

Feline Perspective and Indianness in Nilanjana Roy's *The Wildings*

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines how Nilanjana Roy's *The Wildings*, published originally in 2012, explores Indianness through a unique non-human perspective, i.e. through an animal perspective. It brings to the fore the idea of anthropomorphism strongly suggesting that consciousness is not just a human quality but is also evident in animals. The paper analyses the Indianness in the representation of the feline in the novel while depicting familial ties and relationships. Nilanjana Roy's *The Wildings* is a feline-centric narrative that enables the readers to reassess Indianness and Indian socio-cultural realities through the perspective of cats. The paper also explores how the novel deploys the two literary devices of irony and satire to comment upon the various socio-cultural realities of India.

KEYWORDS

Indianness; Indian English Literature; Animal Studies; Feline Perspectives; Indian socio-cultural realities.

What is Indianness? The obvious answer is that it is a concept of the Indian ethos. But it is not just a concept. It is a shared thought, a shared consciousness of a shared identity, tradition, customs, values, cultures, spaces, behaviors and mannerisms, among other such shared experiences. Therefore, Indianness in Indian English literature subsumes all these thoughts that are evoked in one's mind together with an emotional association – embedding relativity and historical comparisons of the Indian ways – when perusing any work that has originated and evolved on Indian soil.

The Indian English writers of 21st century strive to present this 'life beyond life' with the themes of conflict, cultural anarchy, cultural polarity, loss of faith, morality, universalism, and the bewilderment of the Generation Next. Even though this tendency is evident in the writings of modern Indian writers like Arundhati Roy, Pankaj Mishra, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Shashi Tharoor, Firdaus Kanga, Aravind Adiga and the likes, it must be noted that these writings most often provide us with anthropocentric views. Nilanjana Roy breaks through this anthropocentric

predilection with her work *The Wildings* (2012), which looks at the same kind of Indianness through a unique non-human perspective i.e. through an animal perspective, bringing to the fore the idea of anthropomorphism suggesting that consciousness is not just a human trait but is also relevant to animals. Paul Waldau, in his critical text *Animal Studies*, argues along the same lines. The primatologist Frans de Waal uses what amounts to a critical anthropomorphism, that is, a careful, realistic use of terms we use for ourselves. He challenges those who refuse any such exploration as in “anthropogenic,” which he defines as “a blindness to the humanlike characteristics of other animals, or the animal-like characteristics of ourselves” (de Wall 52). Those who are in anthropodenial try to build a brick wall to separate humans from the rest of the animal kingdom (Waldau 156).

It is an interesting enterprise to consider Indianness from a non-human perspective, particularly from a feline point of view. This endeavour is built upon the premise that cats are individuals with their own sensory apparatus, perspectives and emotions. John Bradshaw, while exploring the tenets of feline science, maintains that cats are individuals and cannot be considered as mere members of a species. He argues:

Even scientists now talk freely of cats having their personalities. The evidence of different personality types among the cats indicates that they, as a species, have the potential to adapt to the demands of 21st century and beyond (Bradshaw 219).

Bradshaw also opines that cats are sensitive to human body language and they show their personalities in their attitude to people. Most cats are extraordinarily sensitive to human body language, much more so than they usually receive credit for. This sensitivity enables

them to adapt their behaviour to the people they meet. People who dislike cats often complain that they are the first person in the room a cat makes a beeline for. So I decided to test this theory by staging encounters between cats and people who either liked cats or found them repulsive (Bradshaw 234).

Svendsen notes that the animal perspective on the human world can be exciting and different. He spells out the possibilities of such a perspective:

Anyone who has ever had a pet has wondered how the animal perceives the world, or how it feels to be in the world of a dog or cat, for example. No dog or cat has ever written an autobiography telling us anything about it. When I see a moose, fox or hare on a woodland road, I wonder how they perceive me. When we see nature programs on TV where an eagle glides, a killer whale swims, or an octopus walks on the seabed, we try to imagine what it's like to be in the consciousness of these animals. (Svendsen, 7)

It also maintains that animals have their own history and mental life. He states that it is possible to draw animals into the hermeneutic tradition or into the theory of interpretation – an attempt that challenges the traditional view that animals do not belong to the domain of understanding.

Kristin Andrews takes a similar stand in trying to explain the animal's mind. His premise is that animals have minds and therefore they have cognitive sense. He states:

Animals think and feel – after all, we are animals, and we think and feel. Members of the human species have human minds, and if members of other species have minds, they will have species-specific minds of their own. Despite the title of this book, there is no such thing as the

animal mind. Different animal species have different biological, environmental, social and morphological features, and all of these differences could have a cognitive impact (Andrews 4).

Fiction extends the possibility of exploring animal subjectivity and the animal mind. It also highlights the possibility of seeing the world through the eyes of animals. Nilanjana Roy's *The Wildings* is a feline-centric narrative which enables the readers to reassess Indianness and socio-cultural realities of India through the perspective of cats. The novel uses irony and satire as literary devices to comment upon various Indian socio-cultural realities like littering public places, belief in mysticism, awe for religious practices, over-emphasis on ritualism, communal differences and even the tradition of naming.

