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Cattle as Colonial Subjects and their Representation in Premchand's *Godaan*

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Abstract

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Abstract:

This paper aims to show that non-human animals, particularly cattle—i.e. cows and buffalo—were subjects of colonial oppression in many of the same ways that colonised humans were. It argues that many of theoretical concepts that theorists such as Homi Bhabha and Edward Said can be applied to cattle in a slightly altered but meaningful sense. The paper aims to bring together ideas from postcolonial studies and animal literary studies, to establish a framework through which texts about non-human animals can be studied from a postcolonial perspective. Building on the works of Susan McHugh and Jacques Derrida (specifically his book, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, it firstly establishes how non-human animals can be treated as subjects both in a moral and literary sense; it then infers from that their colonial subjecthood. As a case study, the paper uses the example of Premchand's *Godaan* to further show how non-human animals are susceptible to colonisation in ways that are not too dissimilar from the way humans are.

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Introduction:

During the course of the 20th and 21st centuries, there has been much written in the field of postcolonial studies that deals with the human subject under colonial rule and later under the influence of neocolonialism. Theorists such as Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Franz Fanon and others have developed a number of concepts to explain various phenomena observed in the (neo)colonial subject including hybridity, orientalism, ambivalence, etc. However, these philosophers and literary critics have, for the most part, overlooked how non-human animals are constituted as subjects under (neo)colonialism. This study aims to elaborate on and/or alter a number of these concepts to show how they can be applied to non-human animals—particularly cattle—and let us better understand their subjecthood and their place in the histories of colonialism and the oppression they continue to face in the ongoing neocolonial regimes.

Animal studies is a relatively new discipline in the humanities emerging in the 1970s spurred on initially by the works of three philosophers and animal rights activists. The three seminal texts in the early history of the field, as characterised by Kenneth Shapiro, are Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (1973), Mary Midgeley's *Beast and Man* (1978), and Tom Regan's *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983). These works have spurred an interdisciplinary field that includes subfields such as cross-species ethnography, green criminology, social zooarchaeology, and many others. (Shapiro 8–9) In this project the salient subfield is literary animal studies which interestingly takes one of the oldest disciplines in the humanities and brings it into conversation with this burgeoning new field.

There is a persistent issue in how readers, students, teachers, and theorists of literature approach non-human animals in literary works. In "*Animal Farm's* Lessons for Literary (and) Animal Studies", Susan McHugh compares it to a magic trick: "Everybody knows the disappearing animal trick: rabbit goes into the hat, magician waves wand, and presto! The magician displays an empty hat…Reading animals as metaphors, always as figures of or for the human, is a process that likewise ends with the human alone on the stage." (McHugh 24) McHugh is pointing out that there is a tendency to read non-human animals in literature, and the arts in general, as metaphors or symbols or some other literary device that is meant to tell the reader something about human subjectivity. Ron Broglio frames this quite well in his article "Beyond Symbolism: The Rights and Biopolitics of Romantic Period Animals", asserting that readers "play a placeholder game in which animals symbolically stand in for our poetic musings and meanings, too easily overlooking the animals while we get caught up within the nets of our own representational systems." (McHugh et al. 2021) Rather, one of the key arguments scholars of literary animal studies

make is that there is a need to read and consider what texts communicate about the subjectivity and selfhood of the non-human animals in it. This act also drastically opens up the possibilities of meaning in a literary text when one can go past the merely anthropocentric symbolic reading.

In the opening chapter, "What is it like to be a trope?", of *Literature and Animal Studies*, Mario Ortiz-Robles points out that animals have always been present in literature but that doesn't mean that we've had stories *about* animals: "In the great epics of antiquity, Gilgamesh, the Hebrew Bible, and Homer, animals play significant, even necessary, roles, but no one would claim that these, the earliest of literary works, are essentially about animals. They are, if anything, about how humans became human. Indeed, from this perspective, literature can be said to be about how humans describe themselves as *not* animals." (Ortiz-Robles 2016) He goes on to point out, in reference to Derrida's neologism "animot" that the term "animals" groups together an incredibly large number of species. A snail and a human being have as much in common as a rat and a crocodile, so this distinction serves just to demarcate humans from the rest. So, reading non-human animals symbolically in many ways is based in the millennia-old belief in human exceptionalism and part of the project of animal studies as a discipline is challenging and unravelling this distinction.

