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Invited Article

The Idea of "One Health": Inter-species Dialogue and Narrative Possibilities

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ABSTRACT

"One Health" has emerged as a novel paradigm addressing issues of human health in terms of its linkages with health of other species of the planet. The most critical element in this paradigm is the acceptance of the fact that there is a strong interrelation between human health and the health of other species and the relationship need not always be viewed from an anthropocentric perspective.. Other factors also needs to be taken into consideration. There, however, remains the issue of conceptualizing non-human animal and plant health from the perspective of humans, not because of neglect of its importance but because of the what could be called the problem of inter species intelligibility; an issue of cognitive non-commensurability. This is partly due to the special ways in which species constitute their speech and cognitive universe and partly, and in this case, also due to the inability of humans to understand. The way out of this impasse, as understood in this paper, is to innovate narrative frameworks so as to enable non-human, i.e., animal and plants, voices to find frames to enter into what has been a restrictive and anthropocentric narrative universe so far.

Keywords: One health, Non Humans, Narrative, Normativity, Personhood

1. INTRODUCTION

The idea of "one health" has emerged as a paradigm, integrating concerns for health of human beings with those of neighboring non-human species, i.e., non-human animals and plants. In disciplinary terms, it involves an effort towards the integration of humanities with the natural sciences with an emphasis on biodiversity as well as ethics and conservation. The rapidly deteriorating climatic conditions have further deepened the realisation that sectarian thinking on human future, which also includes thinking on health, needs to give way to planetary level thinking (Ghosh, 2016). Thus, the obsession with single species level thinking must open itself up to dialogue with other species as well as evolve a much larger and all-encompassing idea of health.

> The entry to such a road however prompts a gatekeeping question: what is a human and this question of human subjectivity also gets intensified as one delves deeper into the way the subjectivities of other species are constituted and they in turn help humans to constitute their own.

Recent scholarship has brought to the fore the significance of this question by placing this as the central problem in thinking about the human existence itself. Questions regarding methodology to unravel the inner domain of both human and non-human species, have come

up for discussion and so is the ethical issues one need to encounter in the process (Haraway, 2008). Barbara Smuts, who spent all her academic life trying to understand chimpanzee, baboons, and now dogs, draws our attention towards this primary question that should be considered:

> Every now and then, I look deep into my dogs' eyes and ask, "Who *are* you?" Usually, the answer is a tail wag or a pointed glance at the cookie jar. But every now and then, they will get serious and stare back at me intently, as if to say, "Well, who are *you"* (Smuts, 2006, p. 115).

The way humans and animals perceive each other requires to be studied,. It is here that narrative mediation becomes critical. The paper will argue that the innovation in narrative forms can allow interspecies conversations and dialogue to facilitate understanding of non-human animals and plants. This could provide a bedrock for the idea of a sustainable health for all.

1.1 The Non-Human world: Suspicion and fear of an unknown

In the first decade of the 21st century, two movies released in a gap of seven years, portrayed two different facets of Human ways, depicting its relationship with non-humans. In 2000, *Werckmeister Harmonies,* the cinematic adaptation of the novel *The Melancholy of Resistance by* the Hungarian Nobel prize winner, Laszlo Krasznahorkai, was released (Krasznahorkai, 2015). Bela Tarr, the compatriot of the writer and an equally famous director, brought his unique cinematic style to bear on the equally unique prose of Krasznahorkai and made the otherwise stillness of the daily life of a Post-socialist Hungarian town more serious. He brought his slow and languid movements to add to the stillness of the town which was fated to get destroyed by the arrival of a circus with a carcass of a giant dead *whale* being its chief exhibit and an impending visit of "the prince" as its main attraction.

The dead whale brought the fear of the unknown to the whole town, as if it prepared itself, for some dangerous upheaval. The center piece of the whole story was the slowly unpacking violence which in many ways was inspired by the very sight of the stuffed giant whale in the town. The town was soon taken over by violent mob followed by the military.

