

# Exploring Symbiosis: a Critique of Anthropocentrism in Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*

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## ABSTRACT

*This article explores the relationship between human beings and animals with the ecocritical lens. The objective of this paper is to bring the original relation between human and nonhuman beings into context by addressing the question that how is human identity and existence shaped by animals and how can the symbiotic bonding between them be established for sustainable existence of all? The critical and theoretical insights from Emmanuel Levinas's ethical considerations of interest, Jacques Derrida's idea of relative existence along with the issues of ecological-environmental justice and other philosophical, ethical - biological views of the scholars are special considerations of this research to critique human and nonhuman animal dichotomy to bring out the state of symbiosis. It finds a symbiotic relationship between the two species that leads the work to critiquing pervasive speciesism in human. The human and nonhuman beings appear in the contesting relation in the culture leading to the state of negation, exploitation, consumption and extinction. From wild to tamed, aquatic to terrestrial, small to big, powerful to powerless all nonhuman animals have to live defensive lives and humans always behave in offensive way against them. The discourse that human is endowed with prerogatives over the nonhumans is self-created. So, the rivalry between human and animal is a suicidal contest between culture and nature.*

**Keywords:** Symbiosis, Anthropocentrism, Dichotomy, Speciesism, Reciprocity

## 1. Introduction

This article attempts to examine anthropocentric practices of human beings in the earth community through Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* (1903) from eco-critical perspective with major focus on human animal relation, its need and problems in the primary text. Human tends to exploit animals and other natural resources so as to satisfy their thirst for being powerful.

Exploitation of animals and nature cannot create conducive environment for better life because the welfare of them has consequential relations with the welfare of other species and non living things. Therefore, anthropocentric advances for mere happiness are ironical. Fulfilling their desires and gaining happiness through the manipulation and exploitation of the fellow creatures, human beings prove that they want to make cost-benefit analysis. Disrespecting the nonhumans and focusing on their personal transitory motives, suggest the long existing intellectual tradition of speciesism, the idea of human supremacy and superiority to the nonhumans.

The ecosystem of the earth is operated by the equal share and contribution of the all biotic and abiotic existence. The satisfaction or happiness of a species depends on equal consideration of the interests of all species but the reality of the situation is just the adverse. The human beings' self-centric activities in pursuit of their better life are suicidal in the long run. Although human beings and animals play complimentary roles and their relations have long history from the dawn of civilizations, the sense of human supremacy over the nonhumans has led rest of the creatures and environment.

The human discourses about animals and environment have defined, ruled and exploited animals. Human trend of getting material prosperity at the cost of the exploitation of nonhuman existence has put them into danger. It has put the life of animals into great risk. The identity of human as superior to the animal and formation of the 'I' are based on the discriminatory human attitude. Because of the binary relation created by human civilization, the animals are othered and humans as 'self'. The lack of ethics and morality in humans towards is notable in the othering the animals. In the *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, Levinas's discussion on the concept of the face marks the ethical sense, along with its signal for animals focuses on the responsibility of human to animal. The face of the animal should appeal a sense of morality in human and stops from killing: "The animal has a face, and the face is what forbids us to kill." (Levinas, 1982, p.89). He stresses on the point that meeting with face of other being including animals provokes an ethical response and reaction in the human. The dichotomy between human being and animals is based on the profit motive of humanity. This human strategy has been into practice since time immemorial or the time when human species appeared in the earth. But this binary of human animal is less logical, artificial and superficial. Upon the closer and deeper analysis, the human-animal have remarkable proximity in terms of the origin, evolution, psychological and

physical variables. Human association with animals goes far back to the prehistoric time as Giorgio Agamben asserts: "Previously the boundaries of distinction were not drawn fixedly and that it is the human science that has segregated animals" (Agamben, 2004, p.24). Aligning with him, Jacques Derrida in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* says:

The animal is there before me, there close to me, there in front of me – I who am (following) after it. And also therefore, since it is before me, it is behind me. It surrounds me and from the vantage of this being- there before- me it can allow itself to be looked at, no doubt but also, but also – something that philosophy perhaps forgets, perhaps being this calculated forgetting itself – it can look at me. It has its point of view regarding me. (Derrida, 2008, p. 380)