I have affirmed the claim of proponents of animal studies that we ought to treat non-human animals as subjects as we do with humans, and, since "ought" implies "can", there needs to be a way for one to do so. Though our focus so far, and will continue to be so for the most part, this paper has been on non-human animals as *literary subjects*, I think it would illuminating—and possibly more palatable to the reader—would be to show how non-human animals can be treated as *moral subjects*. This also follows the history of animal studies as an academic discipline where the initial texts that formed the bedrock for it came from moral philosophers grappling with issues of animal welfare and animal rights. The example I will use is heavily influenced by the work of the Neo-Kantian ethicist Christine Korsgaard, particularly her 2018 book *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals*. I must admit that follows is merely a sketch of the argument and I advise that any lack of rigour be attributed to my understanding of it rather than to Korsgaard's work itself.
In his *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Immanuel Kant conceives of three formulations of what he calls the "Categorical Imperative" which is meant to allow an agent to determine whether a certain act is morally permissible or not. The three formulations are as follows:

- Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.
- Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end.

- Act according to maxims of a universally legislating member of a merely possible kingdom of ends. (Kant 2019)

Abstracting from these postulates, Korsgaard argues that human morality functions (or ought to function) in the following manner. A person recognises that they have a good for themselves and they pursue it, and by doing so they will it as a good universally that others should respect. Through our rational faculties, they also acknowledge that others also have a good for themselves that they also will universally and that should be respected in the same manner. Where Korsgaard departs from Kant, who believed non-human animals were not moral subjects, is that she argues that non-human animals can also take part in this moral legislature as they also have a good for themselves and through pursuing it also will it as a universal good, though it is unclear if any non-human animals can take part in the second step of rationally acknowledging the good of other legislators. So, this is an example of how non-human animals can be subjects in one sense.

Derrida in his *The Animal That Therefore I Am* also shows an implied recognition of non-human animals as subjects in a discussion of nudity and nakedness. He recounts being naked in front of a cat, it goes as follows: "I often ask myself, just to see, who I am—and who I am (following) at the moment when, caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal, for example, the eyes of a cat, I have trouble, yes, a bad time overcoming my embarrassment." Derrida goes on to attempt to deny that the cat is a literary figure:

"I must immediately make it clear, the cat I am talking about is a real cat, truly, believe me, a little cat. It isn't the figure of a cat. It doesn't silently enter the bedroom as an allegory for all the cats on the earth, the felines that traverse our myths and religions, literature and fables… No, no, my cat, the cat that looks at me in my bedroom or bathroom, this cat that is perhaps not "my cat" or "my pussycat," does not appear here to represent, like an ambassador, the immense symbolic responsibility with which our culture has always charged the feline race, from La Fontaine to Tieck (author of "Puss in Boots"), from Baudelaire to Rilke, Buber, and many others. If I say "it is a real cat" that sees me naked, this is in order to mark its unsubstitutable singularity." (Derrida, 2008)

Though, in my estimation, Derrida fails in his attempt of separating the literary and reality. All his examples of cats that are interspersed in this discussion are either from the works of Kafka or Lewis Carrol and carry with them certain symbolic meaning. This does not mean he has not been talking about a real cat, rather it is a reflection that our relation with animals is so stooped in literature that it is hard to complete remove them from the cultural cats that surround us. In some sense, all animals (including humans) come to us imbued with a certain cultural significance that cannot be completely separated from them, which is partly what encourages Mario Ortiz-Robles' rather extravagant claim that "animals as we know them are literary inventions." (Ortiz-Robles 2016)

I'd like to venture that treating animals as subjects lies in a certain liminal reading where one acknowledges the literary, allegorical, or symbolic meaning that non-human animals come to us with while also being aware of how their lives function in everyday lives. So, a reading of, for example, Orwell's *Animal Farm* must recognise the allegory for the Bolshevik Revolution and the rise of Stalinism but must also keep in mind the real experiences of farm animals and the suffering that they suffer as part of animal agriculture and how that also independently motivates the creation of meaning in the text. Similarly, a reading of Albee's *The Zoo Story* can legitimately place value in the symbolic nature of the landlady's dog relation to Jerry but must also consider the everyday experiences of guard dogs and the material conditions that configure their lives.

