

## The Interspecies Ecology of Care: Bim, Baba, and the Ethics of the More-Than-Human Family

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### ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the deep relationship between humans, animals and environment through the lenses of environmental humanities and post-humanist literary theory. It particularly analyses the ethics of care within a human-centric model of kinship. By following these concepts, Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980) illustrates the relationship between humans and animals and also engages with ecology, post-humanism and ethics of care. Here, the primary objective of this paper is not only to explore Bim's caregiving role toward her brother Baba but also to show her relationship with her companion dog, her house, and the weak ecosystem of the garden. Typically, Bim's character is read as a psychological or female-oriented representation of familial commitment, but this paper argues that her actions reflect a more-than-human understanding of kinship. This article highlights Donna Haraway's influential theory of 'Making Kin' that discusses post-humanism and ecological study. By examining these elements, it proves how Anita Desai reshapes the domestic household not only as a deep human relationship but also as an eco-critical theory that discusses both her family members and surroundings. The findings of this thesis suggest that Bim's caregiving builds an interspecies responsibility that transcends her feminine self-sacrifice. This study carries a significant value for scholars of post-colonialism and eco-criticism as it reflects Anita Desai's thoughts of 'Kinship' in the novel. Ultimately, the article contributes to understanding how Desai's novel shows family as an expanded world where care extends to animals, nature and her ecological surroundings.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the similarities between Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* and the 'Animal Turn Theory'. In this novel, animals are not kept for any symbolic meaning. Historically, animals were broadly absent from literary works, instead were used as symbols of people's quality including dogs and parrots, representing loyalty and captivity. But a great change occurs in humanities studies known as the 'Animal Turn'. Animals also have their own place to live, their own desires, pain and sociality. It was previously thought that animals behave according to what humans want. But now, it is thought that animals also shape human society, culture, economy, and even language (Ritvo 119). The two non-human characters of Bim the dog and Baba the parrot can be found in *Clear Light of Day* written by Anita Desai. Even though these characters may be depicted as simple domestic creatures, their role in the novel goes far beyond mere decoration. The dog character called "Bim the dog" is an integral part of the family's memories (Desai 208). Meanwhile, the parrot takes up the place of a silent witness to everything that happens at home. In a family characterized by complicated relationships between people, the presence of the two animals highlights the degree of human indifference. Not being able to speak, both of the characters become witnesses to the process of time passing by and human emotions evolving. Desai's novel shows that families are not made up of just humans. Rather humans and other animals have evolved together, created each other, and are co-evolved as companion species. They are interconnected in each other's lives (Wright 280). The two animals are childhood playmates of the children; the parrot is an integral participant of the family. The animals are witness the breakdown of the family relationships, the pride, and the negligence of parents. In the end, the broken relationship between Bim and Tara is somewhat repaired, and the animals' memories become part of that repair (Desai 251-52). It is no accident that both Bim and "Bim the dog" share the same name; instead, this indicates the existence of a strong connection between the two. Neither the dog nor the parrot is an imitation of the moods of people but actual inhabitants of the household. In times when Bim feels lonely, the company of the dog gives her solace, implying that care does not exist only among humans but also among animals. There is no such thing as a separate, unchanging entity called "human"; we always become "human" through relationships with animals. Indigenous societies in the Amazon have a way of understanding the language and thoughts of animals along with understanding this changes anthropology (Wolfe 30-34). Interspecies ecology of care includes the idea that everything is interconnected and cannot be seen separately. Again, the relationship of care is formed across species boundaries. In the novel, humans, dogs, parrots, homes, time,