Derrida portrays the human existence of 'I' to have been determined by the presence of the animal. Human is surrounded by the animal in terms of giving the meaning to it. The differential relation with the animal is the way to derive existential, rational, psychological distinctness of human, though the western philosophers have ignored it. He posits that just like the human being has perspective to look into, to define, to behave with the animal, they also possess the same perspective for the similar purpose.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This part includes the reviews and literatures on Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* (1903) that has been discussed from multiple perspectives. Based on the qualitative research method for the textual analysis with the ecocritical lens, the critical insights from the library, books, research journals, research articles have been used the secondary sources. The arguments put forth by the critics like Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida have been taken into consideration to discuss the ethical aspect to treat nonhuman animal and what it means by equality, why it is essential to maintain the ecosystem. Rhetoric of biospherical egalitarianism is at prime to analyze the narrative of text. The strategy or human trend has been into practice since time immemorial or the time when human species appeared in the earth. But this binary of human animal is less logical, artificial and superficial.

Upon the closer and deeper analysis, animals have remarkable proximity in terms of mutual trust and re-liable companionship. Animal's association with humans can be contextualized as Levinas argues in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. In his Reflection on the nature of a dog; Levinas tells an anecdote based on his personal experience in the prison during World War: "A dog is not a human being. It is not man. And yet it is certainly with man that the dog has this relationship of absolute trust and without any question-ing." (Levinas, 1990, p. 134). Here the dog as a trustworthy animal accompanies the prisoners showing the human traits towards them, which supports the idea of humanistic feelings that the animals possess. It de-scribes how the dog displayed clear friendship and recognition of humanity when humans lacked it. There-

fore, there is the synthetic relation between the two species. Their traits are overlapping and adjoining that can make us conceptualize the two sides of the same coin. It is the human being who has established and exposed that inseparable relation as distinctly separate one.

As the member of a community, animals share some feature with the humans in their instinct and behaviors. They are common to the human in many respects which bring the human-animal communicates together in the complimentary role. As Darwin, in the *Origin of Species* (1859), highlights on the evidence of "common descent" of the species through the branching pattern of evolution, the origin of all human and animal species was the same and it was in the long course of generation that brought the divergence and hierarchy among those species in the earth.

### 2.1. Departure

*The Call of the Wild* (1903) was set in the late 19th and early 20th century America. London reflects the then contexts of economy, culture and society vividly in the novel. It was in late 1890s when the large masses from America along with London himself had rushed to Yukon, North Canada in search for gold. That adventurous and economic pursuit mirrors the desires and efforts of the American society made for richness. The extraction and collection gold remind of the beginning of industrialization in America. By mirroring the competitive, exploitative, ruthless times and ambitions of his time, London also signals the successive imperial-colonial America through the novel. The dynamics of London's time like class struggle and labor, individual and society also underly in setting, plot and characters.

A number of critics have examined *The Call of the Wild* from different critical approaches which are anthropocentric. Some define it as an exciting adventure classic that should be read by the all American boys. However the mutual relation between human and animal, their shared instinct, trends and features have not been discussed extensively in those readings. Raymond Benoit reads this novel as the expression of the American Dream: "The myth of Buck, the great dog is an embodiment of the American Dream of escaping from the entangling complexity of modern living back..." (Benoit, 1968, p.1). The dog turns wild because he gets fed up with the dominating environment of his civilized masters. Raymond relates it with American youths' desire of freedom from the influences of American civilization.

Through the Marxist lens, Alfred Kazin interprets *The Call of the Wild* against capitalism: "London's greatest desire was to slip backwards, away from capitalization, into the lustier and easier world of the primitive frontiers" (Kazin, 1942, p.29). He seems to be tempted to the socialist than capitalist and to ideal past from real present. He has projected the novel as an allegory of American industrialization and its effects on the American people, animals and the nature.