Having seen how non-human animals can be conceptualised and understood as subjects, I feel it is now important to see how esteemed theorists fail to do so in what are considered seminal works of postcolonial theory. In the introduction to his 1994 collection of essays, *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha, in a discussion of the "beyond" primarily in relation to the works of Toni Morrison and Nadine Gordimer, claims that in a postcolonial, postmodern world certain singularities need to be called into question. The passage starts as follows: "The move away from the singularities of 'class' or 'gender' as primary conceptual and organizational categories, has resolved in an awareness of the subject positions—of race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation—that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world." It's interesting that in thinking of these singularities 'species' is not one of those that comes to mind for Bhabha. Initially, one might think it is perhaps indicative of the neglect of our animal nature in Bhabha's conception of the postcolonial world, and thereby suggestive of a possible limitation of Bhabha's thought.

However, there is another passage in this introduction: "Being in the 'beyond', then, is to inhabit an intervening space as any dictionary will tell you. But to dwell 'in the beyond' is also, as I have shown, to be part of a revisionary time, a return to the present to inscribe our human, historic commonality; *to touch the future from the hither side*." The very specific choice to use the word "human" here makes apparent that animals do have a space in Bhabha's mind as what defines the "human" is its distinction from the non-human animal (as we have discussed earlier). Another passage directly acknowledges the human as animal: "As *literary creatures and political animals* (my emphasis) we ought to concern ourselves with understanding of human action and the social world as a moment…" yet in his actual theorising we continue to see a gap where the non-human animal ought to be. One area in this introduction where I think the experience of non-human animals would be obviously relevant is in Bhabha's discussion of Morrison's *Beloved*. Sethe, the slave mother's situation is in many ways similar to the situation cows are put into in industrial animal agriculture in regards to the future of their children.(Bhabha 2024) Considering the importance of this text to postcolonial studies, I think it is worth looking at more examples from it.

In chapter one, "The Commitment to Theory", while discussing issues of negation and negotiation and the relevant categories to which these terms apply, Bhabha writes: "It makes us aware that our political referents and priorities—the people, the community, class struggle, anti-racism, gender difference, the assertion of an ant-imperialist, black or third perspective—are not there in some primordial, naturalistic sense." Again here, Bhabha gives no justification for the exclusion of species, speciesism, or animal welfare in this analysis. In the same essay, while pointing out groups in which the fragmentation of class and cultural consensus in relation to a Marxist understanding of labour, Bhabha omits a reckoning of the free labour that is extracted from animals while acknowledging the issues of "the unemployed, semi-skilled and unskilled, part-time workers, male and female, the low paid, black people, underclasses…" For a theorist interested in pushing the boundaries of postcolonial analysis and attain a more holistic understanding of the subject, this is a glaring failure. (Bhabha 2024)

There are a couple more areas where Bhabha shows a blind spot towards the non-human animal in relation to his understanding of postcoloniality. In "Interrogating Identity", Bhabha attempts to explain the "Invisibleness" of the colonial subject and how that relates to their identity. Considering his Indian roots, it should be readily apparent to him to include the colonial beast that provides a backdrop to nearly all aspects of life in colonial and postcolonial India, yet he fails to do so. In an ironic sense, we might take this to be evidence of the magnitude of "Invisibleness" that non-human animals in colonial states suffer from that even those most interested in creating an inclusive account of the colonised fail to see them. (Bhabha 2024)

