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BEYOND THE FAMILIAR BIOCENTRIC ZOO CRITIC AND HUMAN EXCEPTIONALISM IN KIRAN MILLWOOD HARGRAVE'S GEOMENCER TRILOGY

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ABSTRACT:

This research seeks to examine the representation of non human animals in the works of Kiran Millwood Hargrave, critically acclaimed speculative fiction novel is the Geomancer Trilogy made up of *In the Shadow of the Wolf Queen* (2023), *The Storm and the Sea Hawk* (2024), and *The Ship of Strays* (2025). While going beyond the traditional confines of the biocentric 'zoo critic', where animals are caged and shown in individual instances of institutional captivity, attempts to see Hargrave's fictional world as a macrocosmic manifestation of human exceptionalism and ecological domination. By considering the commodification, imprisonment and enforced exhibition of animals like the noble sea wolves and free birds under the despotic control of the Wolf Queen, Hargrave disputes the Anthropocene era's quest to rob animals of their agency. With characters like Ysolda and her friend Nara the sea hawk and other animals onboard the Ship of Strays, the trilogy provides a redemptive eco-narrative that demonstrates an intrinsic ontological longing for freedom, bodily autonomy and ecological parity. Trilogy requires an end to the notion of animals being passive displays of power.

INDEX TERMS: Geomancer Trilogy, Kiran Millwood Hargrave, Zoo Criticism, Human Exceptionalism, Captivity, Animal Agency, Post-humanism.

INTRODUCTION:

The Imperialism Spectacle and the Mechanics of Captivity. The colonial power and visual spectacles in cultural display public exhibition to project dominance and authorities it also analyzes legal and physical systems employed to institutional control restricted autonomy and subjected colonized population. In current critical animal studies and ecocriticism, the image of the captive animal can be considered as a powerful monument to human pride and anthropocentric domination. In history, the captivity of the non-human world had both a practical goal of imposing physical dominance on the other side and an ideological purpose of perpetuating the philosophy of human superiority, the dangerous idea that makes humanity think of itself as different from, and higher than, the nature it is living in. In literary theory, the 'zoo criticism' developed by such researchers as Randy Malamud and John Berger, demonstrates the objectification of the sentient being results in depriving that animal of its ecological essence and making it part of the human show.

Kiran Millwood Hargrave, an accomplished fiction novel, is the Geomancer Trilogy made up of *In the Shadow of the Wolf Queen* (2023), *The Storm and the Sea Hawk* (2024), and *The Ship of Strays* (2025). Presents a powerful, allegorical critique of precisely those processes. In this vast epic, the landscape is no longer a mere setting but a hyper sentient agent taking part in the geopolitical struggle. The plot reveals the reign of the tyrant Wolf Queen, Seren, whose conquests depend on the domestication of nature through violence and its display in performance. The creatures of her realm are ripped from their native environments, chained in iron, and forced to become subordinated symbols of imperial power. The tropes of animal companions to show the existential significance of the subordination of these creatures, showing that such subordination works as a sophisticated critique of the biocentric zoo mentality through showing how the captive creatures remain in their want to roam free. With reference to environmental texts beyond the novel itself and critical animal theory, I will show how Hargrave shows the struggle of her non-human characters to reveal the ethical failings of human exceptionalism and propose a new model of multispecies liberation and mutual healing.

The fundamental idea of zoo criticism is to completely appreciate the profundity of Hargrave's animal renderings. Randy Malamud describes in his seminar work *Reading Zoos: Representations of Animals and Captivity* (1998) the visual consumption of animals in human controlled environments works to systematically de-realize the non-human subject in a peculiar way.

