



# Understanding Animal Narratives through *The Bees* by Laline Paull

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## Abstract

Non- human animals functioning as narrators and protagonists is not common only to fairy tales and fables. Their voice can be found in serious literature too and they narrate the intricacies of their life and their worlds. The primary reason for having animals as narrators is the possibility of evoking empathy from the readers towards the plight of animals. The authors of such works try to decentre human beings and defamiliarize the human perception of the world. Having animals as narrators also facilitate the writers to avoid censorship and persecution by projecting their ideas through animal voice. Thus, ranging from fairy tales to political satires, animal images are common and their voices are used to negotiate the relationship between animals and humans. The paper aims to analyse the Animal narratives in the novel *The Bees* written by Laline Paull. The plot of the novel is revealed from the perception of a bee and with a limited human intervention. However, traces of

anthropocentrism are found in the novel despite its careful detachment from the animal world. The paper sets to show the convergence of animal and human world and the system devised to have a better understanding on the life of bees.

Keywords: Animal Fiction, Animal Narratology, Anthropomorphism.

Literature has always had the power to influence minds and improve the attitudes towards the outcast and ignorant groups in society. Various minority and suppressed groups were discussed in literature and possible solutions for their issues have been identified within the pages of literary fiction. Moreover, fiction has the credibility to bring out a vivid, emotionally charged accounts of individual suffering. It has to be noted that literature is not chiefly a human- domain subject rather it has encompassed non- human animals also. Far from representing animals, literature has proceeded to offer broader insights into socio-cultural forces and systems that are relevant to human- animal relations. Through fiction, writers are able to command the attention of public and policy makers towards the sufferings of non-human animals.

Bees, though tiny, are often praised for their hard work, harmonious nature and intelligence. They are regarded as symbols of structure, social cooperation and virtue in terms of human culture. Unlike other animals, bees are noticed less but Laline Paull has made the bee as a central character in her novel *The Bees*. Bees are vital for natural ecosystem and the novelist by anthropomorphizing bees has provoked human empathy towards bees through her novel. The novel is narrated by a poor low class worker bee named Flora 717. The entire novel is presented from the perspective of bees and Flora takes the readers to various levels that exist in bee society. Flora is considered as an abnormal bee when compared to the rest of the worker bees. She is a sanitation worker bee occupying the lowest rank in the bee hive and her kind are not supposed to speak. Surprisingly, Flora can speak and it made her different from other sanitation workers. Due to the difference she had, Flora is able to move through different ranks in bee hive and ultimately breaks the most sacred laws of bee society. The hive shows a striking resemblance to human society through the rank systems and the strict totalitarian state policies. The bees have to live under the dictatorial rules of the Sage priestess and the fertility police which eerily resembles the human society.

The novel presents a collective observation on bee consciousness by focusing on the reception of sensory experience by the bee Flora. The bee is anthropomorphized as it becomes evident with her instinctual understanding of life and her perception of laws becomes clear as she ages. Flora can identify different scents and her sensory ability is explored more when she is lost in the forage:

Flora searched the air for the smallest scent of Holy Mother and scanned down at the foreign shapes and colors below her to try to reorient herself. Massive green and beige fields dulled the air with their vast, monotonous odor and she veered away to glean any clue to home. With a surge of relief she picked up the scent of the orchard and then of her sisters- never more beautiful...At the thought of the Queen, Flora located the precious molecules of her divine fragrance, poised and spinning like jewels where the air currents converged...A new scent mixed with the homecoming marker, and as Flora began her descent her venom sac swelled hard in her belly and her dagger unsheathed. The code was alarm: the hive was under attack. (Paull, 60)

Flora uses her ability to identify scent to discern her environment and she aligns herself with the changes she picks from her surroundings. Bee here is a sentient being, possibly a conscious agent, and she has conscious internal state within herself which gives meaning to the sensory experience she feels. She instantly feels relief when she picks up the scent of her hive and her kin which can be considered as an instance for her second order intentionality. Like humans, Flora is able to feel emotions due to her sensory experience and by anthropomorphizing her experience, the novelist is able to command the empathy of humans towards her protagonists.

