

REVIEWS



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Ratul Nandi. *Animal Poetics and Literary Thinking*. Lexington Books, 2025. pp. 116. ISBN 978-1-66696-395-3 (paper), ISBN 978-1-66696-396-0 (electronic), \$95.00.

In the last five decades or so, there has been growing preoccupation with “the animal question” which has been given ample space in fields such as ethics, law, politics or public discourse, reflecting a marked change in the way in which humans perceive and relate to animals. This has resulted in the emergence of the transdisciplinary field of animal studies, especially under the influence of ecocriticism that has been drawing attention ever more saliently to the destruction of the natural world, the loss of the animal habitat, and the extinction of the species, as well as the increasing necessity to protect animals in various settings. A plethora of books has been published on this topic, among which *Oxford Handbook of Animal Ethics* (2011) edited by Tom L. Beauchamp and R. G. Frey, *Thinking Animals: Why Animal Studies Now* (2012) by Kari Weil, *Animals and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies* (2012) by Margo DeMello, *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Studies* (2014) edited by Linda Kalof, *Thinking Through Animals: Identity, Difference, Indistinction* by Matthew Calarco (2015) or *The Edinburgh Companion to Animal Studies* (2018) edited by Lynn Turner, Undine Sellbach and Ron Broglio, to mention but a few.

In this context, Ratul Nandi’s 2025 book *Animal Poetics and Literary Thinking* addresses ‘the animal question’ from another vantage point, foregrounding and questioning the possibility of understanding the intricate animal sensibility. The author starts from the premise that, since all animal studies are ineluctably human studies, there can never be any animal studies in the strictest sense of the word, such as animal studies by

animals. In the Introduction, he points to the major stumbling block in humans' approach to animals: a submerged anthropocentrism which makes it impossible for us to think of animals beyond our thinking, to glimpse their actual being from a position that would not be one of superiority. Instead of the anthropocentric approach that seeks to fence them in under a single concept, that of the animal, one should try to grasp the transcendent animal through, Nandi argues, "the creation of disparate representational configurations which make us think in the first place" (5). This "ironic, fragmented, and almost incomplete experience of animal lives" (20) represents animal poetics, i.e. an attempt to capture the elusive character of animal life that stubbornly defies our methodological conceptual or cognitive mapping. This kind of approach does not offer definitive solutions to the issue of the ontology of animal lives; it only reminds us of the temporary nature of the representation strategies we use in order to produce such an ultimate and unrepresentable state. "Animal poetics is . . . a disclosure of animal being through forms or systems of human 'making' (poiesis), as well as an 'unmaking' in the realization of the ultimate failure of such making, while not for a moment forgetting that it is only through such finite forms of human creation that we can picture the transcendental animal being" (8). A key concept that the author resorts to is the Heideggerian *Befindlichkeit* ("attunement") that presupposes a dual relationship to knowledge: we can only understand animals because we are essentially attuned to them, yet human knowledge will never fully comprehend the underlying mechanism of this attunement.

After clarifying his approach to animal studies, the author sets forth his methodology: a reading of fictional works that avoid the idea of animals as prescriptive, normative and totalizing, that refrain from formulating any final philosophical or theoretical views on animals as immovable or timeless. The author contends that the essence of the animal can only emerge from literary or poetic thinking, as the literary discourse draws the reader's attention back to the mechanism by which it both represents and performs the animal. Furthermore, literary works establish a space where boundaries blur, allowing species to relate to one another without actually relating, turning into one another without losing their essence. The advantage of literary works, according to Nandi, is that they

help the reader uncover the truths of animal beings, while the thinking of truth is inherently literary. They also facilitate a literary perspective that is neither fully human nor entirely animal, allowing the emergence of an in-between consciousness characterized by skepticism in relation to the points of view specific to any species.

Consequently, the three chapters of the book endeavour to decipher the ethereal sense of animal existence, in its non-foundational mode, in literary works that question the textual representation of animality, that suggest the impossibility of knowing the animal in the singular, and that intimate that one cannot envision a single animal unless representational pluralities are invoked. The chapters address three nearly stereotypical ways in which people attempt to understand animal life: ethics, stupidity and monstrosity. The author submits them to a radical “defamiliarization” that is meant to result in a change of our ingrained attitude toward them, as well as a renewal of their hermeneutical reach.

The first chapter entitled “Animal Poetics and Coetzian Ethics” foregrounds the possibility of genuine animal-centric ethics in the context of the anthropocentric Western thinking that has shaped our minds. The notion of animal ethics is analysed in relation to the belief that nonhuman animals should have legal rights because, with proper training, they will be capable of performing some of the fundamental behaviours (such as speaking), that set humans apart from animals. The author combats anthropocentrism as well as speciesism, the practice of viewing and treating members of one species as morally more important than members of other species. The chapter focuses on two titles by J. M. Coetzee – *Disgrace* and *Lives of Animals* –, that give ample space to human-animal ethical relations and point at the way in which animal ethics may emerge in the area of indistinction between them that may be triggered by a shared feeling of vulnerability. Coetzee is chosen for his masterful illustration of how the incomprehensible reality of animal life often conflicts with our firmly held beliefs, with our compassionate actions and practical obligations.

The second chapter engages anthropocentrism from a different perspective, dwelling on “the animal within” and questioning the boundaries between the human and the animal, knowledge and stupidity,

rationality and ignorance. Nandi chooses to discuss stupidity as an entry to “the animal question” since we usually associate it with animality. Animality as a discourse capable of staging an intricate and unsteady conversation between knowledge and stupidity is illustrated in two titles by Franz Kafka – *Metamorphosis* and *A Report to an Academy* – that highlight the writer’s animal poetics and that urge us to question all we supposedly know about animals. By placing the animal within the human being, or, on the contrary, by making an animal become human, Kafka’s animal poetics suggests that new forms of expressivity can be accessed, and that they may shed new light on animality.

The third chapter takes issue with our biopolitical humanity by dwelling on the issue of “the monstrous other” that has always challenged the fundamental presuppositions underlying the human / animal divide. Nandi reads Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* through the eyes of its monster which, by being constructed as both human and animal, calls the existing species model into crisis. This strange alterity of the creature which Nandi calls “enantiomorphic alterity,” presupposes characteristics of both animality and humanity that are conceived as neither antagonistic nor identical, but mirroring each other. Reverting perspectives and looking from the creature’s vantage point, the “in-between” area that the monster occupies in ontological terms may indicate the (im)possibility of knowing a different type of humanity – the alternative reality that the creator was blind to because he could not see past the normative limits. Nandi rightly contends that anthropocentrism and speciesism can only be overcome by embracing this formless humanity, by accepting a new, though terrifying form of life, by “loving” the monster as a monster.

The monstrous other is also analyzed in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*, in which the cloned individuals are identical to the human, yet different in their bio-engineered origins. Nandi reads Ishiguro’s novel as an attempt to construct a response to the argument for creating an inhuman or anti-human type of art that would be perfectly appropriate for the clones’ peculiar, ambiguous ontological status. The ultimate response of the novel to the perils of capitalism may very well be to preserve this creative inhuman that points to the inadequacy of the forms of humanist literature and art in addressing such “more-than-human” experience.

Ishiguro also intimates how this grotesquely in-between alterity of clones can articulate a potent resistance to the technophilic inhuman humanism of our days.

In conclusion, the book is a passionate plea for an animal poetics that provides us, by recourse to literary thinking, with a useful tool to address two of the most pernicious and naive conceptualizations of animal lives: anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism. It challenges our ingrained beliefs about the ontological nature of human animals, being of interest to both academics and the lay person who is attracted to the mysteries of animal life.

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