"The zoo stands as a quintessential cultural site where human exceptionalism is visually and physically institutionalized. By placing the wild creature within an artificial frame for human amusement, we do not engage with the animal; rather, we engage with an elaborate projection of our own imperial mastery, rendering the animal's genuine ecological and ontological reality completely invisible." (p. 42)

Randy Malamud contends that zoos are cultural institutions intended to display the supremacy of humanity over nature rather than honoring the animals. In forcing the natural creatures into artificial cages in order to provide entertainment for the audience, zoos have turned animals into mere representations of human superiority over nature. As a result, this whole performance becomes totally oblivious to who the animals really are and what role they play in nature. It is only the representation of human supremacy that

comes into contact with people. In his seminal essay *Why Look at Animals?* (1980) cultural critic John Berger claims that zoos are manifestations of a deep alienation of modern capitalism from nature. According to Berger, “the zoo is a demonstration of the relations between man and animals; or, rather, a demonstration of how man has isolated himself from them.” Here, the main purpose of the animal becomes purely aesthetic, an object that is supposed to look at humans and to affirm their supreme place on the pyramid of evolution.

Through Hargrave’s speculative fiction, the theoretical insights uncover a dark undercurrent beneath the rule of the Wolf Queen. While Seren’s empire serves as a decentralized macrocosmic zoo, the giant sea wolves, as well as the grandiose bird species, are not just there for their war value. Instead, they are shown off as a symbol of her total domination. This type of performative containment is explicitly described by Val Plumwood, ecofeminist theorist, through the master model of human exceptionalism a dualistic way of seeing the non-human as an object of manipulation, classification, and containment, with no inherent value.

In the novel *The Storm and the Sea Hawk* explicitly identifies the connection between the absolute political tyranny and the forced containment of apex predators. In the case of the Wolf Queen, her throne room represents an architectural symbol of her domination over the elements and the wild beasts representing them. It is the absolute control over the giant sea wolves that stands out as the Wolf Queen’s power statement, those legendary ancient predators, who naturally belong in the roaring oceans and boreal rivers, now restrained by reinforced iron collars and heavy chains around the foot of her throne.

Hargrave meticulously details this oppressive dynamic through the eyes of the protagonist, Ysolda, whose deep, natural connection to the earth allows her to instantly perceive the profound psychological trauma inflicted upon these majestic creatures. When Ysolda is dragged into the Queen’s presence, she does not see fearsome monsters instead, she witnesses the tragic de-radicalization of the wild through the mechanics of forced display.

“The great sea wolves lay coiled like heavy, silver shadows at the foot of the dais, their massive jaws bound in thick loops of dark iron. They did not look like the mythic beasts of the deep currents; they looked like statues carved from grief, forced to sit beneath the heavy, unblinking gaze of the court, their magnificent eyes dulled to a flat, dead slate.” (p. 114)

The captive exhibition of the animals in the Queen’s court, eliminates all the majesty and might of the wild animal. Bound with iron and turned into lifeless statues, the sea wolves become tragic objects of sorrowful mourning. In the end, they are completely defiled because the natural brightness of their being is lost and replaced with a lifeless, submissive look. Demonstrates the ideas of Malamud’s zoo criticism. The sea wolves become living statues that lose their animal agency and become domestic items in the imperial court. Bound jaws serve as a powerful metaphor showing the suppression of the non-human voice within the framework of human exceptionalism. “Unblinking gaze of the court” is an image of the consuming human eye which sees only an entertainment spectacle of the wild animal.

It should be emphasized that Hargrave does not forget about the fact that such containment cannot totally eradicate the animal's ontological being. Even being bound in iron, the wolves produce vibrations of collective sorrow that serve as silent, persistent rebellion against human dominance. Eo (2022) The breathtaking Polish drama revolves around the life of a gray donkey called Eo, whose life begins in a circus as a celebrated animal before he is left behind to face the unpredictability of the outside world. The entire movie is filmed through the bodily and perceptual experiences of the donkey. The transformation of mythic beasts into statues of grief highlighted by Hargrave has an exact representation in the genre of investigative eco-cinema. Skolimowski's *Eo* provides a challenge to the anthropocentric viewpoint and presents the entire story from the perceptual viewpoint of the donkey. By moving the perspective from the human viewer to the captive animal, *Eo* destroys the elaborate projection of human domination.

