



De-aestheticising Animal Cruelty: A Critical Study of Aravind Malagatti's *Government Brahmana*

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Abstract

The paper focuses on analysing the representation of animals in the Dalit autobiography *Government Brahmana* by Aravind Malagatti. This autobiographical narrative raises questions about the welfare and agency of animals, challenging societal norms and cultural practices that may overlook the well-being and autonomy of animals. The paper explores how the autobiography 'de-aestheticises' animal cruelty and challenges the mainstream tendency to portray animal suffering in an aesthetic manner. It examines *Government Brahmana* from the perspective of animal-standpoint criticism in order to demonstrate how it de-aestheticises animal cruelty and sheds light on the ethical and moral dimensions of human-animal relationships depicted in the text.

Keywords: Dalit autobiography, Animal-standpoint criticism, Human-animal relationship, De-aestheticising animal cruelty, Acknowledged referent.

Introduction

Dalit autobiographies recount the stories of individuals from marginalised 'untouchable' communities in India as they strive for self-realisation and fight for their human rights. Through meticulous analysis of these autobiographies, one can discern the deliberate use of animals as symbolic representations, depicting

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the shift of Dalits from being perceived as nonhuman subjects to becoming central figures in the narrative. Animals are employed as metaphors in Dalit autobiographies to convey the multifaceted aspects of Dalit life and their struggle against oppression. These metaphors feature the intersectionality of caste, power and discrimination, shedding light on both personal experiences and the wider social context. One way animals are used as metaphors is to illustrate the dehumanising treatment and subjugation faced by Dalits. By drawing parallels between the mistreatment of animals and the discrimination endured by Dalits, writers reveal the oppressive social order that devalues and exploits both groups. This portrayal reveals the inherent violence in caste-based discrimination and the shared quest for liberation. Through the use of animals as metaphors, Dalit autobiographies surpass the limitations imposed on Dalits as mere ‘untouchables’ and redefine their narrative subjectivity. Animals serve as potent symbols that amplify the voices of Dalits, enabling them to express their experiences, challenge oppressive systems and assert their human rights. The inclusion of these animal metaphors broadens the scope of Dalit narratives, offering nuanced perspectives on caste-based discrimination.

However, using animals as metaphors in this manner tends to aestheticise animal cruelty and reinforce the notion of human superiority over animals (Donovan 2011). Several critics, including John Simons, a pioneer in animal-standpoint criticism, have raised objections to the figurative use of animals. In his work, *Animal Rights and the Politics of Literary Representation* (2002), Simons emphasises that while symbols are a prevalent form of animal representation, “animals are not symbols” (7). He advocates for exploring texts where animals are not merely “displaced metaphors for the human” (6). Additionally, Carol J. Adams (1990) objects to the use of animals in a metaphorical sense, emphasising that when animals are employed as metaphors, “[they] become absent referents, whose fate is transmuted into a metaphor for someone else’s existence or fate” (67). In recent years, there has been a growing interest among literary critics in reassessing the portrayal of animals in literature, likely influenced by the animal rights

movement. These critics examine the ideological implications of animal representation, criticise the widespread aesthetic exploitation of animal suffering and explore alternative forms of representation. They aim to either rediscover neglected texts that offer different perspectives on animals or propose new approaches that avoid “reduce[ing] the animal to a blank screen for the projection of human meaning”, as expressed by Philip Armstrong (3). The present paper analyses the representation of animals in Aravind Malagatti’s *Government Brahmana* (2007), a Dalit autobiography in the same light. It explores the manner in which this Dalit narrative de-aestheticises animal cruelty rather than aestheticising it. The driving force for the present analysis is thus shaped by the exploration of how the selected Dalit narrative brings animals into the foreground and takes their suffering with gravity. This will be accomplished through the lens of animal-standpoint criticism. According to Josephine Donovan, “identifying ideologically-driven representation in literary texts establishes a theoretical basis for animal-standpoint criticism” (203). She also adds that “the central underlying concern of animal-standpoint critics is, however, the aesthetic exploitation of animal pain, the aestheticisation of animal cruelty” (205). This critical approach is driven by a deep concern regarding the portrayal of animal pain solely for aesthetic purposes, as well as the transformation of acts of cruelty towards animals into objects of aesthetic appreciation. An animal-standpoint critic may pose the question of why the author chooses to ignore or repress the suffering of animals within the literary work. The likely answer to this inquiry lies in the prevailing speciesist.¹ Assumptions that allow for such disregard and lack of awareness lead to a blind spot regarding animal suffering within the literature.