I am Legend was released in 2007. The film features the protagonist, played by popular Hollywood actor Will Smith, as the lone survivor of an infectious disease that has already turned all other Earth inhabitants into vampires, who are now hunting for his blood. As he struggles to survive in a hostile New York City, the battle highlights human evolution on one hand and the fight against the unknown on the other. Two earlier adaptations of the novel, namely The Last Man on Earth (1964) and The Omega Man (1971), also depicted the idea of infectious diseases turning people into vampires and how they, in turn, transformed into a new society of their own. Viruses and unknown diseases, in fact, became the template that gave these films their apocalyptic nature, arousing fear and great uncertainty. The emergence of vampires as an extension of human disease and death and the idea that there could be a reservoir of "germs," as scientists began to argue in the 18th century found its cinematic amplification here. The spread of the plague, influenza, smallpox, and other infectious diseases that killed millions provided physical evidence for this reasoning in medical and biological science, followed by Humanities.

The emergence of the germ theory and the phylogenetic distinction between species have brought in a realisation that the annihilation of one or the other species, for example in *I am Legend* (that of the Vampires), is also linked to the

extinction or spread of the other. The extinction of species of humans has always been a real worry across civilizations across times. In their grandest cinematic imaginations, the possibility of human extinction remains the dominant motif.

It is this danger of extinction of species that has also triggered human imagination into thinking of and for the other species. Efforts have been made to develop capacities in humans to navigate new challenges. How the other species are framed in the imagination of humans and how the survival strategies are thought of, led to further add to the way non-humans have been thought of. The idea of One Health may be seen as part of the same ongoing human effort at securing a significant spot for humans amid many other species. However, this time there is a recognition that humans must survive along with the survival of other species. But does the human understand other species?

2. SOURCES OF NORMATIVITY

What is the status of species in the larger scheme of things in nature and how have humans come to occupy the central place? This is a question directly related to the definition of a human itself. The exceptional place that humans occupy, referred to in literature as human exceptionalism, is quite often a self-referential issue. Humans define themselves as exceptional. In a sense it is an arbitrary position as the claim of being exceptional might have been the result of human ignorance towards other species rather than what humans have found exceptional about themselves which^666666666666666666 'humanized.'

Human exceptionalism also gets linked to the idea of speciation. However, attributes which were seen to be making the human species exceptional were seen as product of a bias or the lack of knowledge about the other species. It is argued therefore, that a more scientific and balanced understanding of species brings about the urgent need for a more scientific and unprejudiced understanding of inter-specific relations. Speciation is seen as promoting an idea akin to racism and should be discarded. Another premise about human centrality is its exceptional capacities. This too however has come under strong critique as knowledge of capacities of other species dilute the exceptional place of only humans.

It is however, in the domain of 'moral and legal personhood,' that there is a deep contest. Acquisition of a 'personhood' which in its most celebrated form distinguishes humans as bearers of a moral status, is often presumed to be absent in animals and plants. This distinction long anchored on the idea of reason, has been undergoing philosophical scrutiny, particularly the role of reason as a defining feature separating humans and non-humans (Sorabji, 1993).

The centrality of reason was most rigorously argued by Immanuel Kant for whom moral responsibility arose from the autonomy of rational agents acting on self-imposed maxims; the primacy of which is facing challenges. In contemporary philosophy, Cristian Korsgaard, a leading interpreter and extender of Kantian philosophy, has recast, and in some sense, relaxed this demand in terms of what she calls 'normativity' (Korsgaard, 1996). She argues that sources of moral personhood are grounded in self-regulation and reflective endorsement of one's action. As this 'normativity' remains inextricably linked to reason, non-humans cannot attain moral personhood despite this short relaxation by her.

The absence of a moral personhood therefore still makes non-human animals or plant for example, elude legal personhood. It is this lacuna which has historically justified the subordination of animals, rivers, mountains, plants and forests to human desires and interests, shaping their legal status as objects rather than subjects of moral consideration.

3. THE NARRATIVE WAYS

What still lies in the realm of possibilities has entered the domain of contemplation. The moral and worldly lives of non-humans is sought to be brought to our cognitive domain by innovators. In so doing they are also opening possibilities. It is here that new narrative mediations became crucial.

While cinema has vividly depicted the possibility of human extinction- amplifying our anxieties- it has also begun to unravel through its narrative forms the pathways and mechanism of such extinction. Our understanding of genetic mutation whether accidental, synthetic or occurring with or without human intervention, is now presented to us in their most vivid and magnified form -thanks to the media.

