

A Saga of Wild Love: The Human - Animal Bond in Jeyamohan's *The Elephant Doctor*

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"He who is cruel to animals becomes hard also in his dealings with men.

We can judge the heart of a man by his treatment of animals."
Immanuel Kant.

Human – Animal bond is found to be a fundamental aspect of civilization that shapes culture, society and belief system across the world. From ancient literature to modern studies, the human- animal bond has been explored and portrayed as a deeply rooted bond that brings emotional, psychological, loyal, healing and survival benefits to both. The bond between human and animal is always complex, that is created only by mutual trust, survival and conservation. Sometimes, it results in conflicts, positing that wildlife interactions always need a great understanding of ecological considerations, focussing attention on how humans and animals co-exist in wilderness. Elephants are known for their high intelligence, emotional and social connections have deep attachments with those they care them. Tamil *Sangam* Literature presents an evidential portrayal of elephants as majestic, valour and symbol of divine beings. These are symbolized in literature for their quintessential like memory, wisdom and suffering that reflects ecological concerns. Some advocate elephants as sentient beings challenging anthropocentric views.

Jeyamohan's *The Elephant Doctor* is a semi-fictional short story in Aram a collection of short stories. Particularly, the select work is translated to English by Priyamvada in her *Stories of the True*. This research paper utilizes the translation of Vishvesh Obla in his blog *Vishnupuram Ilakkiya Vattam* (2019). The story follows Dr Krishnamurthy, a Veterinarian who dedicated his life to treating sick and injured

elephants those are particularly affected by the intervention of humans into the wild. The narrator is newly appointed forest ranger, through whom the story of Dr Krishnamurthy as Dr. K, a guardian angel who has profound emotional connection with the animals and treats the injured elephants/ wild animals giving them utmost trust unveils to the reads. The major role and contribution of Dr. K in the Mudumalai forest is well known to the tribes and he is fondly called as “Elephant Doctor”(Yaanaai Doctor). Dr. K’s selfless service as a Veterinarian is to provide medical attention to both wild and domestic animals in the Topslip region of Pollachi. But over a period of time, the TamilNadu Government acknowledged that he is the most knowledgeable Vet on the subject of the pachyderms. His selfless service is mentioned in the story as

They said that Dr. Krishnamurthy must have operated on more than one thousand elephants. He had delivered three hundred or more elephant calves...He had developed the procedure used today for performing these autopsies... The system developed by Dr. Krishnamurthy to tend to the elephant’s well-being has since become a manual for the Indian forest department... Harry Marshall, a world-renowned wildlife documentary maker, made an eponymous film on him for the BBC. Dr.K is a living legend. (Obla)

The human brutality against the wild animals is brought to the awareness of the readers on many occasions by Dr. K. Dr. K mentions the ruthless behaviour of humans which cause a severe pain and damage to the wild animals. The immoral behaviour of humans who visit the wild for entertainment is expressed in the following sentences by the writer.

Most tourists who come here are educated and in ‘good jobs’. They carry fried snacks and liquor bottles all the way from their homes. Throughout their journey in the forest, they keep drinking and eating. They vomit. They pierce the tranquillity of the mountain ranges with their blaring horns. Blasting their car stereos as loudly as they can, they jump about and dance. They scream obscenities at the lofty hills. (Obla).

Some people’s weirdness results in the tragic death of the elephants. Broken beer bottles are always a threat and these magnificent creatures trample on these bottles and get hurt. The following words describe what happens to the wounded elephants, “within two days, the wound will form puss. Maggots will enter it, pierce the flesh and transport the pus inside. If they manage to reach any of the critical blood vessels or bones, the elephant will not survive” (Obla).

In *Animal Liberation*, Peter Singer advocates for the animal rights and urges the humans for the moral consideration of animals. He argues that ethical consideration should extend beyond human species and discriminating against animals simply because they are not belonging to human species. Singer affirms that animals possess intrinsic value apart from their utility to humans and hence they deserve moral consideration in their own right. Dr. K’s perspective align with the philosophical arguments such as those advocated by Singer, a call for the moral concern for the small creatures irrespective of their size. Dr. K attempts to diminish the disgust feeling of the narrator toward worms he saw while the doctor dissects the rotten carcass of an elephant by highlighting their intrinsic value. “All worms are like infants. They can’t walk or fly. They just keep on crawling. The only thing they know is eating. They keep on doing that. It is like our children...(Obla)

Dr. K refers Byron’s *Epitaph to Dog* to contrast human and animal morality.

