



Human-Animal Nexus in Michael Morpurgo's *Farm Boy*

Divya Lekshmi M S^{1*}, Dr. M. Raja Vishwanathan²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, National Institute of Technology Warangal, Telangana, India, 506004.

*Email: divyalekshmims@gmail.com, dl22hsr1r03@student.nitw.ac.in
<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-8136-0611>

²Associate Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, National Institute of Technology Warangal, Telangana, India, 506004.

Email: vishwanathan@nitw.ac.in, <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-2715-4498>

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Abstract

Michael Morpurgo is renowned as a storyteller for children, and *Farm Boy* is a sequel to his well-known novel *War Horse*. The protagonist is a boy who feels delighted with his grandpa's storytelling, which urges him to spend holidays on his grandpa's farmyard. The narration unwinds Grandpa's childhood memories of their best-loved farm horses, Joey and Zoey. His family shared a priceless relationship with these non-human animal friends, and their relationship was marked by compassion.

The narrative of *Farm Boy* reflects the merit of humans' organic relationship with non-human animals. The framework adopted while expanding human-animal relationships is Donna J Haraway's *When Species Meet* (2008), which discusses the importance of harmonious cohabitation with other living creatures. An ethical relationship between the bio and the geo is needed for sustenance, and young minds can be moulded through creative art. Hence, stories matter in the Anthropocene age.

Keywords: storytelling, ethics, empathy, aesthetics, human-animal relationship.

"Grandpa loves to tell his stories, and when he does, I love to listen. But it isn't just the stories I like - to be honest, . . . it's the way he tells them" (Morpurgo 31).

Storytelling is a liberating experience for both the listener and the narrator, as stories can bring forth awareness. *Farm Boy* is special as it has a frame narrative or an embedded narrative. The aesthetics of storytelling carry ethical implications. Empathy, moral

imagination, and a profound sense of connection between humanity and animals are perceived through storytelling.

Joey is one of the farm horses who proved his mettle in the war zones. In the novel, Grandpa narrates the human-animal bond between his dad, Albert and Joey the horse. Albert and Joey were partners who considered each other equal. Their relationship manifests Donna Haraway's concept of companion species in *When Species Meet*. But the army had taken Joey away into the war fields, and Albert joined the military to find his horse, since they found it impossible to be apart. "It took him three years of looking, but he never gave up." (20). When the war ceased, Albert found the lost horse in No Man's Land and was reunited with him.

Grandpa narrates the tale of Joey, Zoey and Albert to his grandson, and it is all about the human-animal relationship they cherished in the family. Grandpa was a farm boy since his childhood, and he was proud to be so. He asks his grandson to teach him how to read and write, and after months of learning, he can write a story about Albert and his relationship with the horses. That is the story embedded within the novel *Farm Boy*, forming the frame narrative. The story is all about Joey returning from the war fields to his hometown and the later episodes of his life.

There are similar literary works which portray the human-animal relationship. Owners also develop strong bonds with their work animals, such as horses. One of the peasant novels by French author George Sand, *The Miller of Angibault* (1845), vividly depicts that bond. Grand-Louis, the miller, and his horse, Sophie, share a bond in this instance. The bond between the peasant Érembert and his goat Scripant in Ferdinand Fabre's novel *Le Chevrier* (*The Goatherd*) is another example of human-animal relationship. According to Peter Ellis, "Life lived intimately with other animal and plant species meant that they were seen as human persons

with similar consciousness, language and culture, but differing in appearance and perspective" (Maiti 16).

The Bet

Harry Medlicott, a man with pride, challenges Albert and his horses to plough a field. He was boastful about his tractor and considered machinery smarter than working animals. He says, "A man without a tractor these days can't call himself a proper farmer" (Morpurgo 66). Albert accepts the challenge in a drunken state and says, "If I win I drive away the tractor. If you win there's a hundred bales of my best meadow hay for you" (Morpurgo 67). It was a hopeless challenge with the old horses in the barn as Joey was fifteen and Zoey near twenty. It was indeed a hard nut to crack, but Albert couldn't withdraw the challenge for fear of humiliation by the public. The challenge resembled the story of the tortoise and the hare; the account of a race between unequal partners, which attracted conflicting interpretations.

Nonetheless, the horses did it all. Their power superseded the power of the machinery. Harry Medlicott keeled the tractor "over in the ditch and leant up against the hedge with his ploughs ploughing nothing but air and his great muddy wheels spinning round and round . . . a sight for sore eyes" (Morpurgo 95). The tractor engine choked and stopped. Joey and Zoey ploughed "together like one horse with eight legs" (Morpurgo 97). They ploughed sixty-one furrows, and Medlicott did only sixty. Indeed, the horses won the race with the tractor, and Albert took away the old green Fordson.