memories – everything together creates a living system. Just as family members neglect each other, but the relationship between the humans and animals is not severed. Previously, it was thought that all power was in the hands of humans, and animals were passive recipients. But now researchers believe that we must start from the small everyday moments. For example, feeding the dog, giving water to the parrot's cage, running with the dog with children, trying to talk to the parrot, forgetting to feed it in the midst of busyness, not caring during illness, remembering that dog or parrot after many years, feeling the house empty without them. Piers Locke's "Interspecies Care in a Hybrid Institution" examines how humans and elephants live, work, and care (77-78). In a relationship of care, emotion, attention, and responsiveness are most important, not just intellectual responsibility (Haraway, *When Species Meet* 32; Donovan 353-354). In *Clear Light of Day*, Anita Desai portrays the characters, dog Bim and parrot Baba as symbolic representations of human experience, the animals are also understood as an active participant in the construction of a family network between human and non-human entities. Therefore, besides being a symbol, the story can also be interpreted with the help of a multispecies approach where the moral importance of the non-human actors is taken into consideration. In spite of the fact that the characters such as Bim and Baba may be considered as passive participants, their mere presence serves to help the people sustain their relationships. This study consists of several consecutive parts. First of all, major theoretical approaches related to the concepts of ecofeminism, posthumanism and multispecies ethnography will be considered in order to set the theoretical framework for the research. Next, methodological aspects of the research will be discussed. Then, the analysis of the roles played by Bim and Baba will be conducted. The main aim of this qualitative research is to make a comparative analysis using primary and secondary data.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review situates the novel within several interconnected critical frameworks including Ecofeminism and the Ethics of Care, Posthumanism and Critical Animal Studies, and Multispecies Ethnography. Ecofeminism scholars have argued that the domination of women and the domination of nature are structurally connected (Donovan 350). Expanding on this point of view, Donovan presents an ethics of care of animals that is founded on attentive responsiveness to their bodies and needs. This sort of ethics brings out the importance of empathy as an ethical process through which relationships between human beings and animals are formed. (Donovan 358-59). According to Locke et al., care and belonging arise as a result of interdependent relations among both humans and nonhumans. Lonkila

stresses the importance of 'care-full' ethics in research on multiple species (Lonkila 481). According to Doucet, the environment needs to be cared for by species capable of long-term responsibility (Doucet 5-6). Wolfe argues that humans are co-constructed by non-human others. According to Wolfe, posthumanism entails the realization that the self is not an independent entity but rather one that is constructed in relation to other non-human entities (Glasson 30). Wolfe argues that ethics must abandon the speciesist binary (Wolfe xi-xii). This human-animal duality must be broken which is not denying human difference. Wolfe argues that we are not the autonomous beings that liberal humanism imagines us to be (Wolfe xiii). We are not autonomous in terms of power either. While humans have power, we are vulnerable to animals. Haraway's concept of "companion species" suggests that humans and animals have evolved together. To tell one's story is to tell the other's story. Haraway emphasizes mutual construction. As we train each other in acts of communication we barely understand (Peterson 611).

Firstly, it acknowledges the complexity of communication. Secondly, training means learning, becoming accustomed to. Haraway's concept of "becoming with" suggests that identity is not pre-given; it emerges from relationships. In Haraway's view, the theory is that Bim and the animals are intertwined. Bim's identity, her loneliness, is formed through her relationships with these animals. The animals are also transformed by Bim's presence. This is an example of "becoming with". It illustrates that identity is not pre-given which emerges from relationships. (Haraway, *Companion Species Manifesto* 15-17). According to Derrida, there had been efforts by philosophers to show that human beings were unique because of their language, reason, sense of shame, and clothing while animals were denied these qualities. This border has never been clear, but rather it has been a void which kept dividing itself again and again (Derrida). Barbara Smuts illustrates her own experience to show that animals have individual personalities and awareness using her wild baboons and dog Safi (Smuts 302-304). Srinivasan points out that UK animal welfare laws are not simply better than India's because "British laws treat dogs as killable," but Indian laws take street dogs as legitimate residents (Srinivasan 108-109). Anthropocentricity, humanism, and speciesism are the three concepts that come together to generate a fallacy in which man is perceived as superior to and entirely different from other living beings (Weitzenfeld and Joy 4-5). The authors Thomsen et al. discuss how veterinarians contribute to creating ethically based cohabitation between man and wild animals (Thomsen 1-2). According to Locke, interspecies caregiving implies both interdependence and ethical engagement between humans and animals.

Multispecies ethnography studies how different species coexist in the world. Anna Singh's *The Mushroom at the End of the World* is a famous example. She illustrates how humans and fungi coexist in the ruins of capitalism (Tsing 2). According to Tsing, when capitalism destroys the environment and closes down industries, new forms of life develop in the place of that destruction. Deborah Bird Rose's "Wild Dog Dreaming" shows how Aboriginal Australians live with dingoes. Here, the Dingo is not just an animal. Living with dingoes is a form of mutual responsibility. Just as dingoes affect people's land and culture, humans affect the lives of dingoes (1-2). This research articulates that the family is always "more-than-human", it is not just made up of humans, but also animals. Even if mainstream narratives obscure this fact, animals are present as family members in people's daily lives. In Rose's words, this fact is evident in the case of indigenous communities (Rose 154). As Shruti Desai and Smith argue, "we can learn to care for trees and farm animals as kin, if we truly face them and learn from them". Mehtta discusses ecological coexistence and survival strategies in the Sundarbans. Padmanabhan discusses how ecological meaning is produced through more-than-human interactions (Padmanabhan 1-2).

