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We, the Animals: Studying Interspecies Relationships in *Never Cry Wolf* and *Mia and the White Lion*

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Abstract

Cinema has undergone multiple shifts in recent times and one of the major shifts is towards the eco cinema, where ecocritical theories, primarily focusing on interspecies relationships are highlighted. These theories also include the basic rights of animals, human's relationship with animals and nature, and also reject anthropocentric beliefs. In one of his articles titled, "The Human Animal: An Ecocritical View of Animal Imagery in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*", Erik Fredriksson argues that, "Ecocriticism begins to see human and non-human nature as interconnected and part of a whole. The distinction between human and animal is questioned and animal stories are examined to illuminate how we think about animals. The idea is also to promote empathy towards animals by highlighting kinship and to break up patterns of anthropocentric thinking." In this paper, the focus will be on two films based on real-life events, *Never Cry Wolf*, based on Farley Mowat's book, and *Mia and the White Lion*, which talks about the fate of lions in the hands of the canned hunters in South Africa, which will blur the line between reel and real. This paper will also highlight the interspecies interactions and relationships, more specifically, the unconventional interaction between the supposed 'dangerous and ferocious' wolves and lions and the two central characters, Tyler and Mia.

Keywords: interspecies relationship, eco-cinema, ecocriticism, solarpunk

Elements of Ecocriticism in the Films

Never Cry Wolf showcases how a wolf is perceived by people commonly which does not have any similarities with reality. When Tyler, an environmentalist, and a biologist, went on an expedition in the Canadian Arctic to investigate the wolves and whether they are

responsible for the declining population of caribou, he witnessed a completely different scenario in the wilderness. In *Understanding the Call of the Wild: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents*, Claudie Johnson states that “So-called science and imperfect observation as well as folklore perpetuated the view of the wolf as an aggressive and fearless devourer of sheep, cows, defenseless men, women, and, especially, children and a grave robber who craved the flesh of dead humans. In Europe, this resulted in the wholesale slaughter of wolves.” (Johnson 225). However, in reality, the behaviour of the wolves is different since they “live in extended family groups that include a breeding pair typically two strong, experienced individuals along with several generations of their offspring,” as mentioned by Sharon Levy in “Family Values: Why Wolves Belong Together.” While staying in northern Canada, Tyler experienced a similar behaviour as his life got entangled with the family of the wolves, somewhere he became one with them. In a place where he was surrounded by thick sheets of ice, emptiness, danger, and extreme temperatures, Tyler’s only source of inspiration was this animal, who shared a complex social life with him without showing any signs of brutality. As his interaction with the wolf intensified in the wilderness, Tyler’s view of seeing the wolf as a wild and ferocious creature transformed into perceiving them as loving.

The audience witnesses a similar situation in Maistre’s film *Mia and the White Lion* where a young girl, Mia gradually befriends a white lion cub and later saves him from the canned hunters. The white lion, Charlie, (real name Thor) shown in the film was in reality purchased by the famous “Lion Whisperer”, the animal custodian in South Africa, Kevin Richardson from a “captive lion breeding facility in South Africa where he was destined to enter the cycle of farmed lions that inevitably ends in a canned hunt.” (Richardson) The story revolves around Mia, who was born in New York and has been persuaded to come to South Africa since her father owned a lion farm. At the beginning of the film, the young girl tries to cope with the new surroundings, people, school, and most importantly the animals. She feels like a fish out of water, mostly disappointed and disinterested until his father gifts her a lion cub on Christmas. Though she tries to ignore the innocent and delicate newborn, Charlie manages to win her attention with his warmth and

friendliness. Mia breaks her cocoon and forms a unique bond, entirely based on trust and friendship, which doesn't stop Mia from taking drastic steps and going beyond her comfort area to save the lion later.

In one of the interviews with Daniah de Villiers, the one who played the character of Mia, mentioned the harmonious relationship that Kevin shares with these 'ferocious creatures' and said, "The way Kevin builds his relationships with all of his lions is on such an intimate level of trust. It was so unique seeing how the lions love him and the respect and love he has for them in return. It's strange to witness at first but it became my everyday norm. The amount of love and energy that Kevin has dedicated to all of his animals is so inspiring, it has sparked my passion to help them even more." Lions are known to be one of the world's most dangerous animals but Kevin has proven that with love, understanding, and trust, even these big cats can be loving animals. In one of his books titled, "Part of the Pride: My Life Among the Big Cats of Africa", Kevin Richardson clearly stated that he never uses sticks or chains to tame the animals but he considers them to be his brothers and also gets the same respect back. Kevin's contribution in making the film, training the young actress, and also introducing the lions have been commendable and somewhere it blurs the line between cinema and reality to showcase the actual existence of interspecies relationships. The author further explains his love for nature and animals since childhood, when he was fond of birds, frogs, and fish, and sometimes, dogs and cats too. In the chapter titled "The Bird Man of Orange Grove" (Part of the Pride), Kevin states, "My career choices as a child included bird trainer, veterinarian, zookeeper or game ranger." (Richardson 9) his contribution as a wildlife conservationist is truly remarkable.