Human-animal Relationship

Grandpa says, "Father says to me once it's not the same working with a tractor. Can't hardly talk to a tractor" (Morpurgo 105). Farmers communicate with their working animals, which is impossible with a tractor or a machine. Animals could feel the energy of their caretaker and understand the emotions because they possess cognitive skills as humans do. Farmers as handlers share an emotional bond

with the animals they employ, which is unfeasible with machines. This sort of human-animal work employs collaboration that results in efficient work on farmlands, where animals are considered partners. In her book *Animals, Mind, and Matter*, Josephine Donovan observes that farm labourers maintained a close bond with their work animals, such as horses, shepherd dogs, and oxen, which are frequently seen as companions and members of the human kin network, in rural areas, prior to the emergence of industrialized farming (30). It has long been a custom for farmers and the impoverished to have little differentiation between themselves and their animals. These animals served as everyday companions, assisted their human owners in challenging tasks, and occasionally were the main source of their affection (Donovan 32). The animals were considered as individuals or as subjects capable of understanding what is said to them by the caretaker. There are several advantages to working with animals, including better mental health and increased productivity for humans as well as increased empathy and compassion for animals, which improves animal welfare and can result in happier, healthier animals.

In his article on "Animal Rights Versus Human Rights: The Need for Compassion and Empathy Towards All Sentient Beings" Kuldeep Singh Chauhan states that by advocating for animal welfare and showing compassion for non-human animals, we cultivate a culture of empathy and non-violence, which ultimately improves our own moral character and societal harmony (Times of India). It is evident from the storyline that animals are valued more than machines. In this Anthropocene age, it is indiscreet to overlook the non-human lives around us. No machinery could surpass the merit of animal existence. In *When Species Meet* (2008), Donna Haraway says:

We are in the midst of webbed existences, multiple beings in relationship. . . Regarding animals as systems of production and as

technologies is hardly new. Taking animals seriously as workers without the comforts of humanist frameworks for people or animals is perhaps new and might help stem the killing machines. (72-73)

Sundhya Walther mentions Donna Haraway's concept of human-animal relationship in her work *Multispecies Modernity: Disorderly Life in Postcolonial Literature*. Haraway is able to suggest a kind of human-nonhuman relationality in which both or several partners are co-constituting and the relationship is reciprocal, albeit always dependent and prone to imbalances. The notion that any human-nonhuman relationship must inevitably be one-sided, oppressive, and imposed by humans is significantly corrected by this mutuality model (19).

Farm Boy is a classic book for children. The use of animal imagery in Children's Literature instils compassion, empathy, relationship skills, and kindness in children. Margo DeMello states that children who demonstrate empathy for animals are more likely to develop empathy for other people and understand the distinction between treating someone fairly and unfairly. Their interactions with animals also aid in the development of their personal identities. Kids turn to animals as an emotional safety net, withdrawing to them in times of sadness, agitation, or fear (330). In his article on "Can Natural Theology Rethink Its Relationship with Non-human Animals?", Peter Ellis opines that a world where one is not compelled to be a distinct singularity but may more readily navigate an embrace of otherness, which includes coexisting with other species in space and time, is equally alluring from the perspective of lived experience (Maiti 18).

There is a shared understanding between Albert and the horses. Erica Fudge opines that "without understanding animals we can hardly understand what humans are" (6). Nowadays, animals seem to be more humane

than people. Frans de Waal states that “being with animals profoundly shapes our perceptions and nudges us to learn more about them and care about conserving them” (270). A world without animal beings is unimaginable. Human lives are entwined with non-human beings in direct or indirect ways.

Conclusion

The human-animal relationship has its significance in these posthuman times. In her article “Bowers of Persuasion: Toward A Posthuman Visual Rhetoric”, Cynthia Rosenfeld holds that instead of viewing species and behaviours in a hierarchy, accept the variances both within and between species (Maiti 83). The relationship between Albert and his horses is one of companionship. They shared an equal partnership and needed each other. Companion animals provide emotional support and comfort in times of distress, and they deserve respect and due care from humans. Horses have a life of their own. It is illegal to use them for trade, tourism, and entertainment. In the online article “How does PETA feel about horseback riding?” Peta.org suggests that, “Horses deserve to live their lives as nature intended. We can connect with horses in our care and have a meaningful and mutually beneficial relationship with these sensitive animals without climbing on top of them”. The human-animal relationship shared by the characters in the novel and their horses is an instance to reflect on the merit of being empathetic to co-living species. Animals should be valued for who they are as living beings, not based on the monetary worth they possess in the human gaze.

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Bio-notes of Authors:

Divya Lekshmi M S is a PhD candidate at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, National Institute of Technology Warangal, India. Her areas of interest include Animal Studies, Postcolonial Studies and Disability

Studies. She has also published research articles in Scopus-indexed and Web of Science-indexed journals.

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Dr. M. Raja Vishwanathan is an Associate Professor at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, National Institute of Technology Warangal, India. His areas of expertise include American Literature, British Literature, Commonwealth Literature and English Language Teaching.

<https://erp.nitw.ac.in/ext/profile/hs-vishwanathan>