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CROSSING THE ANIMAL/HUMAN BORDER: A READING OF S. S. RAJAMOULI'S *Eega*

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Abstract

Indian cinema has rarely represented animals and in these limited representations, animals are relegated into the background as props. Though there are some exceptions in which animals are projected as characters, the film textures fail to assimilate their exposures and experiences. Against this backdrop, S. S. Rajamouli's *Eega*, translated *The Fly*, is analysed and examined how it deviates from the usual anthropocentric representation, but, at the same time, adheres to it in most fundamental aspects. This paper problematizes the framework of human/animal divide in which humans entertain a superior position by distancing themselves from their animality. Thus, the paper analyzes how the filmic texture destabilizes the narratives which either put the human and the animal categories in a dichotomous relation or establish human superiority over the animal. In this sense, this study inquires into various ways of border/margin intersection in the animal and the human ontologies.

Keywords: animal, human, filmic representation, anthropocentrism

Eega, translated *The Fly*, a well-acclaimed Telugu movie, tells the story of a person who gets murdered in sexual jealousy and reincarnates as a fly. The fly, thus, has the persona of a human, but in all other respects, is a fly. The paper tries to analyse the representation of the animal, in this case, the fly, in the movie. The film problematises the boundary of conventional assumptions on human and the animal and thus sheds light into a complex vis-à-vis of both categories in a totally imaginative situation.

To begin with, the human-centric world has always considered characteristics associated with animals as something inferior and despicable in spite of the fact that human beings themselves are

animals. Culture, language, literature, art, and other forms of communications of humans considered animals as something separate from them. Humans sought to distance themselves from everything that is termed as 'animalistic' which in turn is considered taboo or uncivilised. Animals are considered mere machines in the Cartesian world which gives prominence only to thinking and reasoning as per human understanding. As Barbara Creed observes: "Western civilization has rendered the animal inferior, even abject, by means of essentialist and formulaic notions that the animal is without language or feelings." (61) Representation of animals in human-centric art, literature, and media

like films has been reduced to the level of props in general. The common ancestry that exists between the animals and the humans has been recognized after Darwin which necessitated a shift in these perspectives.

In a place like India where theriomorphic cults exist, characters with animal forms can be seen in literature and culture especially among their gods. But, a full-fledged animal is usually seen in the position of serving the human or as destroying humans. It is in this context that a movie which portrays a fly as the protagonist is analysed. The paper examines how the movie has portrayed the insect with its animalistic characters, but at the same time, adhered to the human version in its most intimate form.

The fly is shown interacting in an anthropocentric world which reflects the spirit of man inside its mind. In a human-centered world, the actual representation of any animal is almost impossible. The spirit of the man is still inside the fly as flashes of his memories of being killed are played in the mind of the fly. Most of its encounters with the humans are anthropocentric in the sense that its animated movements ape the depiction of a human super hero. Revenge and love are the two desires, desires of the dead human, which motivate the actions of the fly throughout the movie. In spite of being a fly, it is shown moving at a high speed even faster than vehicles throughout the movie which somewhat spoils the director's efforts to picture a fly. Most actions of the fly resemble a cartoon which is intended to make the fly more likeable to the audience. The fly is more like an anthropocentric cartoon character than a real life fly.

The actions of the fly are guided by its human cultural instincts. When it sees the gift given by Bindu, the female lead and the lover of the murdered human, the memory of the fly gets vivified. It also intervenes and blocks the prospect of Bindu being harassed, being directed by patriarchal chivalric instincts. It tries to disturb the villain when he tries to sleep, frustrating him to the core. It also enters his nose and ear holes which is also an anthropocentric depiction of which aspect of the fly infuriates the humans the most. The fly, thus,

thwarts his plan of going to a trip with Bindu by giving him a sleepless night.

The insect is shown to possess maximum existential potentiality escaping the usual possibilities of its death as it is often thought of in a human perspective. The metamorphosed fly undergoes the plights any insect might face from a human perspective; such as children beating it, getting hit by cricket bats, big birds preying upon it, falling in cold drinking water, its legs and body-parts getting separated, getting stuck to a spider web, and still like a phoenix, it gets its rebirth and gets invigorated. It takes up the challenge of fighting with a powerful man, incessantly following him, and getting hit and beaten by him. The villain is viewed through the eyes of the fly. He has been shown as a despicable man from the beginning itself so that one would easily identify with a fly.

Killing a human is impossible for a fly, but the human inside the fly gives the villain the message that it will kill him. It actually writes or rather imprints on the dust the message that it will kill him. This makes the villain ask the question whether animals take revenge. Here, a discussion on the revenge of animals is opened. But humans are not ready to even discuss it as a problem. The villain fails to make understand others about his problem. Different ways in which the fly seeks revenge is entirely human. Towards the end, when it loses its wings, it loses its fly-characteristics almost instantly. The wings of the fly are cherished by its lover who is a micro-artist as well. Throughout the story, it can be seen that the fly has been driven only by human interests, pursuing love and revenge. More animalistic tendencies like hunger and other needs are completely neglected. Regarding its failure to project the fly-world and fly-angle properly, it could be said that it is an instance of the inability or sometimes lack of interest of one located at specific discursive structure to identify and comprehend structures of the other.

The hero of the story thus is a fly whose characters are the anthropomorphic version of the human hero. Anthropomorphism can be simply referred to as the tendency to attribute human cultural qualities to the animal. It works in both

ways; while this tendency harms the prospective of understanding the animal sometimes, it can also attribute a subject position to the animal. The harm comes when such appropriations are used to justify the oppression meted out to them. For instance, chained elephants in the temple are trained using extreme punishments and made to bow to the deity which is justified as bowing out of devotion. In this case, on the other hand, the film has brought about some positive changes in the depiction of an animal.