But the poor Dog, in life the firmest friend,

The first to welcome, foremost to defend, Whose honest heart is still his Master’s own,

Who labours, fights, lives, breathes for him alone, Unhonoured falls, unnoticed all his worth,

Denied in heaven the Soul he held on earth – While man, vain insect! hopes to be forgiven, And claims himself a sole exclusive heaven. (Byron)

Dr. K engages in a broader ethical discourse on the comparative moral standing of humans and animals, challenging anthropocentric assumptions. This resonates with post humanist and animal

studies perspectives, which seek to deconstruct human superiority and recognize non-human beings as possessing intrinsic moral worth. Byron's epitaph is not only a personal grief but also philosophical statement on the emotional and ethical views of animals. Dr K by referring Byron challenges the anthropocentric view and argued for evaluating human attitude toward animals which corresponds to the post-humanistic and animal rights that deconstruct human superiority and understanding animals do possess intrinsic moral worth. "What do you know about a dog? It is such a Divine animal. Man thinks so high of himself. He thinks that animals don't have a soul or any rational sense. (Obla)

There is a general agreement that veterinarians should understand the Human-Animal bond with companion animals because of its impact on the lives, health and well-being of people (Fraser, 1989; Ormerod, 2008; Timmins, 2008). Veterinarians take care of the physical well-being of the wild animals by diagnosing, treating and preventing diseases. There should be an emotional bond, mutual trust and companionship between the Vet and the wild animal to preserve and strengthen their care. Dr K's emotional and moral approaches to the elephants are quiet astounding. Several years ago, Dr. K encountered a wounded elephant in the forest, surrounded by its protective herd. As he approached, the herd, recognizing his intent, silently stepped aside, allowing him to administer treatment. An extraordinary event occurred two years later, further exemplifying the deep bond of trust and affection between Dr. K and the elephants. A baby elephant came all the way from Mudumalai to receive medical attention for its injured legs. It trumpeted in the middle of the night and it patiently underwent treatment administered by Dr. K.

This remarkable connection, built on compassion and care, highlights the profound relationship between Dr. K and these majestic creatures. The author's and readers astonishment is evident from Dr. K's insightful knowledge of elephants from this passage.

He will wake up in an hour and will return to Mudhumalai in the morning," he said. "What, go to Mudhumalai?" I asked. "Yes, he has come from there. You have seen him too," he said. I was surprised. "Yes, do you remember that incident at Mudhumalai one and half years before when we removed a similar beer bottle off an elephant's leg? He was the one standing under the huge Morinda coreia tree. He was tiny then, had the size of a baby bull." "How did you know?" I asked. "Can't you now recognize a man you saw there?" he replied. The Doctor wiped his hands with the cotton and put them all in the paper bag. "He came all the way? It is amazing," I said. I have known that elephants had a sharp sense of direction. They can track the direction for even three hundred kilometers. They don't forget even minute details. But I didn't understand how they tracked the way from Mudhumalai. They might have memorized our scent in that forest. Or else they might have come here previously. (Obla)

The story told in semi-fictional form through the eyes of the forest ranger conveyed the doctor's clear understanding of elephants and his emotional and psychological connection with them, ends with "They won't forget as much sooner" (Obla). Dr. K is not a mere veterinarian but more a human with empathy. This is evident from the interview of Akila Kannadasan with P.R. Mani, a 69-year-old livestock inspector (2023), recounted his nostalgic experiences working alongside the esteemed Dr. K. He described how, upon Dr. K's arrival in the camp, the elephants would instinctively raise their trunks in greetings, an indication of their profound recognition and reverence for him. Mani further elaborated on Dr. K's remarkable rapport with these elephants, recalling how he moved from one elephant to another, addressing each by their name as though one would extend their love to a child.

Dr. Krishnamurthy's namesake, the elephant Murthy, once notorious as a crop raider and responsible for the deaths of 23 people was raised at Theppakadu Elephant Camp in Mudumalai Tiger Reserve until his passing on October 14. Despite his tumultuous past, Murthy came to be

regarded as one of the gentlest elephants at the camp. As people mourn the loss of one of the camp's gentlest elephants, Murthy's life also stands as a tribute to the enduring legacy of Dr. Krishnamurthy, whose profound dedication to elephant care and conservation continues to inspire.

As stated by Akila Kannadasan, “It is easy to earn an elephant's affection. If you put in some effort, like the late veterinarian Dr V Krishnamurthy did, they would go out of their way to express their love”. Hence Saga of Love between human and animals continue for centuries proving the timeless trust and companionship that stands as a symbol of love and loyalty.

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