The novel is entirely presented from the perspective of bees and it shows very less human intervention throughout the novel. In fact, the instances of humans happen only three times within the plot of the novel. The first instance is in the prologue, when the owner of the orchard decides to delay the sale of the orchard because of the beehive there. And in the middle of the novel, an old man rips of the top part of the hive and steals the honey from the bee's Treasury. The third instance is in the epilogue, where the owners see that the hive is empty and the bees have abandoned it. The man along with his wife and children come and address the hive, saying that their bee-keeper (his father) is dead and he apologises for selling the orchard. When they find the hive is empty of the bees, they believe that the bees have went along with him (the bee-keeper). This incident shows that humans always think themselves as the centre of the universe and they are important to keep other species of this world survive. In the three instances, the first and third appearance of humans is shown in a positive light

and it is narrated by a third person but the second instance is embedded in the plot of the novel which is narrated by Flora. Unlike the other two incidents, the old man in the second instance terrorizes the bees and disturbs the sanctity of the hive.

Despite having very limited human interaction, the novel cannot completely decentre the presence of humans. In fact, the bees here represent the functions of humans resembling the practice of using animals as metaphors in literature to represent the human culture and political system. The plot and communication pattern of the bees in the novel set them apart from the humans and is slightly successful in decentring humans and make the novel an animal exclusive one.

The major plot of the novel revolves around the consciousness of a single bee and the events are related to the experience of bees. Activities like collecting pollen, cleaning the hives, protecting the hive from the attack of wasps and making arrangements to have comfort during the winter times are given prominence in the novel and are dealt with seriousness. The portrayal of bees is set different from the human lives through the language system used in the novel. Words like “Kin-sisters”, “Kin-scent”, “Crone vomit” and “Flow” are unique and conform to the world of bees, strikingly different from human language. For instance, the Queen bee says, “I too once knew them, but it was many eggs ago, and I have forgotten” (Paull, 83). Through the words of Queen it is to be understood that the bees calculate days by their hatching time. Thus, there is a glimpse into the terminology used by the bees. Through such terminologies, the novelist lures the readers into the world of bees and the language helps the readers to empathise with the complex emotions of the bees.

The novel is not completely estranged of human intervention as the very beginning of the plot is set with the introduction of humans who sympathise the bees. The readers are directed to the orchard where the hive is built and the owner of the orchard decides not to sell the land because of the presence of the hive. The bees are anthropomorphized in the prologue when the owner says that his father used to call the bees as his ‘girls’. This establishes a personal connection between the bees and the owner’s father. It also shows that it is not possible to completely decentre humans in an animal fiction and their intervention is necessary to acknowledge the attributed human characteristics to animals.

*The Bees* resemble the plot of the dystopian fiction where the protagonist is characterized with phenomenal abilities compared to others and who struggles hard to retain his or her individuality. The bee, Flora is like the protagonist of the dystopian fiction who is set apart from other characters with her exceptional prowess and she is looked down by other bees in the hive. She is even led to believe as a 'deformed' bee in the hive. She, with her instinctual understanding realizes the dictatorship rule within the hive and struggles against the oppressive behaviour she is forced to subject. She uses her individuality to carve a destiny for herself in the hive that is characterised with collective behaviour. The bees in the hive lead their lives based on the collective consciousness accepting the roles they are made to perform but Flora questions those rules and she goes on with her individuality which is a complete contrast against the social mind. Flora is anthropomorphized through her individuality and incidentally, collective consciousness in humans is referred as 'hive mind'. Flora shows the collectivist mind set and establishes the fact that such government structures condemn individuality and suppress people. Thus, the novel though narrated by a bee, providing a perspective from the stand point of an insect, is still anthropocentric and can be considered as a metaphorized human society. The hive life can be synonymous with the corrupt human world and the bee symbolizes the heroine who struggles in the human dystopian world.

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