

## Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's short fiction *The Flood* : Reading the Animal Soul

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### Abstract

Literature usually becomes a platform to display human life and experiences. The occurrence of nature, birds and animals take a secondary place in creative writings. Of late, Eco criticism and Animal studies have gained attention. Animal studies is a recent emerging field in literature and other interdisciplinary studies. In literature, it's mainly the humans who gain more literary space and attention compared to other non-human forms. Animals occur as symbols, motifs, metaphors and stay in the background. Animals are personified in fables or animal tales. In the recent past, literary studies has shown interest towards how animals get portrayed in literature, their concerns, how they get constructed and their experiences. In literary criticism, perspective on animal issues is a point of view, a form of consciousness.

This paper is an attempt to analyse Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's short story 'The Flood' from the perspective of animal studies in literature. The story can be read as a text for multiple critical interpretations and one of the inquiry into the text is reading it from Animalconsciousness. The story can be read from the contemporary field of literary thought; from two perspectives, one study it from eco critical point of view and the other looking it through the lens of Animal studies in the field of literature. How animals get represented in fiction is a study by itself; its voices, symbols or character. Animals were part of literature for a long time but they weren't been the focal point or resumed central figures. Multiple ways of reading animals or animal texts comes under this discipline. There is a kind of (re)evaluation towards animal studies in literature. With the arrival of the eminent French philosopher and theorist Jacques Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)* in English translation in 2008, the field has gained academic interest and attention. This paper makes a humble attempt to apply some contemporary discourses to the chosen text especially those of Jacques Derrida to understand the nexus between animal and human relation and 'constructed' ideologies.

Key Words: Animal, Animality, boundary, construct, binary, subaltern

### Introduction

Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai (17 April 1912 – 10 April 1999) was an Indian novelist and short story writer from Malayalam literature. He wrote about 40 novels and more than 600 hundred stories in the Malayalam language which also got translated into English and other languages. He was best known for his works such as *Kayar* ( Coir, 1978) and *Chemeen* ( Prawns, 1956). *Chemeen* became the first post-colonial Indian novel to be translated into English. The novel and its film adaptation, also titled *Chemmeen* (1965), earned him national and international fame. He was the recipient of SahityaAcademi award and the Padma

Bhushan, the highest civilian award. Pillai's literary works are known to portray the society in Kerala in the mid-20th century. His concerns were associated with the poor, lower class people and down trodden people of his society. He was truly a notable face not only for the poor human beings but also for other fellow living beings in this planet.

### **Textual Analysis**

Thakazhi's works can be read as historiographies, as realistic works and also as texts arousing consciousness for the poor and for the non-human forms. His short story 'In the Flood' is a testimony for this. Indian literature in English and in regional literature has captured the sentiments of life around. Pillai's short story 'In the Flood' can be thought to bring in ecological and animal consciousness. In this study the text is examined through the discourse of Animal studies as there is no relevant studies done in this perspective. Studying animals has been a mainstay of scientific disciplines for centuries, but "cultural animal studies" began to take off when theorists like Carol Adams, Donna Haraway and Jacques Derrida started talking and writing about ethical care and consciousness about animals and human relationships with animals.

The title of the story 'In the Flood' arouses a sense of loss and empathy for flood victims and brings to us the image of humans suffering in such devastation. Every time we hear of flood, we hear about the human losses. So does this title and the story seem to bring about at the first reading. But as we reread and interpret the text, we find that the text doesn't just seem to capture the realistic picture of human suffering due to floods. It's beyond that. The text subverts it to a different level. The image of flood as it is portrayed in the story doesn't seem to get a negative image for bringing in suffering but on the other hand it takes with it the dog which is not rescued by the human beings, almost saying that nature gives a permanent solution if humans can't help.

The narrative has two plots. The first revolves around the story of a pariah, Chennan whose master had fled away with his boat leaving Chennan alone with his dependents- his pregnant wife, four kids, a cat and a dog. The second part deals with story of the dog who is left behind by his master. At the onset, there is a description of a temple and the rise of water up to the level of the sculpture. Chennan makes some raised platform in his house to avoid the water rising and waits for the boat to rescue them. Somehow Chennan could not rescue the dog and his property – the 5 banana trees with heavy fruits and his hayrick. So the dog is stranded at the western end of the roof top of the hut while Chennan and his family escape via a boat. But as we read the story, we find that it is not only Chennan who desires for escape but also the dog. The dog soon realizes its plight that its master had fled away leaving it alone.

Interestingly, the narrative says

“No one took notice of the dog who was still sniffing around in the western end of the hut.”

“When the dog eventually returned to the spot on the roof from which the family had made its escape, the boat was far away. The animal began to run around frantically on the roof, sniffing here and there, whining all the while.” (p 64)

There are references to a number of other creatures such as frogs, crocodile, fish, a crow eating the carcass and a green bird twittering. There are references to fleas, ants and a snake which sneaks into Chennan's house. There is a repeated image of carcasses floating on the water and the dog looked 'longingly at them' in order to feed them. The next morning, on noticing a boat, the dog is extremely excited about the possibility of escape but the man in the boat seemed to not even notice the dog. Again in the afternoon, the dog sees another boat and the possibility of hope gets built up. The emotions and sentiments attached are not less than a human being's. The two men notice the dog but refuse to help it out. Again at night, a boat appears. The appearance of boat is indicated three times yet there are no chances of survival. There is this repetitive pattern of boat coming in. There is elevation of hope of survival and suddenly everything comes to a dismay. The pathetic situation of the dog and its desire for escape and survival gets intensified. The third boat is the robber's who passed by and halted to steal Chennan's bananas. But the dog makes frantic efforts to rescue the property of its master.