With the post colonialist and feminist tone, John Bruni claims the novel: "...

animals and humans share biological kinship, an idea supported by the dog and wolf's behaviors with the role activism plays in the construction of masculine identity and the imperialist call for US expansion into new frontiers" (Bruni,2007, p.26). The idea of kinship is supportive not only to critique on the human superiority but also to see the similarity in the human and animals in the novel. The efforts of dog and masters remind the masculinity and their journey to find gold signifies the expansion of American imperial thought.

This ecocritical research work contextualises the reading with reference to Levinas's ideas of ethics, morality and Derridaian logic of relative(differential) existence to argue for equal human-animal relation in the earth community. Because of the anthropocentric plot, the dog and the pig face trials and tribulations to live the life. Their struggle for life is suggestive of the idea of survival of the fittest. Buck is in conflict with humans, with other animals and with the environment, which it must challenge and survive. Despite these multiple readings, *The Call of the Wild*(1903) still suits to be studied in the ecocritical framework to discuss the biospherical equality.

### 3. Results and Discussion

Despite of the physical differences the animals have innocence and honesty to share with humans. In Levinas's opinion on human-animal proximity in "The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights" from *Difficult Freedom* substantiates the argument of symbiotic connection between two species:

But there is something in our attraction to an animal . . . In the dog, what we like is perhaps his childlike character. As if he were strong, cheerful, powerful, full of life. On the other hand, there is also, even with regard to an animal, a pity. A dog is like a wolf that doesn't bite. There is a trace of the wolf in the dog. In any case, there is here the possibility of a specific phenomenological analysis . . . Children are often loved for their animality. The child is not suspicious of anything. He jumps, he walks, he runs, he bites. It's delightful. (Levinas,1963,p. 172)

Our attraction to animals like dogs, emerges from their childlike qualities—vitality, cheerfulness, and innocence—combined with a sense of pity for their gentleness, despite traces of their wild origins. Similarly, children are loved for their natural, transparent behaviors, which reflect a alluring and pleasureous innocence.

The capacity to suffer and communicate it , animals equal with the humans though not in the audible linguistic pattern. As in "Levinas and our moral responsibility toward other animals" Atterton Peter says: "That certain animals—though by no means all—have the capacity to suffer, which they are able to communicate to us, I take to be an incontrovertible fact."(Peter,2011,p641). Some animals are capable of experiencing suffering, just as humans can. This could include physical pain, distress, or emotional suffering, acknowledging that animals are sentient beings with the ability to feel. Because of their neurological set up and cognitive power, some animals may

not experience pain in the same way or to the same extent as others. But animals are capable of communicating their suffering to humans through visible signs of distress, vocalizations, behavior changes, or other forms of expression that allow humans to recognize and empathize with their pain. The construction of human and animal body, function of those body parts and their sensitivity in maintaining the life of them are based on the similar theory of biology. That is why, the proximity of animals to human is reasonable.

Exploring how Levinas's ethics can help challenge the traditional view where humans are seen as the central reference point for ethics and beings, Villers in "Thinking-of-the-animal-other with Emmanuel Levinas" questions the traditional anthropocentric view of ethics in the following lines:

Man remains the measure of all things. Levinasian ethics provides a framework for thinking about humans, animals and ethics in a way that can lead to a displacement of the human as the patriarchal centre of beings. The significance of drawing attention to these limitations cannot be over-stated, as it fundamentally concerns the very possibility of locating the disruptive power inherent in an encounter with the animal, and thus of an alternative thought of relationality that might develop from non anthropocentric grounds. (Villers, 2020, p.14)

It suggests that the encounter with animals can disrupt this anthropocentric worldview, leading to a new ethical framework where humans no longer dominate but instead engage with the animal and other beings in a more respectful, responsible, and relational way. The "disruptive power" of encountering the animal is that it opens up the possibility for an ethics that is non-anthropocentric, focusing on ethical responsibilities beyond human interests.