Finally, on reading Bhabha's essay "The Other Question", it is truly glaring to those approaching the text with the importance of colonial relations and the situation of non-human animals under them how exclusionary a text *The Location of Culture* ends up being. Bhabha in this essay argues that the basis on which otherness is built is the stereotype and how indispensable it is to understanding the discourse of colonialism. He discusses how a fixity of identity is in some ways necessary to the colonialist project as it allows the coloniser to treat the masses as one and to reject their subjectivity. Thus, the fact that there are no mentions of any non-human animals in this essay is shocking. Our everyday understanding of non-human animals is one that is almost completely based in stereotype and a fixed unchanging identity (if we ascribe them any meaningful sense of identity to non-human animals at all) so to completely neglect this group in his analysis is an astonishing failure, and is one that this project hopes to avoid. (Bhabha 2024)

Another example of a prominent postcolonial theorist overlooking the role of non-human animals can be found in Edward Said's 1994 treatise *Culture and Imperialism.* In the introduction to the text, Said astutely points out the relationship between the novel form and colonialism and gives what is now the typical example for this observation: Daniel Defoe's

Robinson Crusoe. He states the following: "The prototypical modern realistic novel is *Robinson Crusoe*, and certainly not accidentally it is about a European who creates a fiefdom for himself on a distant, non-European island." (Said 1994) And later, in the chapter "Consolidated Vision", he adds: "Robinson Crusoe is virtually unthinkable without the colonizing mission that permits him to create a new world of his own in the distant reaches of the African, Pacific, and Atlantic wilderness." (Said 1994)Though, as we can see, he does make a passing mention to the "wilderness", he fails to make a connection to the domestication of wildlife that is central to the novel that Ortiz-Robles does make. I'd like to include his analysis here:

"Crusoe's process of reinvention is entirely premised on the domestication of animals—goats, cats, a parrot—and the use he makes of them for food, clothes, shelter, and companionship. (He makes his famous umbrella, the most over-determined symbol of his civilized individuality, out of animal skins.) Crusoe's story of human refashioning is all about the individual distinguishing himself from the other—non-humans, savages, cannibals, Friday, Spaniards—through a series of separations, the aim of which is a life of independent sovereignty in a state of nature." (Ortiz-Robles 2016)

Ortiz-Robles' analysis ends up fashioning a much better understanding of the character, the novel and its place in the history of colonialism because of a more holistic approach that considers our relationship to animals and the entire process of domestication that is essential to understanding human history. This section is not meant to imply that the works of Bhabha and Said are of no value, pace that I believe their contributions are invaluable to understanding colonialism and its legacy. The second chapter of this project will be devoted to applying their concepts to representations of cattle in Indian literature, but it was first necessary to point out where their analysis was lacking to then attempt to fill those gaps. However, I would like to briefly discuss neocolonialism and its influence on cattle in India before embarking on that journey.

P. C. Joshi in "The Subaltern in Indian Literature: Some Reflections on Premchand and his *Godaan*" argues that India went through what he calls a "colonial modernisation" rather than a "genuine modernisation". He argues that the main victim of this colonial modernisation is the Indian peasant thereby any analysis of colonial India needs to take this into account. So, traditional Marxist views of the transition from feudalism to capitalism don't straightforwardly apply to India as they might have with feudal societies in Europe. There is also then a qualitative difference in the literary representation of peasant life in Europe and in India. This leads him to compare Tolstoy as the author the of rural peasant Russia to Premchand as "the pioneer novelist of *rural peasant India.*" He goes on to state the following: "two qualities—sense of history and literary sensibility—combine to create the immortal but tragic character of Hori in Premchand's *Godaan* as the living personification of the colonial present." He also sees Premchand's project in *Godaan* as a

"critique of the colonial and semi-feudal social order" and that this critique is what establishes Premchand as an "epoch-making figure not only in Indian literature but also in Indian cultural history." (Joshi 2005)

If one was to go through the rest of Joshi's paper, one would find, among other things, deep analyses of the colonial system in India and the location of the principal character of *Godaan* Hori in it, astute observations of Premchand's relationship to the Swaraj movement and the influence on Gandhi, alongside many other interesting insights. As an article of postcolonial analysis, it is well-crafted, well-evidenced and well-sourced, and makes persuasive arguments about how we should regard Munshi Premchand in the cultural history of colonial India—especially as it pertains to the lives of rural peasants. What one will not find is much discussion about cows or bullocks which is rather strange in a novel whose title is often translated as *The Gift of a Cow*. Joshi's analysis is almost completely anthropocentric and takes nearly no note of the cow that sits at the centre of the first half of the novel till its death nor of the bullocks that have quite an influence on the latter half of the story. In this subchapter, I would like to focus on these ruminants and how ideas of Orientalism and the Other can be related to them.