Belief in the mysticism is one of the distinguishing features of Indianness depicted in *The Wildings*. The novel suggests mysticism from the start to the end as it revolves around the life and learning of the orange kitten Mara, a sender cat who can mystically travel to places far and wide, read minds and speak to other cats, not necessarily physically but through a connected consciousness. This idea of feline consciousness reverberates throughout the novel. Mara converses with not only her species but also with others, even as she is miles away from them. For instance, at the very beginning of the novel, Mara is oblivious of her powers and therefore has no control over when or what messages she transmits through the sending, as illustrated here:

One of the bats chattered nervously as the soft, frightened words reached him, echoing in his head: Dark. Want my mother. Why are the dogs growling? Why aren't you

saying anything? It's so dark in here (Roy 8).

Or, when, during the battle of the Nizamuddin wildings and the feral cats, Mara surpasses herself as a sender by going a step further. Instead of being the one to travel between spaces, Mara brings Ozymandias (also known as Ozzy), the Royal Bengal tiger, to Nizamuddin virtually to scare the ferals away – something that none of the earlier senders had ever been able to do:

Beraal was the first to recognize Mara, who was bobbing along next to the tiger's gigantic face. ... "Hold your ground," she said to the Nizamuddin wildings, using the link so that the ferals wouldn't hear. "It's the Sender's work—the tiger is just a sending, it isn't real! There's nothing to fear—keep your whiskers unknotted. Well done, Mara!" (Roy 232)

The names of the feline characters in the novel are Indianised to implicate the Indianness inherent in their personae and attributes. The names such as Mara, Datura, Abol, Tabol, Qawwali, Rudra, Kirri etc. are distinctly Indian in origin. These names not only assert the Indian cultural roots of these feline subjects but also invert the convention of westernizing the names of cats and dogs.

Another aspect of Indianness is implicated in the novel through the language Junglee – which is spoken and understood by cats and other animals. This language is a mixture of Indian expressions and English to indicate the Indianness that the cats and other animals align with. For instance: "...the clan, like all clans who lacked Senders, used the mews, chirps and barks of Junglee rather than linking by a whisker when they needed to speak to those from other species" (Roy 11). Another example is:

Katar growled, trying to get the dog to turn, but the beast swivelled once, snarled in warning at the

tomcat and barked defiance at him. "My kill!" said the dog in Junglee, the language of the hedges; all animals knew it, even though most could communicate only the most basic warnings and requests in that tongue (Roy 69).

Feline geography in this novel is also Indianised. It signposts familiar locations of Nizamuddin and the nearby areas, albeit from a feline perspective. The stepwell, the beggar's home, the shrine and the tomb located in the Nizamuddin area of Delhi are identified using words like *baoli*, fakir's home, dargah, and Humayun's tomb, lending the novel's topography an Indianness from the cats' perspectives. Moreover, each of these locations is intended for a different purpose. For instance, when two cats from the Nizamuddin clan, Beraal and Hulo, disagree on the fate of the orange-coloured sender kitten Mara, the other senior cats, Katar and Miao, remind them:

Katar moved between the two of them and hissed loudly. "No fights in the cemetery," he said. It was part of their pact with the fakir. ... Hulo seemed ready to spring, but Miao intervened, her whiskers bristling. "Settle this the usual way," she said to the tom and the queen (Roy 40-41).

Indianness in the feline world is represented also in the arboreal details. Cats have an understanding of trees and here it is with reference to specific Indian trees:

The dappled branches of a neem tree and the friendly, yellow-flamed branches of a laburnum tree hung invitingly over the roof; it was perfect. And the kitten's attention had wandered; its head bobbed up and down as it followed the flight of one of the butterflies (Roy 25).

Another aspect of Indianness revealed in the novel is in the form of culinary references. These references are linked with the cats' culinary experiences, though, often in the form of dished-out and leftover human food items – bait fish and milk, meat stew, fish heads or fish broth etc. which are either provided by the humans, called Bigfeet, themselves or are to be fetched from garbage cans and the like.

A very distinct feature of Indianness showcased in the novel is the Indian tradition of hospitality, of *Atithi Devo Bhava*. The cats in the novel are also shown to follow this belief system:

The laws were the first thing all cats learned when they were old enough to leave their mother's side, and like all wildings, Southpaw had the words running through his mind:

Help, water, shelter and feed
To any of the clans in dire need;
No one shall refuse a stranger
Sanctuary, should he be in danger;
Hear these laws, and hold to them fast
As have all wildings from the days
of Bast (Roy 76).

