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**ANIMALS IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: A CRITICAL READING OF KIPLING'S
RIKKI-TIKKI-TAVI**

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ABSTRACT

Talking animals is a device used by the authors where animals are attributed with human qualities. Anthropomorphic animals can cook, read, write, speak, behave and feel like humans. This special device used by the authors of Children's Literature is called as anthropomorphism. The present paper attempts to examine the role of the young anthropomorphic mongoose Rikki-tikki in Kipling's short story "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi" published in *The Jungle Book* (1894). The short story uses talking animals to send a message in a simple way that can be understood by the child readers.

Animals have been a vital part of human lives since times immemorial. Human beings are surrounded by animals. Animals have not only been domesticated and tamed but have also become our pets. They share our homes as our companions. We often treat them as a family member, celebrate their birthday, and take them on a vacation. We see animals on television channels like Animal Planet and National Geographic. We see anthropomorphic animals in the cartoon shows. We consume animal and animal products. We wear clothes and shoes made up of animal skin. Fur and skin of animals are used to make fur coats and woollens to protect us from cold. We use beauty and cosmetic products that are tested on animals. Animals are objects of study in the field of biology, zoology, medical science and biotechnology. Many drugs are manufactured by the pharmaceutical companies after testing them on animals. We refer to animals when we speak of someone being "blind as a bat". We include animals in our religious practices. Some of the animals are considered holy and sacred. They are the first things that are gifted to children in the

shape of colourful stuffed teddies. As stuffed toys, animals function as transitional objects. As pets, animals give love, comfort and companionship to their owners. Hence, animals also find their place in children's stories, novels, illustrated books, nursery rhymes, comic strips and cartoons.

In the present times, Children's Literature has developed as a separate genre and holds a special importance today. Earlier, it was dismissed as a literature of not much significance and was considered to be written by people who could not write anything better. Over the time, it has developed into a rich and diverse field. In the present times, it has received considerable attention and is popular equally amongst the children, teenagers and adults. In fact, it is also identified as a new area of teaching and research. It exists in various forms from folk tales, fairy tales, myths, legends, ballads and nursery rhymes to novels, poetry, drama, picture books, comics and multimedia texts. It now includes within its purview anything produced for "entertainment, exploitation and enculturation of children" (Hunt 3).

Kimberley Reynolds in her study *Children's Literature: A Very Short Introduction* points to Myles Mcdowell's observation. Mcdowell describes Children's books as:

Children's books are usually shorter, they tend to favour an active rather than a passive treatment, with dialogue and incident rather than description and introspection; child protagonist are the rule; conventions are much used; the story develops within a clear-cut moral schematism... children's books tend to be optimistic rather than depressive; language is child-oriented; plots are of a distinctive order ; probability is often discarded; and one could go endlessly talking of magic, fantasy, simplicity, and adventure (qtd. in Reynolds 26).

Children's Literature is replete with animal characters. Animals of every variety populate picture books, comics and short stories. Generally the animals that figure in the stories of children are depicted as having acquired human qualities and intelligence and are located amidst a social set-up which is familiar to children. This special device used by the writers of Children's Literature is called anthropomorphism. Talking animals or anthropomorphism is a special device used in Children's Literature to attribute human qualities to plants and animals. Anthropomorphic animals can speak, write, read, dress, feel and behave like humans.

Elizabeth A. Dunn in her research paper "Talking Animals: A Literature Review of Anthropomorphism in Children's Books" states that talking animals are very common in Children's Literature. The animal characters exhibit various levels of anthropomorphic traits from talking and thinking like humans to wearing clothes, cooking, stitching and riding bicycles. She examines the ten most commonly seen animals in Children's Literature, their role and importance.

Talking animal stories fascinate children. Anthropomorphic animals provide a necessary facade to present the mundane and difficult subjects to children. Naima Azmiry in her thesis "Animals and Their Functions in Children's Literature Since 1900" focuses on twenty one story books with animal

characters. She observes that the animal characters in works for children help and educate children with lessons for life. She concludes that the use of animals in Children's Literature has a literary and a realistic value too. Animals in stories engage the young readers, and introduce them to fantasy and the funny side in books (Azmiry 25-6).

The present paper examines the technique of anthropomorphism as used in Kipling's short story "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi". The *Jungle Book* is a collection of stories mostly about animals by the Nobel laureate Rudyard Kipling. Rikki-tikki is a young and courageous mongoose in the short story titled "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi" in Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894). Kipling attributes human qualities to Rikki-tikki. He is courageous and determined. He is adopted by a white family residing in a big bungalow in the Segowlee cantonment. Rikki-tikki quickly becomes friend of the boy of the family named Teddy. Animals can be friends and companions to humans. As a young house mongoose, Rikki-tikki becomes a friend and companion to Teddy. He goes to sleep with Teddy and thus provides companionship and security to Teddy. Teddy's father believes that Teddy is safer with Rikki-tikki than with any bloodhound.