Human, Nature, and Animals - The Interconnections

In the article "With Respect for Nature Living as a Part of the Natural World" J. Claudie Evans opines that "the belief that the human species, along with all other species, are integral elements in a system of interdependence such that the survival of each living thing, as well as its chances of faring well or poorly, is determined not only by the physical conditions of its environment but also by its relations to

other living things” and this is the major essence of the film, *Never Cry Wolf*. Tyler, in the film, portrays the unique interconnection between humans, animals, and nature since in that barren land there was no other life except the wolves, caribou, and other smaller beasts. In this situation, humans seemed to be the intruders in the land of animals and nature. But surprisingly none of the animals protested the ‘invasion’ of humans but rather taught them how to be in harmony with each other. Even the Eskimos, who are the ancient inhabitants of the place, have always maintained a cordial relationship with them. The Eskimos believe that nature can be the best teacher and when we all maintain a bond; we create a better world because our needs are thoroughly entangled. Claudia D Johnson states that wolves hold a sacred place in the lives of Eskimos and the former is also a part of their folklore, which has been passed on from one generation to the other. Johnson writes, “The wolf continued to be admired and cherished in Native American culture at a time when wolves were feared and hated by whites. Each tribe had a slightly different view of the wolf, but all seemed to regard the wolf as representative of all the variety and complexity, the strength and the weakness, of nature itself ... Some tribes, like the Ojibwas, focused on the wolf’s family structure and faithfulness. Others, like the Oneidas, especially admired the wolf’s endurance and courage. The Navajos believed that the wolf had magical powers. To the Inuit, the relationship between the predator wolf and its prey illustrated the oneness of all nature.”(Johnson 225) One of the most important characters whose life was entangled with animals and nature was Ootek, who had the special ability to understand the wolf language and he also considered himself to be so connected with the wolves that he could converse with them easily. Ootek’s special ability to understand the wolf’s conversation has been projected in the film multiple times and it was Ootek who enlightened Tyler about the importance of the wolf-caribou relationship which opened Tyler’s eyes to the reality of the situation and how the wolves were simply used as a facade by the hunters to justify the reason behind the declining population of caribou. He mentioned that “the caribou and the wolf are one; for the caribou feeds the wolf, but it is the wolf who keeps the caribou strong.”(Tilseth). Ootek also said that the wolves were only feeding on the sick and weak caribou so that the land

could have strong and healthy caribou needed to maintain a balance in the ecosystem. Farley Mowat, in this book, also highlighted that “The wolf serves a vital role in maintaining the long-term well-being of its prey species is not a threat to human beings, is responsible for only minor losses of domestic stock, and for the most part, will not even live in proximity to human settlements or agricultural enterprises” (Mowat vii-viii)

Mia and the White Lion also puts forward the arguments on the same line to showcase harmonious relationships between animals and humans and also the cruel side where humans legally kill lions for the sake of entertainment or to showcase their power. Unlike Tyler, Mia has neither been portrayed as an environmentalist nor as a lover of nature initially. However, Mia finds comfort, happiness, and harmony in the company of a lion cub, who grows up to be her closest friend. Mia is portrayed as a simple girl who is unaware of her father’s secrets. Mr. Owen (Mia’s father) had an animal farm which was known to all but what turned out to be his darkest secret was his involvement in selling off lions for canned hunting. The secret is revealed to Mia when she hides herself inside her father’s van and visits the place where one of their lions was being taken only to witness the horrific sight of trophy hunting. This incident completely shook Mia, whose only motive was to save Charlie and somehow send him to the Timbavati Nature Reserve, where no one could harm him. Like Ootek could decode the language and conversation of the wolves and caribou, Mia could at least understand the language of Charlie, who in turn chose to be a gentle giant in front of her.