Donovan and Gruen provide a powerful framework for how humans should be aware of animals (Donovan 350). Here, the animal is seen primarily as a recipient. They do not spend much time on how the animal initiates, resists, or transforms the care relationship. In ecofeminist care ethics, the animal is not seen as an active participant who also shapes the relationship. Therefore, one of the critical shortcomings of ecofeminist care ethics is the devotion of the framework to conceive animals more in terms of care receivers than active agents in the creation of interspecies relations. Posthumanist theory offers a strong critique of humanism and speciesism. Cary Wolfe's emphasis on the co-construction of human subjectivity through interactions with nonhuman others which suggest that that ethics should move beyond the speciesist binary that has traditionally distinguished humans from animals (Wolfe xxviii). Donna Haraway proposes the concept of "companion species" in which humans and animals have evolved together. In "When Species Meet", she writes: "We are training each other in communication that we barely understand" (Haraway 16). These ideas are powerful and theoretically important. But there is a problem: abstraction. When Haraway and Wolfe say "we are co-constructed by each other" or "our identities are formed through relationships" these are abstract claims. Posthumanist writings do not always show how this works in a particular literary or anthropological context. There is a gap between the theoretical claim that humans and animals co-construct each other and the

detailed textual evidence needed to make that claim credible. Nonetheless, there is an issue of the gap that exists between the posthumanist theory and its actual application in literary works. Multispecies ethnography gives us rich, nuanced accounts of how humans and animals coexist. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing shows in her *The Mushroom at the End of the World* how humans and fungi coexist in the ruins of capitalism. She shows that the supply chain of Matsutake mushrooms from the forests of Oregon to the markets in Japan is an example of multi-species coexistence (Tsing 1-2).

## RESEARCH GAP

These studies give us detailed accounts of interspecies relationships. But here too there is a limitation. These studies are ethnographic. They are not typically associated with literary texts and do not place fiction, novels, or literary narratives at the center of their analysis. We know how humans and animals live together and we know the responsibilities humans should have, but the method of bringing these two together is not clear. Even though multispecies ethnography provides an insightful perspective on interspecies cohabitation, literary texts have received relatively less emphasis within the genre. This article addresses these gaps by doing something that none of these three strands do alone. It uses Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* to show how animals co-construct family life, how human care can both succeed and fail, and how moral responsibility is understood through narrative. Using the dog Bim and the parrot Baba, the story illustrates how animals are not simply recipients of human care but participants whose presence, absence, and neglect influence the memories and human characters. This approach bridges the theoretical abstraction of posthumanism, care ethics, and the multispecies ethnography.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on close textual reading and thematic analysis. The primary source of data for this study is Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980) and secondary sources of data include posthumanism, ecofeminist ethics of care, critical animal studies, and multispecies ethnography. Rather than depending on quantitative data or surveys, this study focuses on episodes involving the dog Bim and the Parot Baba because these animals occupy a crucial place within Bim's family. Moreover, it identifies care, neglect, companionship, memory, vulnerability, and interspecies responsibility. The analysis of the research follows three procedures: Firstly, this article identifies textual episodes depicting human-animal interactions including feeding, playing, forgetting, and remembering. Secondly, it describes thematically according to patterns of caregiving,

emotional attachment, remembrance, and mutual dependence. Thirdly, this study analyzes the selected passages using theoretical frameworks to determine how the novel constructs a family beyond human beings. To interpret these patterns, the article applies several famous theoretical frameworks including Donna Haraway's companion species "becoming-with, and "making kin, Cary Wolfe's posthumanist ethics, and Josephine Donovan's ethics of care. Also, Piers Locke's work on interspecies care and multispecies ethnography support animals as active participants in social relationships. The combination of this methodological approach, close reading and thematic analysis enables a detailed exploration of interspecies care and more-than-human kinship in the novel. This article follows MLA 9th edition citation manual for referencing.

## DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

### *Bim the Dog: Named into the Family*

The dog is introduced early in the narrative of *Clear Light of Day* and is significantly named the same as the eldest sister, Bimla (Desai 4). The narrator says: "Their family had four people, Bim, Tara, Raja, and the dog it also named Bim. The dog shares the sister's name. It is not just a pet; also a double. Naming the dog eliminates the boundary between human and animal. From the beginning of the novel, the dog is treated like a real part of the family, not just some pet on the side. (Desai 13-14). Giving the dog a name is how it becomes included in the family's sense of belonging and who they are together. It suggests that the dog is not portrayed as an outsider; instead, it is incorporated into the family's collective sense of identity. The four of them, three children and a dog, are a unit. This episode brings to mind Haraway's idea of "becoming with," which suggests that identities are shaped by our relationships with others, not by existing on our own (Wright 280). She says:

This multispecies becoming-with leaves us open to the responsive capacity of all earthly life, and this has important implications for ethics.....if we lose a species, we might irrevocably damage multispecies way of knowing through becoming-with, diminishing what Mick Smith termed the "species of possibilities" that define our "sense of the world. (Wright 280)

One day, the sisters play in the garden. The dog remains closely engaged with them and becomes a participant in their shared activities. The novel describes how the dog Bim lay at their feet, panting, its tail thumping the dust. The dog is represented not as a passive entity but as a companion species. Its tail thumping shows it is engaged and responding. This is a moment of mutual presence. The dog, stretched out at Bim's feet, writhed and coiled, now catching his tail between his teeth, now scrabbling with his paws, then bit at fleas and chewed

his hair, weaving a thick mat of sound together with the cat who was busy with herself (Desai 12-13). Later, the family falls apart, the dog's presence changes. The father drinks and the mother retreats into illness. The brother leaves for Hyderabad. The sisters are left to manage the house. The dog is still there, but the novel's attention to him fades. It becomes part of the background noise of decline. After the death of the dog, the writer describes it normally including, "Do they?" said Tara, shocked. Hate was a word that always shocked her. The image of a dead dog immediately rose before her, bleeding. 'Then they shouldn't teach' (Desai 208).

The absence of ritualized mourning is significant as well, as it suggests the gradual decline of attentiveness in a family marked by emotional fragmentation. This silence in the narrative can be interpreted as a sign of the family's reduced capacity to care and respond. The family's capacity for care has been worn down by years of neglect and loss. Some years later, the sisters return home. Then Tara thinks about how "The dog Bim used to follow them everywhere". The memory is not just nostalgia, rather it is a form of recognition. Its presence shaped their childhood and its death marked the end of something (Desai 208). The sisters pay attention to the dog's absence. They acknowledge it as an integral member of the household. The novel does not sensationalize this. It simply lets the memory surface which carries significant ethical implications.

### ***Baba the Parrot: Imprisonment and Neglect***

Baba The Parrot is presented in a different manner in the narrative. Though confined in a cage, it is initially a considerable presence in the house. The children often play with him and copy his sounds, whose indicate that it plays an important role in the day-to-day life of the family. Anita Desai is described as "the great parrot which shrieked and "chattered all day. He is a source of noise, of life (Desai 16) as Desai exposes:

Bright morning sounds of activity came from them—a water tap running, a child crying, a cock crowing, a bicycle bell ringing—but the house was separated from them by the thick screen of low, dusty guava trees in which invisible parrots screamed over the fruit. Now and then one fell to the ground with a soft thud. Tara could see some lying in the dust with chunks bitten out by the parrots. (Desai 16)

When the family collapses, the parrot's condition worsens. His cage becomes dirty and none changes his water. The narrator says: and they soon grew bored and drifted out, stopped to whistle at the bedraggled parrot she kept in a cage,

fed it a Chilli or two that it only stared at beadily and refused to touch (Desai 157). The episode shows a breakdown in the practices of care, with the needs of the parrot being ignored as the family breaks down emotionally. The family members neglect the animal in their household. Importantly, this neglect is not depicted as a matter of malicious cruelty but rather of emotional exhaustion and inattentiveness. It is passive. It is the result of attention being directed elsewhere. Here Wolfe tells about mastery including humans having power over the parrot, but they do not exercise it responsibly (Wolfe 133). The scene foregrounds the ethical consequences of neglect in human-nonhuman relationships. The novel does not romanticize the parrot's captivity. It shows care can fail. It shows that animals can be harmed by human neglect. This is an important ethical point. Responsibility requires attention. But the novel does not leave the parrot there. When the sisters return home, Tara cleans the cage, pours fresh water. Desai says: "If she had, Baba would have been grateful. If anything, anyone had stopped him now, he would have collapsed with relief and come crawling home like a thirsty dog to its water bowl" (Desai 21). The Parrot reshapes the present. His presence becomes a way for the sisters to reconnect. He is a sign of the childhood games, the family's collapse, and long silence. He is a witness. When Tara finally pays attention to him, she is also paying attention to the family's history.