By adopting an animal-standpoint perspective, the paper unveils how *Government Brahmana* confronts and subverts the conventional norms of representing animal cruelty, offering a more compassionate and nuanced portrayal of animals within the narrative.

Beliefs, Legends and Power Dynamics: Unravelling the Human-Animal Relationship

Beliefs and mythologies often play a significant role in shaping the human-animal relationship. Some animals may be regarded as sacred or imbued with spiritual significance, leading to rituals, ceremonies and practices centred around them. These beliefs can influence the treatment and conservation of certain animal species, as well as the roles animals play in folk narratives. Malagatti writes:

Isn't it said that the crow, the owl, the dog, the donkey, the sheep and the bison are rishi Vishwamitra's creations, while the pigeon, the horse, the cow and animals such as these are rishi Vasishta's creations? It seems the brahmin sage Vasishta could create pure, white, sweet-voiced, sweet-tempered, mild and beautiful animals and birds, and rishi Vishwamitra could create only those with the opposite qualities. (17)

The above lines portray a mythological belief system that ascribes different qualities and characteristics to the creations of different sages, namely Vishwamitra and Vasishta. This mythological narrative reflects and reinforces certain social and cultural beliefs that existed at the time of its creation. It presents a hierarchical distinction between the creations of the two sages and links it to their respective statuses as Brahmins. The passage also implies that a non-Brahmin, represented by Rishi Vishwamitra, could never attain the elevated status of a supreme Rishi like Vasishta, regardless of their penance or achievements. These myths, deeply ingrained in the cultural and social fabric, can perpetuate discriminatory ideas and reinforce social hierarchies. They suggest that social status and caste play a role in determining one's inherent qualities. Malagatti implies that these myths serve as vehicles for perpetuating social hierarchies and biases, including the denial of certain privileges or status based on caste or social background. By examining these myths, the author probably intends to expose the intrinsic discrimination and unfairness woven into the fabric of social systems. His commentary on these myths demonstrates the underlying bias and discriminatory implications they carry. He

poses thought-provoking inquiries regarding the inherent biases and discriminatory notions present within cultural mythologies and the difficulty of eradicating them entirely when he says, "These myths are so deep-rooted that while you think you have uprooted them completely, they will spring up like weeds - such is their nature" (17). Delving into the realm of caste-based discrimination, he further includes a poem, signed as Brahmana Bandaya:

Look, how many castes exist
among animals, birds and plants.
How can there not be caste among men?
Think a little.
Among cows, dogs, donkeys, tigers,
cats, pigs, fox, rats,
deer, monkeys, fish- how many castes are there?
Likewise among men,
Whites, blacks, tribes, harijans,
Chinese, Japanese, Turks, Mongolians,
Aryans, Dravidians, brahmana, shudra...(17)

Through this poem, Malagatti draws critical attention towards the existence of caste divisions in both the natural and human realms. His tone carries an undertone of frustration or doubt as if challenging the reader to consider the injustice and irrationality of perpetuating caste-based discrimination. He writes, "Can a horse mate with a bitch? No! So what is caste after all? It is a group of similar animals which can mate with their females and produce offspring... and human beings together are a caste" (18). The poem employs a concise and thought-provoking approach to unearth the persistence of caste divisions in human society. By drawing parallels with the natural world, it contests the notion that caste hierarchies are natural or justified. By citing this poem, Malagatti urges us to reflect critically on the social constructs that perpetuate discrimination and emphasises the need for introspection and change.

Furthermore, Malagatti puts up a question, "How can a society, which does not let even the creations of Vishwamitra make love naturally, give a chance for human lovers to meet? Which is why

stories like that of Marammadevi and the buffalo have branched out so widely” (25), which raises a provocative dilemma regarding the cultural constraints on natural love. It raises the dilemma of how a society that even curtails the ability of nonhuman creations, such as those attributed to Vishwamitra, to express their natural love can provide an opportunity for human lovers to meet and pursue their relationships freely. It points out to the inconsistencies and inequalities within societal norms, which trace back to the mythological world. The folk legend surrounding Marammadevi² presents a compelling narrative that illustrates the intricate nature of social hierarchies, caste dynamics and the repercussions of defying traditional practices. Folk legends like this one often serve as cautionary tales, reinforcing social norms and emphasising the severe consequences of deviating from them. They reflect the deeply ingrained social structures and beliefs prevalent within a particular community or region, drawing attention to the intricacies of caste-based hierarchies and the significance of caste identity. Thus, it becomes crucial to critically examine such narratives and consider the implications they have on reinforcing or challenging social inequalities and discrimination based on caste. It is important to recognise that such narratives, despite representing certain religious beliefs and historical realities, can also perpetuate and justify discrimination and inequality based on caste. They may reinforce the idea that individuals should adhere to their assigned social roles and restrict their interactions and relationships within the boundaries dictated by the caste system. So, by posing such a question, the author encourages interrogating and opposing the limitations and injustices imposed by caste-based discrimination. The narrative calls for societal advancement towards inclusivity and equality.