Nag and Nagaina who reside in the garden of the bungalow are afraid of Rikki-tikki. They know that a young mongoose is a threat to their lives sooner or later. Therefore, they attack Rikki-tikki. Although, Rikki-tikki is young yet he is bold to have a fight with Nag and Nagaina. Kipling says "It is the hardest thing in the world to frighten a mongoose, ..." (92). By saying this Kipling suggests that Rikki-tikki though young, is fearless.

When Rikki-tikki first meets Nag in the garden he is afraid for a minute but then Kipling says that it is the nature of mongoose that they cannot stay frightened for a long time. A young mongoose was a danger to Nag and Nagaina. The Nag and Nagaina plan to kill the man, the wife and the child of the family. This would probably lead to Rikki-tikki leaving the garden. Rikki-tikki fights valiantly with the Nag who was hiding in the bathroom. Kipling adds a quality of selflessness to the character of Rikki-tikki who can even sacrifice himself for the sake of his master. Rikki-tikki had no practice of

fighting with a king cobra yet he puts his life in danger to save the life of his master. He knew that the man had a stick when he killed the snakeling called Karait but he may not have that stick when he comes to the bathroom in the morning. Therefore, he decides to stay in the bathroom and fight with the Nag. Rikki-tikki risks his life for the sake of his master. Rikki-tikki puts up bravely with Nag. Kipling writes:

Then he was battered to and fro as a rat is shaken by a dog- to and fro on the floor, up and down, and round in great circles, but his eyes were red and he held on as the body cart-whipped over the floor, upsetting the tin dipper and the soap-dish and the flesh-brush, and banged against the tin side of the bath. As he held he closed his jaws tighter and tighter, for he made sure he would be banged to death, and, for the honor of his family, he preferred to be found with his teeth locked (100).

Rikki-tikki makes an attack on the head of the snake and prefers to die as his teeth locked for the honour of his family. Rikki-tikki like any proud human being is conscious of his lineage. He is successful in killing the Nag. Rikki-tikki fights with the Nagaina who was determined to kill Teddy. Rikki-tikki cried, "Turn around, Nagaina; turn and fight!"(103). He showed Nagaina her last egg which he held between his paws and asked the price of the egg. The Nagaina turned around forgetting to attack Teddy for the sake of her last egg. She lost the chance of killing Teddy and attacked Rikki-tikki that he valiantly managed. Kipling describes the strategy that Rikki-tikki uses to fight Nagaina in the following words:

Rikki-tikki was abounding all around Nagaina, keeping just out of reach of her stroke, his little eyes like hot coals. Nagaina gathered herself together, and flung out at him. Rikki-tikki jumped up and backward. Again and again she struck, and each time her head came with a whack on the matting of the veranda and she gathered herself together like a watch-spring. Then Rikki-tikki danced in a circle to get behind her, and Nagaina spun round to keep her head to his head, so that the rustle of her tail on

the matting sounded like dry leaves blown along by the wind (104).

Kipling anthropomorphizes Rikki-tikki by attributing him courage and an intelligent mind to analyze, focus and execute a plan in a difficult situation. Rikki-tikki bites all the eggs of the Nagaina which she had hidden. He even takes the risk of chasing the Nagaina into her hole when she ran with her last egg. Chasing the Nagaina down her hole meant death for Rikki-tikki but he comes out victorious. Rikki-tikki is also vigilant. When he meets the Nag and Nagaina for the first time in the garden, Nagaina tries to attack him. He jumped up in the air to avoid the attack. He was quick to pay attention to the warning of Darzee who gave her the instruction "Behind you! Look behind you!" at the right time (95). This also gave him confidence because as an inexperienced young mongoose he escaped a blow from behind. Rikki-tikki also fights with Karait, the snakeling who was as dangerous as the king cobra. Rikki-tikki becomes a friend to Teddy and twice saves the life of Teddy and his family.

Anthropomorphism voices the emotions of animals which amuses the children. Anthropomorphic stories help to teach moral lessons to children. Caroyne L. Burke and Joby G. Copenhaver in their article "Animals as People in Children's Literature" observe that by presenting anthropomorphic animals the author softens the didactic tone. At many points Kipling writes about the human emotions felt by animals. For instance, Rikki Tikki feels proud of his deeds of combating a Nag and Nagaina yet he is never overconfident about his capabilities. Anthropomorphic animals behaving as humans gives a necessary distance to the child readers to understand the lessons of life in a simpler way. Therefore, Kipling by presenting a young inexperienced mongoose Rikki-tikki as courageous, determined, selfless, focused and vigilant sends a message to the child readers to remain focused and confident in difficult situations. Authors of Children's Literature have made an extensive use of this device to open a dialogue with their readers.

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