naming ceremony. A cow's name is changed by other cows when she has a calf tunnel inside her. This is a practice that is adopted by all the elephants and the cows expect to be addressed by the new name instead of their birth names. The names are given according to the character and behavior of the cows. For instance, the readers witness the naming ceremony of Mud who is renamed as She- Spurns because of her nature to reject everything. Similarly there are names like She-screams, She-Stammers, She - Distracts, I-flirt and so on. This reflects the keen observing nature of animals. The other ritual that is observed sincerely is the mourning ritual. However this ritual seems to be different from one species to another. Every elephant feels it necessary to mourn the death of their kind. Even if the corpse is destroyed, the elephants search for the remains to mourn the dead. Though all the species mourn the death of their kind, they don't seem to observe it in a similar way. The mourning ritual of Rhinos and Elephants are very different. The elephants form an outward circle around the corpse and they sing hymns. The Rhinos stay in the same place where the death occurred. They believe that in the interval of time from ten to thirty days the spirit of the dead returns and if the female rhino happens to stay there to catch the breath, she will give birth to a calf with the qualities of the dead.

The elephants have sexual attraction towards their kind. Tall Time is aroused at the first sight of Mud. True

to his words Tall Time is the first elephant to mount her and dig her inaugural calf tunnel. Like a love sick person his thoughts are always behind her and he tries hard to ensure her safety. He wants to start a herd with Mud (family) which is unheard among the elephant families. Long Rains Massive Gathering is an annual congregation of the elephants where elephants of all the families meet especially for mating. Most of the cows go into oestrus and bulls go deep in musth during this period. Bulls are really uncontrollable during the musth period still Torrent tries to subdue because he wants to talk about the white bone with Tall Time. Torrent realizing the necessity of the white bone is ready to subdue his vile mood and have a talk with Tall Time.

Similarly there are certain myths that prevail among the elephants. There is a quest for the white bone, which is the rib of a dead newborn elephant, throughout the novel. The elephants believe that the white bone directs them to The Safe Place away from humans. Another interesting myth that prevails among them is the descent of humans. Earlier the elephants and men were alike creatures created by She, the God. But man showed his disobedience by becoming carnivores and he was degraded from his stature. He eventually became so proud that he instead of walking on four legs started to walk on his 'hind' legs and his trunk began to shrink to become a nose.

Gowdy's characters have excellent imaginative and thinking ability. Date Bed devises a plan to search for the white bone. She plans to attract an eagle with the Thing (probably a torch) and bribe him with a glimpse of his image in the Thing in exchange for his help in searching white bone. The elephants are very calculative that they take precautionary measures to prevent unforeseen dangers. The We-F's hide in the caves to escape from the predatory humans. Inside the caves "they talk softly. Inside and out, they sing, throwing their voices so that humans can't identify the source, and in any event confident that when they sing they sound like birds" (*The White Bone*, 214). They are prudent enough to devise strategies for their safety. When they are in danger, the elephants form a V formation protecting their young ones behind them. The matriarch stands first to defend her herd. Hail Stones and Swamp decide to separate from the family but She-Screams is reluctant to send her son Swamp alone. In order to hide their path from her "the bulls began to eat their dung and bury their urine in order to vanquish their scent" (242). The elephants trace other animals of their kind by scenting dung and urine. While Date Bed has thoughtfully managed to leave her dung at appropriate places, the bulls hide them.

Besides thinking and making decisions animals are also bestowed with the talent to cure diseases. Every herd has a nurse cow ready to administer the ailing elephants.

When Hail Stones is injured She-Soothes recommends "a mixture of water - tree bark and grunt piss ought to do it" (29). When She-Soothes milk dries up, she asks for spikeweed oil because that stimulates the flow of milk. The labor of She-Snorts and Mud is described in the novel. The cows are able to sniff the birth aroma of the cow and expect the birth of newborn. However She-Snorts suffers complication during the calf birth and produces still born. She-Soothes predicts the danger by tasting the cow's urine because she knows "clear urine indicating no complications" (311), sadly She-Snorts' urine is not clear.

Aaron M Moe regards animals as capable of communication. He eliminates the idea that human language is superior to other languages. Gowdy creates characters that are capable of communicating with animals of other kinds. She-Screams manages to communicate with Me-Me, the cheetah with gestures and sounds. She bargains with Me-Me to direct them to the safe place in exchange for She-Snorts' unborn calf. She "squats, grunts, squeals like a calf, taps the cheetah's right paw, points at the four horizons, stamps her foot, points again at She-Snorts and then repeat the sequence" (250). Me-Me understands the gestures and reciprocates. This incident implies the idea that different languages exist between animals. When Mud acquires the power of reading mind, she explicitly bargains with Me-Me.

Barbara Gowdy has created characters with the intention to speak, think, innovate and imagine. By creating animal characters with the ability to speak and reason she has diffused the boundary between animals and humans. Their nature to live in a herd and help each other in the time of distress proves them as cultured beings. She asserts that animals do have a family like humans and it is just on part of humans to let them live peacefully on this earth.

References

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