Even if their subjective experience may be incomprehensible, humans have moral responsibility toward animals and infants, recognizing their needs and acting on them. In this context, "Levinasian ethics and animal rights" reads:

The being of the non-human animals more transparent to me than the being of another human. I recognize that a cat has experiences, needs and distress. The exact character of the experiences and needs may elude my understanding, but I nevertheless feel they are somewhat within my grasp. I provide my cat with food, water and a warm, enclosed place to sleep. Similarly, the cry of a human infant can often be understood straightforwardly as a desire for milk, sleep or touch. (Crowe, 2008, p.319)

This statement reflects an ethical and philosophical stance that emphasizes the importance of recognizing the experiential world of animals while also acknowledging the limitations of human understanding. It argues for an inclusive approach to responsibility, one that extends beyond humans to other sentient beings.

The privileged position of human in the earth is dependent on the binary



between the animals and humans that is guided by the selfish motives. The creation of binary of human and animal with the aim of exploitation is unjust and unethical in the context of environmental and ecological justice. The theory of environmental and ecological justice claims that all human and nonhuman species have equal rights to live in the free and fair nature in the earth. The pleasure and pains, loss and benefits should be shared equally by the living and nonliving beings of the earth. David Schlosberg defines ecological Justice as: "ecological justice, focused on the relationship between those human communities and the rest of the natural world"( Schlosberg,2009, p.3). Going beyond John Rawl's distributional justice, Schlosberg is concerned with doing justice to the nature which includes the living and nonliving beings or the human and animals, but the human activities are not just to the animals and the rest of the nature. In *The Call of the Wild*, human characters are allured by the material motives turning hostile to the pets.

Buck, the dog is living happily with carefree life in the Californian Santa Clara Valley as the story opens. It is kept as the pampered pet of rich Judge Miller and his family. But this happiness does not go longer when the dog is stolen away by Manuel: "Buck was stolen from his peaceful life in the sun-kissed valley of Santa Clara and carried away to the rough northern gold mining country where he had many masters" (London,1903, p.7).The beginning situation of Buck is filled with joy in the beautiful valley. His being stolen from there signifies the profit motive treatment of human being. Selling him as an object to utilize is keeping him in the secondary position. Like Manuel, Buck also feels to live happily with the Judge Miller but to his dismay, all happiness is snatched away by the human. In this episode, the idea of ecological justice gets violated by the dichotomous attitude of Manuel towards the dog. The pleasure entertained by the dog is not considered by the human being.

While showing such behaviors of cruelty to the Buck, neither Manuel nor even the Judge thinks that their existence of pleasure and privilege are the co-existent of the dog. They take their privileges absolutely without giving equal consideration to that of the Buck. In this connection, Peter Singer's idea is worth mentioning:

One being is intelligent then another does not entitle him to enslave, exploit or disregard the interests of the less intelligent being. The moral basis of equality among humans is not equality in fact but the principle of equal consideration to interest and it is this principle that, in consistency, must be extended to any nonhumans who have interests. (Singer,1979, p.57)

Singer highlights that the discrimination and domination of humans on the nonhumans or the animals appears from the lack of equal consideration and respect to the animals. When humans make policies and behave with the animals, they forget the value of subjective experience of other sentient beings. They have the common interest in experiencing pleasure and avoiding pain. The consciousness or capacity to

experience is to be respected, but *The Call of the Wild* lacks the principle of equality to the animals that causes the objectification of the Buck. Although, he likes to sit around the fire with the owner, Judge, he is compelled to give up because of Manuel's interference with his pleasure. His feeling of pain is not paid any heed by the children of the Judge. They tease and poke Buck.

System of creating dichotomy between human and animal, and valorizing the first one goes back to the western intellectual tradition. Immanuel Kant, lecturing on ethics, considered the question of our duties to animals and gave his opinion in a biased way: "So far as animals are concerned, we have no direct duties. Animals are not self-conscious and are there merely as means to an end. That end is man" (Kant,1998, p.56). Kant's idea of ethical duties of human towards animals sounds exploitative. He defines and limits them to a utilitarian purpose for humans. In the similar tone, the subject in the novel, *The Call of the Wild* goes ahead. With the purpose of collecting gold from Klondike, North Canada, men wanted the dog: "Searching in Northern darkness for gold, men wanted dogs...heavy dogs with strong muscles for work and with furry coats for warmth find me a dog. A big one, who can work and pull his weight, I will pay plenty" (London,1903, p.9). In this quotation, the purpose of the strong dogs like Buck is to fulfill the need of human beings to collect material property. Buck, as the hybrid of St. Bernard and Scotch Shepherd, is preferred by the gold extractor. There was a type of competition among the people for satisfying their thirst for gold which put the interest and conveniences of the dogs into secondary position whereas they deserve the equal consideration.

