

STORIED WORLDS: ANIMAL LIVES, ANTAGONISM AND ACTIVISM IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

Susan Haris

Abstract

This thesis interrogates the marginalization of animal lives in postcolonial India. Such marginalization is, for the most part, invisible. It can perhaps be best understood as indifference to animal lives, a lack of acknowledgment of the fact that animals are ensnared in various pre-colonial, colonial and neo-colonial networks of ecology, development, and agriculture, almost all geared towards human well-being. Yet, bringing forth or narrating a perspective that includes animals becomes challenging due to the overwhelming extent of human suffering related to hunger and poverty in postcolonial India. In this formulation, the well-being of animals appears to be pitted against human flourishing. This thesis argues for a more nuanced ethical position: its central contention is that the difficulty of conceptualizing animal life in postcolonial India is a barrier to discussing the actual treatment of real animals under existing circumstances. With the overarching goal of crafting a more precise conceptual analysis, attentive to the lived realities of both humans and animals, this thesis focuses on themes at the intersection of postcolonial studies and multispecies ethnography. I illustrate these interconnections through a multispecies ethnography of three species in Kerala: wild boars, street dogs, and elephants. My ethnographic exploration of animal lives in Kerala reveals that postcolonial development politics fosters a deep but often perceptually invisible antagonism towards animals, resulting in increasingly violent encounters labelled as ‘human-animal’ conflict. In response, I propose two complementary approaches to re-dignify animal lives: activism and storying. The embodied ethical praxis of animal activism is grounded in a radical acceptance of animals as agents alongside humans in a multispecies environment. This is most conspicuous in activists’ everyday activities of animal rescue, which welcome injured animals as integral members of a shared moral community who do not deserve cruelty or suffering. Storying illuminates the intricacies of animal sociality within multispecies worlds, showcasing the interweaving of animal lives with our own in liveable worlds in the age of the Anthropocene. It fosters hope by envisioning alternative futures. In a world gravely damaged by Anthropocene interventions, this thesis strives to facilitate regenerative conversations about ethical modes of human-animal relations, activist praxis, and their relationship to multispecies ethnography in a postcolonial context.

Key words: animal; multispecies ethnography; postcolonial; activism; storying; antagonism