"It attacked him immediately and sank its teeth into his leg. Howling in agony, the man jumped back into the boat while his companions took hold of an oar and brought it crashing down on the dog's head. The animal yelped, and retreated." (p 67)

The dog wants to safeguard its master's property but it fails in its attempt to fight against the two thieves. The dog is stranded on the roof top for hours and as severe hunger sets in it eats the floating carcass. But the roof comes to a complete shatter with a loud noise and the carcass and the dog disappear from view. Once the waters have receded Chennan visits his place to find only the body of the dog. This is the end of the story. But the narrative does not reveal the psychological dimension of Chennan after noticing his dead dog. The story arouses pity for the dog.

Some writers like Anita Nair make ample use of nature as symbolic motifs and metaphors to demonstrate the various psychological dimensions of the characters. The description of nature and the plot almost runs parallel. In certain other texts like that of works by Manju Kapur there is no reference to nature at all. Though Thakazhi is equally concerned with the downtrodden and the poor, there is equal morose for the other living creatures on this planet.

The story 'The flood' brings in a sense of loss and displacement; displacement of human lives and loss of animal life. Dead Dogs, crocodiles and fishes floating in the water. The dog that was faithful to his master is left alone. The story does not reveal the psyche of Chennan but his attitude towards the dog represents in general the human attitude towards other living forms. The flood seems to take away with it the animals so as to give them a relief from inhuman attitude towards them.

The narrative does not reveal Chennan's feelings for the dog but it brings to the reader, the plight of the dog, its suffering, hope and faithful attitude to man.

An excerpt from the text reveals the dog's plight.

'Look, a dog,' one of the men said. The dog began to whimper in a peculiar key—it was almost as though it was responding to the compassion in the man's voice.

'Let it be,' said the second man.

The dog whimpered, opened and closed its mouth, it seemed as though it was praying to the men to rescue it. It tried twice to jump into the boat, and was rebuffed both times. The boat began to move away from the house. The dog howled. It was heart-rending. One of the men looked back.

'Ayyoooo...' The sound wasn't from either of the men but the dog. 'Ayyoooo...' It was an exhausted, pitiful sound. It was almost as if the animal was bidding goodbye to the world.

The men did not look back again. The boat drew steadily away, and the dog remained where it was on the roof, watching it go. Its moaning and the expression on its face seemed to say that it would love human beings no more. The boat disappeared from sight.

(p66)

In the light of Derrida's discourse on binary oppositions and fixed connotations, the text seems to question such oppositions. What is supposedly an animal is not so and what is human lacks humane attitude. Human/animal is a constructed conscious divide where one signifies rationality and power and the other is 'othered' and subdued to be of inferior rank. In this hierarchical power discourse, the one which is rational and powerful has no rationality towards other fellow creatures, at the least for the animal who was a constant companion. The narrative evokes a sense of consciousness for the dog, its horrific experiences. It allows the reader to introspect from the point of view of the dog. Although the story revolves around two parallel plots, of equal dimension, yet the text opens up questions and makes it thought provoking. The deliberate shift in the narrative is a shift from the tale of human suffering to animal suffering. The text becomes a site, site for demystifying the common norm; the boundary that is constructed and the boundary that blurs.

The dog represents the idea of truth, trust and faith, its bonding for the master; all positive attributes. Even at the worst situation and knowing that its master had fled away, the dog tries to save its master's property (the fruits from banana trees) from robbery. All humane qualities are portrayed in the animal but Chennan represents the human form which lacks those humane concerns for 'others'. The text seems to problematize the relationship between man and animals. That is probably the reason why the author doesn't say what runs in Chennan's mind when he notices the body of the dog floating. No sentiments are revealed. The text engages with the animal metaphor and also questions human knowledge structures and relations with social power. Because of cultural implications and societal status, man is above in hierarchy and so comes with it social power. A powerless dog having a low status is doomed to death. Every time there came a boat with humans, but all came with different reasons, none to respond to the dog's agony. The dichotomy between power/powerless and man/animal is what the text exemplifies. The text questions authority and power relationships. The text also questions about 'the politics of species' and asks ethical questions about human-animal relations. Somewhere there is a similarity between gender studies and animal studies. Both challenge the idea of binary oppositions like man/woman and human/animal where the former gains power over the other. The idea of 'othering' and subjugation is challenged. By giving the animal more literary space in the text and in the reader's mind, the text decentres the idea of human/animal dichotomies and

boundaries. The sense of ruthlessness and animality is given to human beings. Nowhere in the text, can we understand Chennan's mind, not even when he sees the dead dog. But the text reveals the psyche of the dog, its agony, longing, hope and hopelessness. So the text throws into question the idea of 'animality' and 'beastliness'. A fixed and definable boundary between 'the human' and 'the animal' is challenged. A human figure like Chennan may have 'animalistic' attitude and the animal may have a 'humane' feeling. The boundary that we create is blurred. Hence concepts like 'animality' or 'humanity' are constructs like gender. Chennan thus represents for the entire humanity. The notion of 'superior' and 'inferior' doesn't arise. Flood becomes symbolic as both the power and powerless become victims of natural disasters.

Animals in literature have been used as an allegory, for example, Orwell's *Animal Farm* or in any other tales. Allegory is a form of fictional text in which a consistent pattern of figuration maps one (human) story onto another (animal) one. But in Thakazhi's short story 'In the Flood' the animal doesn't represent any other human forms but it represents itself. It speaks for itself. There is a hidden voice that questions and challenges the dogma. The text becomes a discourse of the nonhuman and of the subaltern forms. The text also decentres the view that animals can be read only as allegories or used as symbolic motifs. Here the animal gets represented as self-aware, rational, emotional being. Thus the text is a true representation for animal consciousness and man-animal relation.

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