In the narrative, revolving around the “he-buffalo” and “she-buffalo” (Malagatti 17), the animals are depicted as having agency and their own desires as they engage in communication and exhibit behaviours such as running and responding to each other. They started a conversation, as the author describes, “The buffalo started moosing, ‘Hyaom...hyaom...’ The he-buffalo inside responded, ‘Yaom...yaom...’ The animals began a conversation” (23). The portrayal of the animals possessing their own intentions and actions

contests the conventional anthropocentric viewpoint that perceives animals as passive entities or solely existing for human use. Moreover, the narrative depicts the social dynamics and cultural significance attributed to these animals. The presence of he-buffaloes is associated with prestige and status for the village heads, symbolising power and dominance. This reflects the way in which animals can be embedded in human systems of hierarchy and social structures, where certain species or individuals within species are valued more than others. Also, it is crucial to mention that there were no he-buffaloes in the author's village. As a result, they had to take their she-buffalo to the neighbouring villages of Kuntoji and Basarkod, when she was on 'heat'. However, the power dynamics come into play, when the man refused their plea to mate their buffalo with his own, stating:

'Hey old woman, didn't we tell you the last time,
we have got the buffalo castrated?
We no longer let him near a she-buffalo.
Didn't we tell you that we use him now for drawing water
from the well?' (23)

This comment revolves around the castration of the buffalo and the shift in its role from mating with she-buffaloes to drawing water from the well. It underscores the control humans exert over animals and the extent to which their lives and functions are manipulated for human benefit. It raises moral concerns regarding the welfare and agency of the animal, as its natural behaviours and reproductive instincts are overridden for human convenience. Castration, in this context, is a physical alteration that limits the buffalo's ability to engage in natural mating behaviours. It restricts reproductive autonomy and modifies its behaviours to fit human requirements. The buffalo becomes a mere tool for labour, serving as a tool for drawing water. The use and exploitation of animals in this manner reveal the power dynamics that exist within human-animal relationships, portraying animals as commodities to meet human demands. From an animal-standpoint criticism, this narrative demands a critical examination of the ethical implications of such actions. It casts doubt on the degree to which humans should

intervene in the natural lives and behaviours of animals and raises concerns about the animal's well-being and quality of life.

Through these depictions, the author aims to emphasise the ethical implications of human-animal relationships. The author expresses apprehensions about the welfare and agency of animals, emphasising the utilisation and exploitation of animals to fulfil human requirements. The autobiography, thus, reflects on the ethical considerations surrounding the control and manipulation of animals, challenging social traditions and cultural practices that may overlook the well-being and autonomy of animals.

Unleashing Agency: Exploring the Dynamics of Caste Prejudice and Animal Subjectivity

Aravind Malagatti's autobiographical narrative becomes truly engrossing as he skilfully incorporates the agency and subjectivity of animals. By portraying animals as active agents with their own desires, intentions, and perspectives, Malagatti undermines the traditional anthropocentric worldview that places humans at the centre and diminishes the agency and significance of nonhuman beings. In the chapter titled "When Handya's hose was slashed", the author describes the greatness of Handya, the dog, as "He was threatening the other dogs and exhibiting his axe-like teeth, as if in challenge: 'Come near her if you dare!'" to protect a female dog from them (52). Later on, the mating scene of Handya with the bitch is described as, "Handya had finally shown his manliness. He was on a flowerbed with his queen, experiencing heaven!" (52). This approach of attributing agency and subjectivity to Handya aligns with the broader objectives of animal studies and literature, as it emphasises the importance of recognising and valuing the inherent worth and experiences of animals. By giving animals a voice and agency in his narrative, Malagatti likely aims to demonstrate the complex interplay between humans and animals, as well as to provoke critical reflection on our treatment and relationship with nonhuman creatures. Engaging with animals as active agents in literature not only enriches the narrative but also stimulates a re-evaluation of our comprehension of animals' capacities, emotions and perspectives. In this profound exploration, Malagatti's narrative

elevates animals from passive objects to active agents, sparking a vital reconsideration of our intricate relationship with the nonhuman world.