There are animal characteristics which are taken in great detail which throws light into the life of a fly. Though anthropomorphism corrupts most details, the fly has its own life in the story. The birth of the fly from an egg is shown in the film and the first struggle it makes to release its wings offers a glimpse into the world of the fly. In the world of humans, the fly seems like a dwarf character in a land of giants. Many minute details regarding a fly which humans usually ignore or take for granted find a place in the film. The director discloses how he has spent hours in observing flies before working on the film. He says, "My relationship with the housefly has changed significantly because I have spent the last two years with it, studying it, observing it. So when I see a housefly, I can no longer swat it, I feel guilty". (Sudhir) The proximity with the fly has helped the director in such a way that he has begun to see a fly as his fellow creature. This shift in his perspective is also reflected in the film in some ways.

Animals can be represented either as subjects or objects according to the role they play. As Eileen Crist remarks: "Animals as subjects emerge in virtue of their portrayal as actors initiating and directing action and living in a world where events and objects are meaningful and temporally continuous. Animals as objects emerge in virtue of their portrayal as entities through or upon which inexorable forces act, steering them to behave in certain ways" (6). In any given human creation, animals are usually represented as objects. But in the movie, the fly emerges as a subject in which it acts according to its will. The fly tries to irritate the villain in its most 'flyish' manner hovering over him, but gets stuck in spider's web. These instances, though viewed through the human gaze, are represented from the perspective of the fly to add

more credibility to the movie. The different ways through which the fly tries to convey itself to human beings form an interesting part in the film. The sorcerer uses its natural predators, i.e. birds, to kill the fly. The minuteness of the fly is contrasted with a close image of the fly in confrontation with a man's shoes. In this context, it can be mentioned that "The screen animal is an artifice, a construct that some films deploy in order to challenge the anthropocentric basis of modern society and culture" (Creed 61). Considering this statement, one can argue that the fly in this film function as an artifice which problematises some human-centric notions. While it is not forgotten that some of its movements ape the typical hero of an Indian film, there has been attempts to move further and view the fly in its authenticity to some extent. Creed further explains that, "Insofar as the screen animal is a technological figure, its significance is different from that of an actual animal—it signifies far more than the 'world of nature' or feelings of sympathy or protectiveness toward the animal. The film maker can use the screen animal to foreground questions about the anthropocentric nature of human society". (61) The fly represented in the film is likewise an animated fly, hence, even though the animal represented is not the actual animal, it serves to defamiliarise and question the notions of usual depictions of the animal. The argument is further strengthened by McFarland and Hediger who observe that "The 'fictional' thought experiments of literature, animation, film and other cultural products can enable us to notice realities we had missed before by reframing reality in new ways" (15). The film can be said to be an instance of such a thought experiment.

The fly is shown too small and negligible as a being compared to a human and is shown ineffectual when it starts attacking the man with its sheer strength. There is always a human centered notion that it is the physically strong who tend to survive. The fly with its heroic movements does not even produce a tickle in the man's body, while he is shooed away by his hands. Human disregard of animal/insect world is depicted in the film while it also shows how the seemingly small beings affect even the huge ones. This problematises the

perspective of social Darwinists who argue that the survival of the fittest means the survival of the physically strong or survival of certain race. The endless potentiality of small beings is represented in an effective manner.

The film projects the irritable buzzing sound of the fly in order to create a horrific situation when the villain plans a business trip with Bindu with malicious intentions. The powerful villain turns into an infantile, miserable figure by the repeated assaults from the fly. The power of the insect is manifested by its interventions in scheduling and re-scheduling of crucial matters, delaying the trip by disrupting the traffic police and finally leading to a car accident.

Though difficult to communicate with its lover who is a human, the fly tries various ways in order to convey the message to Bindu. It successfully informs her that the villain who earns her faith has murdered her lover who is in the form of the fly. The insect performs important things through simple moves like cigarette-rolling as well as moves of high impact like burning the blanket. Both the fly and the man plot the ways to kill each other. The fly's revenge and rivalry lead to the destruction of all business-ventures of the man. It succeeds in making the people think that the villain has become nonsensical and eventually in killing him.

There is also an aspect of human-animal co-habitation and co-operation that is shown in the film. Bindu helps the fly in its fight against the villain by using her capacity as a micro artist by preparing protective shields for the fly. She also helps it survive in other manners. Depicting her love for the fly, the film expands the notion of love even further.

It is not completely possible to determine animal agency of the fly as there is always a chance of wrongly assuming characteristics of animals. Comparing human and animal agency, McFarland and Hediger argue that there are two reasons to assess their degree of difference, "The first is that the natural human tendency is to view an animal's actions in terms of our own conscious motives (called anthropomorphism). The second is because our own conscious motives may not be as conscious as we like to think (and thus may be even more

similar to other animals' behaviors than we traditionally consider them to be" (3-4). The assumption or appropriation may either be based on anthropomorphism or on lack of awareness or understanding of human consciousness.

Keeping in view with these difficulties, the study reaches towards the following conclusions. In the movie, the fly acquires agency in the sense that it determines its own activities and life. The director, though human-mediated, takes the viewers to the world of the insects, showing its possible realities. The narrative decentralises certain superior notions of size and strength by shifting the camera to a hero who is minute in size, and who fights and wins. It also opens up a space for the thought of possible animal/human peaceful co-existence through the characters of Bindu and the fly.

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