*Desai's novel highlights interspecies care*

The analysis indicates the need to continue care through constant presence and responsibility, and not to see care as a given, rather it requires attention. The family's neglect of Baba shows when humans suffer from their pain, they can fail to attend to the animals in their care. And, moreover, caregiving is depicted as a reciprocal process involving both human and nonhuman actors. The dog is not merely a recipient of care but also a present and responds. His tail thumps. He follows the children and part of their games. This is what Gruen calls entangled empathy: the humans and the dog are affecting each other (Gruen 452). But the story also, in the same breath, allows for failure. Cross-species relationships are susceptible to neglect and emotional distance. The parrot's neglect is real. It is not erased by later attention. But the later attention matters. When Tara cleans the cage, she is not undoing the past. She is changing the present (Desai 218). This is a form of responsibility without mastery (Wolfe 130). Here, animals are part of family memory. The dog's death signifies the conclusion of a particular phase. Then the narrator says, "The image of a dead dog immediately rose before her, bleeding. 'Then they shouldn't teach'" (Desai 208). The significance of the parrot's presence stretches across decades. When the sisters remember their childhood, they remember the

pet animal. After a minute Tara realized that she was speaking of the cat. Tara had lost the childhood habit of including animals in the family once she had married and begun the perpetual travels and moves that precluded the keeping of pets. It was with a small effort that she tore her eyes away from her brother and regarded the reproachful cat (Desai 12).

### *The More-Than-Human Family*

In light of these observations, the broader concept of family warrants a more extensive reconsideration. Thus, Desai's novel suggests that family is not to be understood as an exclusively human institution, but as a network of relations in which nonhuman beings too participate. The dog and the parrot are part of the family's history and are present in the sisters' memories. The dog shares the sister's name. Haraway's idea of "becoming with" is useful here (Wright 278). The dog's death, the parrot's neglect are not side stories. They are central to time, memory, and ethics in the novel. The novel also demonstrates that animals aren't just property. They have names, histories and they are mourned. Dying of the dog marks an ending era (Desai 208). Finally, the parrot caring shows a begging for attention.

### *Responsibility without Mastery*

Ultimately, the novel foregrounds responsiveness as a central element of ethical care. The sisters cannot bring the dog back or undo the years of neglect. However, they can respond in the present. Tara cleans the cage, pours water and talks to the parrot. This is a small act, but it matters. Wolfe tells about responsibility without mastery. Humans have power animals. But they can use care, not control, they can choose to attend rather than dominate (Glasson 31). The novel shows care requires vulnerability. The sisters are vulnerable to the dog and the parrot. Their memories are shaped by these animals and their grief is real. What emerges, then, is not a model of mastery but a condition of shared vulnerability whereby human and nonhuman lives are mutually implicated.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

There are limits to this study. This article looked at only one novel, one author. Desai's novel is set in a specific time. This study focused only on the dog and the parrot. There are other animals in the novel – the horses, the birds in the garden. These animals were not discussed in this article. Also, this article relied on a literary text. The animals do not speak for themselves. This research is interpreting them through the narrator's descriptions (Desai 4, 12, 13, 14, 21, 208). This is a limitation of any literary analysis of animals. Future research could explore these indigenous perspectives in more detail. Questions could

include: How are kinship relationships with animals captured in indigenous narratives? How does the concept of care differ from Western care ethics?

## CONCLUSION

Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* is a novel about memory, family, and time (Talukdar and Biswas 148). However, the present study has demonstrated that it may also be interpreted as a narrative of interspecies relationality. The dog Bim and the parrot Baba are not merely peripheral figures but are deeply adorned within the emotional and historical fabric of the family, to the extent that the family's collective memory remains incomplete without their presence (Desai 12, 13, 14, 16, 21, 208). Being part of the day-to-day life of the family members, Anita Desai shows how interspecies care is not a one-directional process of giving but a practice which is created in companionship, remembering, ignoring, and being responsible for each other. Playing with the dog, forgetting the parrot, remembering him later, cleaning her cage, these small acts constitute the practice of care. Moreover, the present study has shown that family is not a human-made institution but rather an entity which is formed on the grounds of complex interactions between humans and non-humans. We are living in an ecological crisis. The environment is becoming increasingly vulnerable. Climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation all are rooted in a profound crisis in the relationship between humans and other species. We have separated ourselves from nature, and are now suffering the consequences of the ecological crisis. In this perspective, the novel highlights the importance of caring for other species from an ethical point of view. In such a way, interspecies care becomes both a moral value and an indispensable reaction.

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