The cats' behaviour of reaching out to others in trouble, showing empathy to those in need, and talking to their prey before killing them, among others, add to the aspect of Indianness exhibited in the novel. The age-old unspoken pact between the wildings of Nizamuddin and the ferals of the Shuttered House bears witness to the Indianised behaviour of keeping to their territories, avoiding and guarding against intrusions, and hoping for a peaceful living in their own social and domestic spaces. Even the debate between the common kitten Mara, the Bengal tiger cub Rudra and the langur monkey Tantara about whether they must remain friends or not – since they belonged to different species – depicts Indianness, as they

reassess their distinct cultural identities, which is rather a reaction to what the other species thought of their friendship:

The kitten couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Why can't all four of us be friends? We never cared before about being different species, did we?" Rudra sighed. "It didn't matter before, Mara, because in a way we were all cubs, or kittens, or younglings—we were just babies playing together (Roy 123).

Indianness is even portrayed through the strong sense of belonging the cats showcase towards their species. For example, Southpaw is a lone kitten found by one of the Nizamuddin colony wildings, Hulo, as the kitten was "stumbling down the canal road with sore paws, mewling and still almost blind—the kitten's eyes had just about opened" (Roy 92), and, being an orphan, is immediately taken under his wing. All the senior cats of Nizamuddin immediately accept Southpaw into the fold and take care of him as one of their own, teaching him the ways of the colony cats. *The Wildings* mentions Southpaw thus:

Southpaw was the colony's orphan, and so far it had taken the combined efforts of all of the Nizamuddin cats to keep him out of trouble—he had an instinct for tumbling from the ant heap into the termite's nest, as the old saying went (Roy 14).

Another aspect of Indianness in the novel is the strong familial ties as seen through the cats' perspectives. Be it Kerri, the ever-so-mysterious mongoose who avenges Miao the Siamese cat's death by killing the heartless ringleader of the ferals, Datura, in the end; or, Tooth the pariah eagle whose companionship is most soothing for Miao during her last moments; be it Beraal – the hunter cat

who has lost each of her kittens till date – whose motherly instincts take over on meeting the sender kitten Mara, or Ozzy the tiger's desperate cries to reunite with his son Rudra at the zoo when he pours his heart out to his partner Rani:

If we'd been in Ranthambore, he would have left to start his family, but do you think we wouldn't have met? We would have explored the dark, cool dens together, Rani! You would have taught his cubs how to hunt and how to study the ravines and the plateaus, what prey to chase through the gorges, and what prey to leave to the sand and the sun. They took my boy away without asking me! (Roy 149)

The animal world shown in this novel replicates the structure of the Indian family, indicating that the animals have also internalized the Indian family system and its values. This is visible in the relationship between the white tiger Rani and the Bengal tiger Ozzy at the zoo:

Drowsing at the mouth of their cave, Rani opened her beautiful blue-green eyes a trifle as she watched her mate. Ozzy had been moody and difficult to handle all through the rains. The monsoon reminded him of the way summer yielded to better weather in dusty Ranthambore, and he had been pacing the length of the cage since the last full moon, restless, growling at the keepers and the gawking visitors. As Mara hovered over the water, Rani sensed happiness ripple through her mate's mane and was relieved (Roy 147).

Indianness is also reflected in the evocation of epics like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana in the final episode of the heroic battle between the wildings and the feral. The fighting factions replicate the binary structure of good and evil depicted through such epics. The wildings

represent the good and the righteous, while the feral are demonic, opportunistic and unscrupulous like the evil or the Asuras. The ultimate victory of the good is realized with the wildings prevailing over their demonic counterparts:

The feral began to make a frantic retreat. Those who weren't killed outright were chased by a posse of dargah cats ...looked for shelter at the mouth of the filthy canal, less scared of the pigs than of the dargah's fierce warriors (Roy 233).

Another Indian situation evoked in the novel is that of a Bollywood-like (Hindi cinema industry of India) cinematic experience with the build-up of the plot – starting from the nocturnal Nizamuddin by-lanes to the eventual clash of the cats, making it a typical case of a Bollywood plot. The presence of the supernatural, a foundling, maternal sacrifice, and the eventual victory of the good forces of the wildings with the help of a magical twist – are a part of the melodramatic, underworld Bollywood sequence. For instance, just when the ferals contemplated a successful coup:

Datura's eyes widened. And then the white cat mewed in terror, foam flecking his jaws as he scrabbled to get out of the way. Out of nowhere, a massive tiger appeared. It strode down the path, roaring straight into Datura's face (Roy 231-232)

Thus, the novel stretches the boundaries of Indianness to make it inclusive for the animal stakeholders. As unmistakably perceived in the novel, the cats are both insiders and outsiders to Indianness, with the wildings and other species looking to maintain peace across the Nizamuddin territory and beyond, and the ferals looking to kill for fun and create chaos and imbalance in the natural order of things, respectively. Roy's novel, although fictitious, gives us a unique point of view of the cats as protagonists by giving them agency and expression. Her use of satire and the depiction of a range of feline personae not only echoes but also critiques the absurdities of Indianness to its core.

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