In a haunting display of caste-based discrimination, the narrative unfolds with the shocking account of Handya, whose tragic fate epitomises the stark realities of caste dynamics within the village. It unfolds like, "Announcing that it is a dog belonging to the lower castes, he slashed its penis with a sickle...The dog started writhing on the ground. Then people pelted stones at it and finally killed it." This poignant episode exposes the depths of caste prejudice and human cruelty as it depicts the harrowing fate of Handya, a once esteemed hunting dog. It reflects on the caste dynamics prevalent within the village, where even animals are assigned castes and subjected to segregation based on these divisions. The incident presents a distressing portrayal of the intersectionality between caste dynamics and animal cruelty within the village. It brings into view the pervasive caste prejudice that extends beyond human interactions to include animals, emphasising the deep-rooted nature of caste-based segregation and discrimination. The act of mutilating Handya reflected the dehumanising effect of caste prejudice, as the dog is subjected to a brutal attack solely based on its assigned lower caste. This act serves as a stark reminder of the devaluation and degrading treatment that individuals from lower castes face, even extending to animals associated with them. Furthermore, the subsequent stoning and killing of Handya highlight the underlying human cruelty that permeates the village, underscoring the desensitisation towards violence and the normalisation of inflicting harm towards animals, within the social fabric shaped by caste-based discrimination. While the author's stance against speciesism is not explicitly stated, it is possible to see an implicit rejection of speciesist ideology in his scepticism and critique of the social paradoxes related to relationships.

The Acknowledged Referent

In the chapter titled "Dead Sheep and Meat Heaps", Malagatti delves into the human-animal relationship, placing special emphasis

on the interconnectedness between humans and sheep. It depicts a vivid and somewhat graphic description of the activities and experiences surrounding the handling of sheep carcasses and the trade of meat. The description of tasks such as butchering, skinning, and cleaning underscores the physical connection and intimate engagement with the animal's body. This portrayal emphasises the interdependence and reliance on animals for sustenance and livelihood. It showcases the instrumentalisation of animals, where the sheep's carcass and its parts are viewed as commodities, as they are measured, bought and sold. The financial value attached to different parts of the animal emphasises the utilitarian perspective in which animals are seen primarily as sources of meat and profit. However, Malagatti has provided a detailed description of how sheep become meat. He has not tried to make sheep behind the meat heap an 'absent referent.'³ The act of recognising and acknowledging the living being that is turned into meat or animal products is what I have termed as the 'acknowledged referent.' The 'acknowledged referent' could be described as the opposite of the 'absent referent' concept proposed by Carol J. Adams. The acknowledged referent refers to actively recognising and acknowledging the living being that is turned into meat or animal products. It involves recognising that the meat on a plate was once a sentient being with emotions, desires and a capacity to experience suffering. By embracing the acknowledged referent, individuals can develop a deeper sense of empathy and connection to the animals, emphasising the importance of considering the welfare of animals.

In his writings about his personal encounters with dead sheep, Malagatti actively acknowledges the existence of the living being associated with meat heaps. He writes, "I had to pour water while the sheep was being skinned and the inner parts - intestines, liver, heart, lungs, gall bladder, pancreas - were being cleaned" (32). In a separate occurrence, the author recognises the presence of a live animal connected to the meat of a dead sheep when its owner comes to inquire about his lost sheep. The narrative emphasises the substitution of a live animal with a dead body, as the author vividly portrays the presence of dead animal bodies behind meat in his detailed descriptions. Unlike disregarding animals as absent referents, Malagatti's approach involves recognising animals,

specifically sheep, explicitly and acknowledging their physical existence as essential for the production of meat. It becomes evident when he mentions in order for the shop to open, "there had to be a dead animal in the village" (35). The notion expressed by Malagatti aligns with the concept that Adams explores, where she emphasises, "one essential part of meat's meaning is static: One does not eat meat without the death of an animal" (Adams 66). Also, Malagatti describes a rather unconventional and playful interaction with the sheep's intestines during the cleaning and butchering process. The narrative portrays a specific activity that some individuals engaged in, involving poking the intestine with a thorn or small sharp stick. As a result, the contents of the intestine would squirt out, splashing onto the mouth and face of the person sitting opposite. At times, the person pouring water into the intestine to remove the shit would accidentally prick it, causing him to drop the intestine. This would lead to a chase within the hut, where the individuals would spray the shit over the person who had dropped it. The author remarks, "Thus, we played games using the shit and intestines of sheep as our toys" (33).