The sense of the empire's colonial pride expands into the sky through the imprisonment of birds as a symbol of the power of the empire's expansion. Through the comparison of the Queen's inhumane use of iron cages for the imprisonment of migratory birds with Ysolda's non-violent partnership with her sea hawk, the author draws the picture of two completely different relationships with nature. In the end, the display of these caged birds on the battlements shows how the once free sky has been transformed into an instrument of human dominance.

Along the high stone ramparts, the wind howled through rows of narrow iron cages. Inside them, the mountain hawks beat their wings raw against the bars, their feathers ragged and stained with dried blood. They were hung there for all to see a grim warning that not even the sky could escape the Queen's reaching fingers, their wild shrieks transformed into a twisted song of absolute ownership. (p.189)

In the novel *The Storm and the Sea Hawk* it explains that the totalizing nature of imperial domination by means of the way in which the Queen uses the sky for the colonization of space and makes out of the free-flying mountain hawks a show of political domination. Ignoring the physical pain of the birds, the empire transforms their screams of pain into the twisted song of absolute ownership. Through the caging of these birds, the real pain of the animals becomes a public advertisement of the absolute domination and exceptionalism of human beings. Systematic exploitation of wildlife leads to the overall ecological catastrophe, which proves that animal captivity and the destruction of the earth are interconnected. Floating sanctuary, where all the hierarchical systems of human exceptionalism are stripped away entirely. This vessel is not a place where animals are kept for entertainment and performance purposes rather, it is a place where animals are acknowledged as autonomous and equally important members of the survival community. The idea that true healing will happen only when animals are released from being used for human's convenience and returned back to their relationship with the wild is shown through the eyes of Sorrell the cat.

"The deck was alive with a quiet, shifting tide of fur and feather. Here, there were no cages, no iron hoops, no masters demanding a show of teeth or wings. Sorrell sat upon the railing, his amber eyes reflecting the vast, unbroken horizon for the first time he was not a stray, not a pet, not a curious thing to be started at, he was a voyager, his heart beating in perfect rhythm with the wild, rising sea"(90).

The deck of the ship as the liberating sanctuary that is completely free of any cages, masters and demand of humans for show performances. Reframing the cat as a subject who is on his own journey, Hargrave shows how the dignity of non-human subjects and its intrinsic connection to nature were restored. The philosophical climax of the work rejects the idea of the imperial zoo by depriving animals of the necessity of entertaining people. As a result, animals become autonomous voyagers who regain their ontological dignity.

Kiran Millwood Hargrave's *Geomancer Trilogy* delivers a masterful critique of human exceptionalism and the restrictive zoo mindset, illustrating that the systemic impulse to dominate and display wildlife inevitably leads to ecological and spiritual ruin. By highlighting the profound suffering and resistance of captive creatures like the sea wolves, mountain hawks, and liberated felines, the narrative asserts that animals are autonomous, sentient beings rather than passive commodities for human amusement. Ultimately, the trilogy challenges readers to shatter these anthropocentric frames in favor of multispecies solidarity, proving that navigating the Anthropocene requires a restorative philosophy where humans learn to live alongside the wild rather than above it.

In conclusion, Kiran Millwood Hargrave's *Geomancer Trilogy* delivers a powerful critique on the existence of human exceptionalism as well as the fundamental violence underlying the zoo mentality. The contrast between the *Wolf Queen's* imperialistic controlling and the *Ship of Stray's* self-sustaining relationships allow Hargrave to deconstruct colonial thinking aimed at reducing non-human existence to mere power displays. The paper shows that the trilogy not only criticizes literary devices but serves as an ecological manifesto compelling reader to reconsider the failures of anthropocentrism. The narrative trajectory of the *Geomancer Trilogy* contains an essential truth for the Anthropocene that survival and ethics come from moving from domination to post-humanist understanding of multispecies solidarity.

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