

DAUGHTERS OF THE WILD: THE FERAL AND HUMAN PERSPECTIVE

JUN-HAO ROSALYN SHIH

When local villagers of Godamuri first encountered the wolf children of Minapore in 1920, they immediately suspected that the wild creatures were Manush-Bagha, Bengali for ghost-headed man-bodied beasts. Driven by curiosity and eager to dispel local superstitions, Reverend J. A. L. Singh led a band of men into the jungle where he found two “hideous-looking beings” (Singh & Zingg 5) huddled with a band of wolf pups in an old ant mound. Singh took the wolf-raised children back to his orphanage and named the younger one Amala and the elder Kamala. Singh kept a diary and recorded detailed observations of their feral behavior, such as the girls’ four-legged prowling and mangled midnight imitations of the noises the wolves made. Amala died a year after her introduction to human society, but her older sister lived on. Singh continued to painstakingly document Kamala’s “tardy development from a wolf-like existence to that of a human being” (Singh & Zingg 38).

Though Singh was deeply concerned with the well-being of the wolf-children, his diary was essentially a scientific case study, and he took a rational, dispassionate approach. This perspective prevented him from having to truly acknowledge the subjects of his investigations as human beings. He was more interested in the connection between heredity and the influence of environment, and he studied the feral children’s ability to comprehend language and their capacity for human emotion. Singh noted that when the children smiled, it was merely to show internal satisfaction of basic needs such as hunger. He wrote that “unlike human pleasures and joys, theirs were confined in a very narrow circle, while those of mankind are extensive, circumscribed by time only . . . All this spoke of a peculiar joy among animals only.” By contrasting their emotions with those of humans, Singh constructed a barrier between the feral children and ordinary people. Singh often made gestures towards eliciting sympathy in the reader, but he then qualified it with impassive statements. A year after capturing the children, he observed:

Kamala shed tears—a drop from each eye was seen trickling down her cheeks—only at the time when Amala breathed her last on the early morning of Wednesday, the twenty-first of September, 1921. Beyond this, emotional faculties were dormant, and not appreciable.

Thus, the most tragic event in Kamala’s life became an occasion for the study of emotion. The death of Amala clearly had its impact on Kamala, who spent nearly three days facing a wall and refusing to eat. But because she could not outwardly express her

emotions, Singh concluded (with a belittling “only”) that she could not truly feel as a human being.

Admittedly, Singh’s main goal was to present an objective understanding of feral children; eliciting sympathy was only his secondary aim, yet he still suffered from what Elizabeth Costello would have characterized as a “tragically limited” perspective. In a fictional speech at Applegate College, Elizabeth Costello, the character created by J. M. Coetzee in a 2003 novel by that same name argues that “the question to ask should not be: “Do we have something in common . . . with other animals?” (Coetzee 34). Instead, Costello, who is a famous writer, believes that the way to ensure universal understanding is to break all barriers that separate the superiority of humans from the supposed inferiority of animals. She calls for us to recognize the spark of life and “embodied soul” (33) shared by all living creatures.

Costello argues that if, as an author, she can think her way into the existence of a fictional character then it is possible to imagine ourselves into the existence of any living being. By this logic, the perspective of a child raised by wolves should not be difficult to understand at all. According to Costello, nothing can be viewed as “a fundamentally alien form of life” as long as it shares with us “the substrate of life.” Of course, Costello herself is not a real person, but the reader of Coetzee’s novel is still able to appreciate and understand her point of view. In fact, the reader herself becomes a vehicle in proving Coetzee’s point: the creative imagination has the power to extend beyond rational thought.

Costello not only argues for but embodies the sympathetic imagination that Singh’s rationalist perspective lacks. Singh was so fascinated by the extent to which feral children differed from either humans or wolves that he failed to appreciate them on their own terms. In attempting to compare feral children to ordinary human beings, Singh finds that the wild child’s capabilities inevitably fall short, and he concludes that they lack the ability to reason. The danger of this perspective is that it implies feral children are unlike man and are not “godlike” but “thinglike” (Coetzee 23). With this belief, we open ourselves up to the possibility of treating them like “things,” too. It is clear that lack of imaginative compassion has dire consequences.

Like Coetzee’s Costello, Martha Nussbaum calls upon imaginative compassion as the basis of our perspective towards other beings, but at the same time recognizes its unreliability. While Costello has no problem imagining herself in the form of a bat or even a corpse, Nussbaum acknowledges that there are obstacles in understanding any living thing. Nussbaum recalls an educational program director in rural India, who, when asked how a foreigner would understand the suffering of another person in another country, indicated the scope of the problem. He replied, “I have the greatest difficulty understanding my own sister” (26).