The cinematic narration with their variation and inclusion of contemporary angst and anxiety, have provided the mental cape for thinking about the other species. The idea of zombies of the 1960s or of aliens of 1990s and now of *mutants* of 2000 and 21st century have gradually become the main content in which cinema is mixing the contemporary and the perennial. Based on fictional writer Jeff Vandemeer's novel, the movie *Annihilation* shows the new genetically reformed species sets up a Shimmer and begins encroaching on human landscape and converting all humans and non-humans into a new genetic plan which includes clones as well as synthetic forms. The human forces were sent to stop expansion. The expeditionary team came back destroyed with one person surviving. He too came back critically ill. His wife, a biologist, also the protagonist of the movie, becomes member of the second team which went for the expedition in the movie.

The new team, consisting of a biologist, a psychologist, a surveyor and an anthropologist (originally in the novel) the four original warriors against the mutants, are interestingly the four major professions which have evolved us to the modern day understanding of the world as a scientific world. They get deeper into the field and finally only the biologist comes back destroying the whole system. However, the audience on their own discretion finds that it could be the clone which has come back and not the original biologist. The anxiety therefore remains. While we are still awaiting the sequel to the movie, Vandemeer would in his later novels show how the human administration lost control, and the land went to the mutants.

Cinematic inclusion of a dog, i.e., in *I am Legend* in 2007, as the only possible companion to the lonely survivor to the cinematic constitution of a mutant world, in *Annihilation* in 2018, where both humans and non-humans were integrated, is significant. This decade is significant as it witnesses the successful completion of the genetic sequencing. Intense debates over the loss of centrality of humans in the genetic map and the need to protect this place by regulating efforts at cloning or other ways of producing synthetic or natural humans by "manipulating genes." The period witnessed development of new synthetic entities and the development of Artificial intelligence which, while providing clues for future world, also brought foreboding about it. Thus, while the invitation to companionship in 2007, which itself was an element introduced to the original theme of the film, no such element existed initially, and mankind had to deal the issue of extinction alone. Animals were seen to be a kind of partner. By the 2020s, the forebodings were more real and by the time that the virus in 2019 became a real killer, the apprehension of what the *Annihilation* would bring was more real than it could ever had been.

It is here that the efforts at finding a new plane to channelize these anxieties into a narrative domain became evident. The fictional and literary narratives tried to explore a range of possibilities for a negotiated world. The efforts here were to find new forms and styles for

species to evolve better mutual understanding. Coexistence rather than dominance was to be the norm in this narrative exploration. It is that stream which brought thinkers on a post humanist platform whose most radical stream questioned the very centrality of the human-centric natural world. It strove to articulate the voices of non-humans, the voice of a companion. Donna Haraway (2008), for example, proposed a full programme overseeing the non-humans occupying a place in nature, which is not subservient to the human interests. The post humanists also pointed out the shallowness of a restoration paradigm in terms of "mutuality of interest" as it was designed to continue human domination on nature.

Thus, there are two delicately poised perspectives emerging. One, which talked of the wellbeing of all species. The other has suggested a transcendence of centrality of humans as the point of beginning and allowed other species and their lives to crowd the place to provide a more panoramic and meaningful cause to take forward.

The urgent question for us therefore is to find out a cognitive frame which allows both humans and non-humans to cohabit. The narrative ways in literary world came to our help. First such narrative need has been to breach the template of human fear of the animals. Bela Tarr has shown that the very idea of an animal itself is enough to trigger fear. The key remains on how to let animals remove the fear of humans. Significantly narrative style as well as forms in which animals can speak of their world are explored by creative and fictional writers. The need is to know them better and their lives as well. Apart from animals, scholars have tried to understand the lives of plants, i.e., community of trees. Efforts of collaboration between narrativists and dendrochronologists have tried to figure out how must the life of the community of trees be recorded and told so as to create an ambience of empathy (James & Koenig, 2026).

However, narratives of non-humans also needed to be facilitated by making the entrenched "we" which "reifies the distinction between human societies and a vast gamut of non-human life forms as well as climatological, evolutionary, or geological processes" (Caracciolo, 2020, p. 94)/ Fludernik blamed, "individualistic bias in our literary and narrative forms which privileges the humans" (Fludernik, 2017, as cited in Caracciolo, 2020, p. 86). She criticised the individualistic bias in literary and native studies fields in which she thinks there "has continued a predilection for celebrating the individual and for subjectivity and personal identity even where the theoretical perspective would suggest otherwise." (Caracciolo, 2020, pp. 86-94) The incorporation of the non-humans in the larger story of nature, therefore, needed an important work of making the entrenched "we" of the humans unstable.