The narrative indicates that the individuals involved in this activity found amusement in such interactions, using the squirting of the intestinal contents as a form of play. They had become accustomed to the foul odour associated with this work and had seemingly forgotten the smell of fresh air. It suggests that their work environment and experiences had shaped their perception of normalcy and what they considered as play. Also, the descriptions provide sensory details, such as the foul odour, the tactile sensations of handling the intestines, and the visual presence of flies. This presents the embodied experiences of working with animal bodies and the sensory aspects of engaging with them. The author exemplifies the olfactory experience, describing the unpleasant scent of the work environment and the distinct odour associated with the sheep's internal organs. Furthermore, the presence of flies and the need to drive them away underscores the difficulties and discomfort that come with interacting with animals. However, the chapter touches upon ethical considerations and cultural norms surrounding the handling of animals. While there are moments of playfulness and humour involving the use of sheep intestines, the

boundaries of acceptability and appropriateness are also acknowledged, as indicated by Maava, stopping the children from engaging in such activities. After such a vivid description of dead sheep and meat heaps, the author also mentions a shift in his own taste preference. Despite having previously enjoyed non-vegetarian food, he now claims to have lost the taste for it. He acclaims, "But now I have lost taste for non-vegetarian food. And I have not had the time to think why" (35). The author admits not having given much thought as to why this change occurred, leaving room for personal reflection and further exploration of his evolving relationship with food.

Blurring Boundaries: The Fluid Interactions of Humans and Animals

Government Brahmana provides a glimpse into the complex and multifaceted ways in which humans and animals coexist and interact within a specific cultural and environmental setting. The chapter "The black cat did not turn white" portrays a harmonious coexistence between humans and animals, particularly cattle. It emphasises the integration of animals into human activities and experiences and the range of emotions, risks, and embodied connections that come with such interactions. For instance, the author writes, "While my avva and her sisters washed their clothes, we would dive into the same water. Leeches would trouble us because we swam without wearing underwear. Though we feared they would enter our arse-holes, we swam with complete abandon" (29). So, this mention of leeches and the fear of them entering the author's "arse-holes" adds an element of vulnerability and risk to the interaction. This showcases the physical and sensory experiences involved in engaging with animals.

While talking about his experience at the ditches, the author also adds, "It was fun swimming in the shallow waters. Even the cattle swam with us comfortably. A ride on them was sheer joy" (29). As it seems, the ditches filled with gravel serve as a space where both humans and animals interact. The act of swimming with cattle and enjoying a ride on them reflects a form of embodied engagement with animals. It demonstrates the embodied

experiences of humans and their connection to nonhuman animals in the environment. The fact that the cattle are described as swimming alongside the children and providing them with a joyful ride suggests a level of comfort and familiarity between the two species that extends beyond mere utility or exploitation. This indicates that there is a degree of mutual acceptance and integration of animals into the everyday lives of the Dalits in the village. Additionally, it implies a blurring of boundaries between humans and animals, challenging the conventional human-animal dichotomy. The act of swimming together creates a shared experience and accentuates the interconnectedness of different beings within a particular cultural milieu.

Conclusion

The paper has delved into how this autobiography disrupts the inclination to depict animal suffering in an aesthetic manner, opting instead to underscore the ethical and moral aspects of the human-animal relationships depicted within the text. Through his autobiography, he disrupts cultural and societal paradigms that uphold speciesist attitudes, exposing the arbitrary boundaries that humans have placed between themselves and other animals. In addition, the narrative in *Government Brahmana* depicts animals as having their own intentions, actions and agency, challenging the traditional anthropocentric view that animals are passive objects or solely exist for human use or consumption. By doing so, the autobiography invites critical reflection on the treatment of animals, promoting empathy and understanding across different species. By de-aestheticising animal cruelty, the autobiography attempts to take another look at social conventions and confront discriminatory beliefs. It serves as a powerful tool for promoting empathy, understanding and social change.

Endnotes:

1. Richard Ryder was the first to use the term 'speciesism' in his essay "Experiments on Animals" in 1971. The term was subsequently developed and popularised by the Australian philosopher Peter Singer in his book *Animal Liberation*, first published in 1975. Singer defines speciesism as a discriminatory belief system that gives preferential

- treatment to humans solely based on their species membership, disregarding the interests and moral worth of nonhuman animals.
2. The folk legend about Marammadevi depicts a narrative where an untouchable man, pretending to be a brahmin, marries a brahmin girl Maramma. As a result of his deceit, he is cursed to be reborn as a buffalo and ultimately consumed by the goddess Maramma.
 3. Carol J. Adams introduced the concept of the 'absent referent' in her book *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, which refers to the intentional erasure or avoidance of acknowledging the living being that is turned into meat. By removing the connection between the animal and the meat, individuals can ignore the suffering and violence involved in the production of meat products.

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