The arbitrary distinction between human and animal is analogous to the binary of black and white race. Like racism, the treatment of the humans towards animals is guided by the 'speciesism'. This trend of giving priority and privileging humans can be further substantiated in the following lines of *The Call of the Wild*: "Manuel needed money. He had a wife, many children and loved to gamble" (London,1903, p.9). For getting the money to feed his children, to his wife, Manuel plans to steal and sell the dog. He is so self-centered that he even wants to play gambling by selling the dog. It represents the human desire to meet their personal interest at the cost of the animals. As a rational being, Manuel could have thought about the comfort and discomforts of the dog before selling it. Buck was a pet, which could have been treated equally to his children.

Lack of the sense of fellow-feeling towards Buck is the reason that leads an obedient pet to the complete wilderness. The dog, getting fed up with all inhuman behaviors, finally turns to be a wolf. Buck's returning to the beastlike state refers to the human characters' othering attitudes towards the animals. The maltreatment of his masters takes the dog so far that he is compelled to quit human company. Due to the othering mentality of the owners, the relationship between humans and the dog becomes hostile. At the railroad station, when Buck is carried away with the rope,



Manuel and the stranger show their cruelty. Mercilessly, Manuel sells Buck to the man.

Advocates of animal rights propose for the anti-cruelty and animal welfare. Like the human being, nonhuman also should be endowed with certain inalienable fundamental rights to life, food, free and fair movement in the nature. In this connection, Tom Regan points out that:

We are sometimes justified in causing nonhuman animals' significant pain in pursuit of institutionalized human interests; animal rightists deny that we are ever justified in doing this. The true objective, for which animal advocates should work, according to this view, is not to provide nonhuman animals with larger cages and stalls, but to empty them. (Regan, 1975, p.68)

Regan's spirit is to define animal right practically by freeing them from the human confinement and providing them with the basic needs. Judging *The Call of the Wild* in this framework of Regan, it can be inferred that Buck is deprived of its natural rights. It can be substantiated with the evidence from the text:

For two days and nights, the cart was dragged along by other locomotives. Buck was given no food or water. He did not mind the hunger so much, but the lack of water made his anger reach frenzy. The bad treatment was only made worse by his thirst. The men did not care. They teased him. They barked and growled at him, which caused him to react. (London,1903, p.13)

Maltreatment to the Buck by the men during their mission to Klondike is highlighted in the above lines. As the right to live, right to have living substance and considered to be the basic human rights in the case of human beings, the dog, Buck also deserves those rights but he was deprived of those that led the condition towards disaster. This event in the mission to collect gold reminds of the money oriented exclusive attitude of human beings in terms of behaving with the nonhumans.

Buck is unable to communicate his feelings, pains and desires with the tormentors. He cannot produce the human sound to share the things though he definitely had his own language. But there was none to listen and respect his voice of misery. Differences in the way of communication do not mean that they do not communicate. In this regard Joyce E. Chaplin puts forward his idea: "We do not know whether animals are like us, and may never know, and it should not matter. Animals may think (and therefore speak) in ways we may never comprehend, but this does not mean we should not respect them, or any other nonhuman parts of nature" (Chaplin, 2017, p.523). Chaplin means to say that the language of human being may not always be useful to understand the animal's inner thoughts and desires. Despite of their language, the human vocal and verbal standard of language does not consider others' language.