That cattle are central to Premchand's *Godaan* can be ascertained from the very first line, "After serving the two bullocks with feed and water Hori Ram said to his wife, Dhania…" The first few chapters of Godaan deal with Hori's desire to buy a cow and how he attains one, only for it to die soon after from poisoning by one of his brothers. Hori's desire borders on obsession: even though he is paying back multiple moneylenders, he still hopes to put together two hundred rupees to buy a cow, at one point thinking to himself, "What did it matter? Didn't a cow tied by the door enhance the prestige of the house? And how auspicious to see a cow the first thing in the morning!" He also reflects on the type of cow he would like to own. One aspect of Orientalism as a discourse is the elevation of the Occidental and a creation of a sort of inferiority complex amongst the natives. In Hori's mind, we see this extended to cattle as well, "Not a cow of native breed, thought! Oh no, those were no good. Their yield of milk was poor and their calves good for nothing. Only fit to be yoked to an oil-expeller. He had set his heart on a foreign pedigreed cow." This notion of the indigenous Indian cow as inferior is something we are going to see repeatedly in the selected texts which is a sign of just how pervasive this aspect of Orientalism is. Yet there is also some negotiation here in *Godaan* where characters are aware that the colonisers don't know how to truly appreciate a cow with the herdsman, Bhola, from whom Hori eventually attains a cow saying the following about a colonial official: "He would have passed it on to some official and the official in turn would have got rid of her as soon as she ran dry." We also see in this very chapter how cows can be treated as the Other and fetishised and their bodies thought of as almost sexual objects. "He looked back. The spotted cow was walking majestically swaying her head gently, and flicking the flies with her tail. She looked like a queen in the midst of maid-servants." Alternatively, the Other can also become a status

symbol and put on a pedestal. "Hori gazed at the cow in a trance, as if a goddess disguised as a cow had come to sanctify his house… For Hori the cow was not only a thing for a worship but also a show-piece, a living symbol of prosperity."

Another question that needs to be dealt with is how do we look at cows as part of the colonial feudal system? Their lives are entirely dependent on their ability to produce milk which requires them to be constantly put through cycles of reproduction that are damaging to their bodies. Their calves do not get the full extent of the milk they need for ideal growth and who are later doomed to be beasts of burden pulling the plough through the field daily in harsh conditions. Once they run dry, they provide little benefit to the family and lose much of the status they earlier held. This is exacerbated in the Zamindar system where, under these feudal lords, peasants are almost always in debt and much of the produce both of the field and of the cattle must go towards the zamindars. This system was solidified under colonial rule and thereby drastically worsened the quality of life of cattle. Cows are also commodified as we see when a moneylender offers to buy from Hori in exchange of forgiving his loan. Though, in this chapter (the eighth one) we do see a clear recognition of the subjectivity of the cow as Hori considers the offer:

"He went and stood before the cow. Her black eloquent eyes seemed filled with tears. He felt as if she was saying: Are you tired of me so soon? You had promised that you wouldn't sell me as long as there was life in you. Is this how you keep your word? Have I ever asked too much from you I put up with my lot without a murmur. Tell me, why do you want to sell me off?"

In this moment, Hori truly connects with the cow with its dignity in mind. He goes past the merely instrumental or symbolic value of the cow and levels with it as co-animals. However, I don't think the same can be said of the author in its treatment of the cow as a character. In the very same chapter, the cow is killed off and is shown to be expendable. It ends up being purely a plot device and the animal disappears into the text. Past this point in the novel, there is little said about the cow and its death. It remains forever a nameless, voiceless cog in the machine of a story that is, as Joshi noted in his paper, about the rural peasant India.

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