Though Mia and her family had seen Charlie since his birth and Mr. Owen was the one to hand over the cub to Mia, he is initially portrayed as an individual who is more concerned about money than the life of an innocent animal. However, this materialistic side never emerged in Mia’s mind since the bond that they both shared was purely based on love, respect, and trust which they maintained throughout. Mia single-handedly left no stone unturned to save Charlie from her father. She even went to the extent of secretly taking her father’s van and Charlie inside it to Timbavati Nature Reserve. Mia did not even think of her own life and the risk that she might have to encounter to carry the lion to such a faraway place. She embarks on a dangerous and unnerving journey where her only

mission is to protect Charlie with whatever she has and though she faces a lot of challenges, Mia is successful in protecting Charlie. The unusual relationship between a lion and a human instantly broke the myth of considering lions to be ferocious and harmful animals only. Charlie and Mia proved that even a dangerous animal can be gentle provided we give them equal love and respect because they are a part of nature as much as we are.

Solarpunk Elements in the Films

Solarpunk can be defined as a sub-genre of science fiction, which primarily emerged as a response to the dark and apocalyptic Cyberpunk genre. In an article titled, “Solarpunk is the Future We Should Strive For”, “the ‘punk’ element in solarpunk refers to the movement’s unapologetically optimistic take on the future despite our growing pessimism and even apathy, and passionately calls for radical societal change and abandoning current capitalist markets and infrastructure.” Solarpunk believes in interspecies relationship, harmony between humans and nonhumans which can contribute to creating a better and more positive world. Interspecies relationship has been showcased in multiple solarpunk anthologies, poems, and articles, however, the most recent and prominent one is *Multispecies Cities: Solarpunk Urban Futures* where more than human futuristic stories have been compiled to showcase how a city would look like in the future where humans, plants, animals and insects would live together, these are stories of inclusion offering an optimistic view of the future urban spaces.

The films that are being studied in this article also have solarpunk elements and both Mia and Tyler can be considered as solarpunk heroes. They take charge of safeguarding innocent animals and in turn, break the myth of anthropocentrism. They not only protect the animals but also encourage others to love, respect, and preserve the wildlife, which is essential to maintaining a balance in the ecosystem. Mia and Tyler give the audience a ray of hope about the future and also motivate them to conserve nature. The importance of listening, not only to human beings but also to the words of nature, holds a primordial space in the solarpunk genre. This concept has been beautifully projected by Priya Sarukkai Chabria, in her poem “Listen: A Memoir” where she highlights the

fact that everything speaks, we just have to listen to them closely. A similar belief has been reiterated in *Never Cry Wolf* through the character of Ootek and in *Mia and the White Lion* through the central character, Mia. Ootek (later Tyler as well) and Mia could listen to the call of the wild, understand the language of the animals, and share a deep connection that can only be felt and not expressed in words. The Solarpunk elements in these films have transformed the plot to be more realistic and contemporary, which is not a fictional tale but is very much tangible.

Conclusion

The most unique features of these films are that they have animalized humans and humanized the animals. The virtues of the wolves along with the love and warmth of the 'ferocious' lions had enlarged the horizon of understanding and opened the eyes of Mia and Tyler to witness the actions of humans from a different perspective. Both the characters gradually understand that humans have attempted to justify the heinous crimes committed by them or have tried to project it on a different being who has lesser power. In these films, humans are shown to exert beastly behaviour towards the animals when the trappers simply blamed the wolves for killing the caribou, solely out of thirst for blood when in reality the trappers were hunting them just as a part of the sport. A similar activity has also been portrayed in *Mia and the White Lion* when Mia exposes the reality of her father who reared the lions just to sell them off at higher prices to the trophy hunters. These films have constantly tried to dismiss the ancient myth of wolves and lions to be savage killers of other animals and humans. As the film progresses, the viewers also have captured an entirely different image of the animals. While living with the wolves, Tyler understood the reality, "On three separate occasions in less than a week I had been completely at the mercy of these 'savage killers;' but far from attempting to tear me limb from limb, they had displayed a restraint verging on contempt, even when I invaded their home and appeared to be posing a direct threat to the young pups" (Mowat 51). Similarly, when Mia's parents thought Charlie to be a threat to her and the entire family, the reality was just the opposite, while Charlie maintained a cordial relation and trusted them, Mia's father almost left him to accept death in the hands of the canned hunters. Hence, these two films showcase the fact that unless humans and animals intermingle and know each other, they will never understand the interdependency. Once humans enter the world of non-humans and engage with them, they keep looking at them through the lens of how they are projected and not how they are. Just like humans can create myths regarding animals, they also can break them and present a fresh perspective which would be beneficial for the entire ecosystem.

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