In the novel, the dogs including Buck, Spitz, Dave and Curly have only instrumental value. When they are taken to the North as sled-dogs, they lose both value of their life and liberation. The importance of their life is only limited to the utilitarian

purpose for gold miners. It makes them sacrifice their remaining freedom. Highlighting these essentials for the animals, Eric Katz makes his comment: "An animal liberation ethic considers as morally relevant certain properties of the animals themselves – e.g., sentience-rather than merely the relationship the animals have to morally "superior" autonomous humans. Animals have intrinsic or inherent value based on some aspect of their existence and not simply an instrumental value for humans" (Katz, 1983, p.89). Katz marks that the value of animals' life is equal to the human life from ethical point of view too. But the loss of this ethical consideration in humans has degraded the inherent value of the animals. The degradation of the intrinsic animal value is resulted from the lack of moral ethical consideration.

The dichotomy between Francois, Perrault (humans) and the Buck, Dave, Spitz (the animals) is not much reasonable in terms of the struggle they make for their survival in the hostile northland. It was environmentally adverse for all the gold miners as there was the deep snow covered the whole land and falling from the sky. But the struggle for the sled-dogs was doubly dangerous because they had to pull the cart amid geographical adversities. It was a risky life of the dogs to adjust to that condition for their survival. In *The Call of the Wild*, Buck's determination to become a lead- dog is analogous to human spirit. He does not merely want to survive; he wants dominate and rule over the rest of the dogs:

Highly as the dog driver had valued Buck, with his two devils, he found, while the day was young that he had undervalued. At the bound Buck took up the duties of leadership and when judgment was required, and quick thinking and quick acting, he should himself a superior even of Spitz of whom François had never seen and equal" (London, 1903, p.83).

The presumed human instinct to rule over others, to gain power can be found in the above mentioned narratives of the text. Buck tries not only to impress and win the heart of the masters in journey but also ambitious for defeating his fellow sufferer dogs. So, the inheritance of human traits in the protagonist, Buck blurs the anthropocentric boundary between human animal worlds.

About the ambition to gain power and to rule over other being, William Salter comes up with the Nietzschean idea that life is constant struggle either to rule or to get rid of the rule. The "will to power" is the agency where mans owe a master or slave. And presence of this "will" questions the conventional system of morality of ethics (Salter, 1915, p.384). This idea can be related to the Buck in *The Call of the Wild*. The undeclared or indirect type of competition of Buck with the humans is filled with pride and he is looking for victory.

In response to the issue of human superiority to the animal, *The Call of the Wild* (1903) can be substantiating enough to prove that animal is equally competent and rational. In some case, the self-created discourse of human superiority in different

sense comes to be ironical. Because the campaigner masters of the dogs including Buck seem dependent on them. In search for gold for material prosperity, human beings alone cannot sustain their superiority among the dogs. Sometimes, animals can replace their assumed privileged position.

#### **4. Conclusion: A Symbiotic Relation**

The research deducts that there are biological and virtual, visible and invisible, tangible and intangible similarities between both of the species (human and animal); therefore the boundary between them is not scientific and justifiable. Animals do have the tactile, auditory, gustatory, visionary and olfactory senses of perception like humans despite of various physical variables. On these bases, human and animal rather exist for each other than one for another which is a symbiotic relation of equality, justice and co-existence.

Jack London portrays and remind of the need for harmony among human and animals, as the later ones fulfill their roles equally with the human characters in the novels. They have subverted human centrality with the cognitive, behavioral or practical performances. The inner qualities of liking, disliking, love, anger, rationality, irrationality, sympathy, empathy, pleasure, pain which human defines as its distinct privileges innately inhibit in the animals, too.

Emphasis on the unity and integrity of both humans animal community for the smooth running of life, equality and justice for all is a must. It is the othering culture of human beings which has brought separation or disintegration with the animal world. For the better, sustainable life, each entity of the earth community has to show respect and reciprocity with the fellow creatures. The realization of this fact will have a remedial value in developing symbiosis in the world that will lead the whole earth community to the path of ecospheric egalitarianism. Therefore, the analysis of the novel *The Call of the Wild* (1903) illustrated that human culture is guided by anthrop materialistic thoughts and that there is the close connection between humans and animals.

At present the whole human efforts are oriented to seek the way out for safe and sustainable existence in the earth. But these efforts made through science and technology, academic plans and discussions, economic campaigns and political missions seem ironical and futile unless human beings realize, assimilate and implement equality, justice and animal rights.

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