The question of form of media in hosting a particular narrative. has also acquired importance. Graphic literature, comics, novels for example have allowed the animals to articulate themselves well. They also advanced the cause of inclusion in the larger narrative pantheon. It is the graphic comics for example which brought to life once again the favour of *Jataka* icons. The Graphic form was found to allow animals to be animals in their own terms. The revelation of the tragic death of Laika, the Dog who went to space, was brought to us in this form as a symbol of how animal lives are at the margins of our consciousness. Laika was sent to the space soon after coming back, in a very short span of time, without allowing him to have required rest. When sent to the space second time soon after the first, with no time to recover, Laika died. Not long after gaining his fame (Herman, 2011). His death never received any spectacular coverage, but the tragic death comes alive to shock our conscience, in a very telling graphic form. However, the story needed a different form of telling and graphic form proved to be an appropriate option

4. IS THERE AN ANIMAL CASE

Historically, non-humans in south Asia had acquired a narrative place proximate to humans in traditional media. *The Jataka Tales*, in fact were the first to formalize the anthropomorphic depiction of non-humans, who walked, spoke and lived as if they were humans. Through those wonderful series of stories, their life and world were revealed to us. The narrative styles and forms of *Jataka* travelled widely; to the Persians and Arabs, and then to the Greeks and eventually returning to south Asia in new guises.

The Jataka narratives often presented non-human animals as possessing moral and legal personhood. One can, however, argue that they were depiction of human stories told in terms of animal characters, i.e., Anthro-morphism. Animal sensibilities, aspirations and predicaments were all human, reflecting contemporary social and moral concerns. This tradition of Anthro-morphism finds an echo in Art Spiegelman's Maus, where characters during the Nazi period wore masks, or in the long-standing Indian tradition of animal stereotypes, where animals are attributed specific qualities that humans have ascribed to them.

Non-humans and non-animals also acquired different gender and social roles. So, there were male and female rivers, while the forests acquired status as separate individual form with names and particular attributions. There were very close familiar and societal attributes accorded to them and one expected them to carry them forward.

There is therefore, a possibility of dialogue and understanding. However, two broad factors coloured this relationship in India. First, colonialism interfered through their knowledge, legal and socio-cultural codes, into changing the way the local viewed their relationships with other species in their cultural habitat. Relegation of the Indian free dogs to the margins by not only employing the term pariah, an abusive reference to the social outcast, but also leading them to be treated as unwanted or entities to be kept at a distance, through acts and municipal codes. The colonial state, therefore pushed the Indian free dogs permanently to be at margins (Ghosh, 2026).

This also brought a historical rupture in our vision of Dogs of the subcontinent. The wide range of Indian Dogs, as Theodore Bhaskaran has brought out to our notice, have increasingly faced the discrimination as well as an unwanted hostility, which further deteriorated their life, now filled with stigma and a sense of "being unwanted" (Bhaskaran, 2017).

Capitalism, its logic and its language further acted on this structure of exclusion that colonialism had built. The new models of development and the new lifestyle meant increasingly shrinking spaces for the dogs. The new spate of urbanization also added to their rapid marginalisation and exclusion (Narayanan, 2017). In shaping our space, thought and sensibilities, capital forced the same dogs now to be seen only as burden on our health system as well as intrusion to our leisure or recreational space. The citizen of the new urban landscape, for example, began looking at them as reservoir of disease and death.

The British employed the term "pariah' for them. The new nomenclature uses ownership as the basis of their identity. The erstwhile free dogs now needed to be owned by someone to have a legitimate life in an urban surrounding. Their life without this enslavement is reduced to a life worry, anxiety and violence. In the new legal language, lives of most of them, as the philosopher, Agamben, argued in the case of the human in emergency, is in a 'state of exception;' they can be eliminated or as in recent years happened, culled with impunity. Significantly it is the legitimate authorities which decide such destiny for them. The idea is increasing in currency in both administrative and the juridical realm.

It is at this historic juncture; one must hope

that the idea of sustainability, that is at the basis of One Health Programme, also becomes the basis a more sustainable conversation of different species. A more empathetic and non-dominant approach is what is going to open a vista of inclusions.

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