Another problem with compassion is that it has the potential of slipping into partisan loyalty. As an example, Nussbaum cites the first baseball game in Chicago played after *September 11*, incidentally against the Yankees. Due to an increased

awareness of the situation of New Yorkers, and perhaps the volume of beer consumed, the spectators began to chant “U-S-A, U-S-A.” At first, the chant was uttered as a sign of national unity, but eventually it devolved into a display of anger against the umpire after he made a questionable call.

Although severing all attachments may be one extreme way to guard against loyalty to one’s own tribe, team, family, city, or species, Nussbaum does not believe in the option of universal impartiality. The extermination of these connections, she asserts, would only result in “death within life” (23). Nussbaum suggests that we retain our local attachments while engaging with other cultures and experiences. She calls this critical compassion: a sympathy heightened by imagination and sensitivity to the arts. Nussbaum believes in the role of “tragic art in promoting good citizenship” and in the artist’s ability “to awaken a larger sense of the humanity of suffering” (25). Tragic art, such as Euripides, dramatizes the loss of local attachments but also places them in a context that crosses cultural and temporal boundaries. Through these works of art, we vicariously experience the pain of others and transcend the limits of our own understanding.

Once we have honed our capacity for critical compassion, we may approach feral children in a new way. Although Karen Russell’s short story, “St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves,” isn’t exactly tragic art, it contains loss and sorrow on a scale significant enough that we sympathize with the protagonists. “St. Lucy’s” is the story of human children of werewolf parents who have been sent to a sanctuary managed by nuns who aimed to “humanize” the young girls. In order to help the children transition into society, the authoritative nuns erase the girls’ original names (“GWARR!” and “HWRAA!”) and re-christen them Jeanette and Mirabella. The girls struggle to suppress their lupine ways and adopt the human code of falsities and formality. The story of the girls of “St. Lucy’s” bears many similarities to that of Amala and Kamala, but the key difference is that Karen Russell, unlike Reverend Singh, is able to engage our critical compassion. Russell describes how the girls lose their local attachments and societal connections. Even so, Russell is able to narrate from a distinctly wolfish point of view:

Those were the days when we dreamed of rivers and meat. The full-moon nights were the worst! Worse than cold toilet seats and boiled tomatoes, worse than trying to will our tongues to curl around our false new names.

Russell enters the mind of a wolf-girl so seamlessly that everything we regard as completely normal—even cooked vegetables and toilet seats—suddenly becomes alien. It is this disengagement from the human world that allows the reader to fully enter the realm of the wolf-girls. From the feral point of view, being human means knowing how to apologize, play golf, say “How do you do,” talk about the weather,

and carry out other decorous social rituals. Humans are not civilized but “bred in captivity” (Russell 236), trapped by their own sense of civilized refinement.

Russell’s wolf-children are the stuff of myths; nowadays children raised in the wild are extremely rare. But by stepping into the paws of the wolf-children, we gain an objective standpoint from which to recognize the contradictions and artificialities of our own human society. As Costello argues, sympathy is “all about the subject,” not the object. Costello’s act of imagining herself as a bat does nothing to affect the well-being of the bat. In reality, it is the act itself that has changed the subject and the subject’s ability to view the world around her.

Our compassion then is for our own benefit: the simple act of empathizing is a lesson in self-awareness. We can consider using our critical compassion to imagine ourselves as various animals whose lives are directly or indirectly affected by our own. It is not enough for us to imagine ourselves as a bat; we need to examine how this perspective affects human lives, customs, and rituals that are taken for granted. Imagine yourself, then, as the rat in the subway running away with your discarded bagel, or the squirrel guarding the last Redwood, or the mosquito landing on your arm. If you briefly distance yourself from human attachments and gaze at the world through the eyes of another creature, you may notice something about yourself that you had never previously seen. Like Kamala discovering her own reflection in the mirror, you may find yourself unrecognizable.

WORKS CITED

- Carter, Angela. “Wolf-Alice.” *The Bloody Chamber*. New York: Penguin Publishers, 1979.
- Douthwaite, Julia. “Homo Ferus: Between Monster and Model.” *Eighteenth-Century Life*. 21 (1997): 176-202.
- Coetzee, J.M. “The Philosophers and the Animals.” *The Lives of Animals*. Ed. Amy Gutmann. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1999. 15-45.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. “Compassion and Terror.” *Daedalus*. 132 (2003): 10-26.
- Russell, Karen. “St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves.” *St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*. New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 2006.
- Singh, J. A. L., & R. M. Zingg. *Wolf-Children and Feral Man*. New York and London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1939.