

Trans-species Empathy in Mitali Perkins' *Tiger Boy*: Animal Ethics and Compassion in Children's Literature*

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Abstract

Trans-species empathy disrupts the traditional human-centered perspectives and represents an expansion of compassion for non-human animals. This paper reads Mitali Perkins' Tiger Boy (2015) as a narrative of trans-species empathy that enhances the symbiotic significance and consciousness among readers. The study employs Suzanne Keen's concept of strategic empathy to show how children's literature uses narrative empathy to transform the outlook of young readers towards animal protection. This paper argues that empathetic responses towards animals can be fostered through fiction and help establish human, animal, and nature relationships as embodied experiences.

Keywords: anthropomorphism, empathy, trans-species empathy, strategic empathy, children's narrative

Introduction

The act of reading involves a significant emotional aspect, as the stories we value and cherish are interwoven with emotions. Basic emotions like happiness or fear are often perceived as uncomplicated. Unlike these emotions, empathy is a complex process that involves both affective and cognitive aspects. This complexity allows readers to engage with the narrative by enabling them to connect with the characters and stories.

The discourse on empathy is extensive, and it is necessary to differentiate the nuances between empathy and related concepts, notably sympathy. Sympathy is defined as "a vicarious emotional reaction based on the apprehension of another's emotional state or situation, which involves feelings of sorrow or concern for the other" (Eisenberg et al. 65). In contrast, empathy involves "identifying the self with the other and the feelings they experience as *if we are them*" (Aizkalna 30). Suzanne Keen traces the etymology of the word empathy to the German term "*Einfühlung*," originally coined by Theodor Lipps to describe "the process of 'feeling one's way into' an art object or another person" ("A theory" 208). English novelist Vernon Lee played a key role in introducing the concept of "*Einfühlung*" to a wider readership in the early twentieth century. According to Lee, the purpose of art is to evoke, intensify, or sustain specific emotional states and positions empathy as central to our collaborative emotional responsiveness. Her theory combined "motor mimicry, memory, and psychological reactions to inanimate objects," arguing that empathy

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plays a crucial role in shaping our “imagination,” “sympathy,” and perceptions of the external world by integrating these with our unified inner experiences (Keen, “A theory” 209).

Spivak’s concept of strategic essentializing parallels with strategic empathizing in literature, as both involve a conscious effort to influence the emotional proximity or distance between the reader and the subjects being portrayed. In fictional narratives, this concept is employed when authors use empathy to create a targeted emotional exchange with a specific audience rather than a general one (Keen, “Strategic Empathizing” 478). She emphasizes how authors capitalize on emotional contagion to influence readers’ responses, particularly in teaching young readers to identify and prioritize culturally significant emotional states (Keen, “A theory” 209). Keen categorizes strategic empathy into three distinct types: “bounded,” “ambassadorial,” and “broadcast strategic empathy” (“A theory” 215). Bounded strategic empathy functions within a “particular in-group,” based on their shared experiences, and cultivates empathy among individuals already acquainted with one another (Keen, “A theory” 224). This type of empathy reinforces group identity and mutual understanding. In contrast, Ambassadorial strategic empathy is directed at selected others outside the in-group. It aims to foster empathy towards the in-group, often to achieve a specific goal or outcome. This form of empathy seeks to bridge gaps between different groups by encouraging understanding and support. Broadcast strategic empathy emphasizes universal vulnerabilities and aspirations to urge all readers to empathize with members of a group. This form of empathy is intended to transcend individual differences, promoting a shared sense of humanity (Keen, “A theory” 215). Though Keen states that there is no evidence that reading literature can produce affective outcomes in readers, philosophers like Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty argue that literature can foster imagination and construct a more empathetic, moral, and compassionate society.

According to John Stephens, “fiction can be regarded as a special site for ideological effects, with a potentially powerful capacity for shaping audience attitudes”, and especially, writing “for children is usually purposeful, its intention being to foster in the child reader a positive appreciation of some socio-cultural values which, it is assumed, are shared by author and audience” (3). Children’s literature from India and the Indian diaspora reflects and offers insights into the social, political, and cultural aspects of Indian society. Contemporary Indian English children’s fiction effectively represents child characters as a complex combination of “tradition and modernity,” where their subjectivity is concomitantly molded by the concepts of individuality and affinity towards the native culture (Superle 57).

Animals have been a part of Indian children’s fiction from the very inception of the genre. Most of these children’s stories misrepresent animals primarily through fantastic anthropomorphism. The emphatic responses to animals in literary works are often solely attributed to anthropomorphism, especially in children’s literature, and this scholarly endeavor scrutinizes and opposes these prevailing arguments through a close reading of Mitali Perkins’ *Tiger Boy* (2015). The cultural context in which the narrative is situated acknowledges the entangled and complex relationship between humans, animals, and the environment. This study demonstrates how fiction works for children by using Keen’s concept to make young readers feel the need to protect and conserve Bengal Royal Tigers from illegal poaching. This paper argues that empathetic responses to animals can be fostered through fiction and not necessarily tinted with anthropomorphism, thus helping young readers understand the importance of extending compassion to the entire spectrum of living beings on earth.

Anthropomorphism and Trans-species Empathy

Anthropomorphism involves “attribution of human characteristics or human behavior to a god, animal, or objects” (Yue et al. 2–3). This process includes attributing human qualities, such as consciousness, complex emotions, and advanced cognitive abilities, to inanimate objects. Hume suggests that anthropomorphism is a global occurrence in which individuals can unconsciously anthropomorphize non-human entities (qtd. in Yue et al. 3). Similarly, Guthrie believed that anthropomorphism is a “cognitive strategy” that helps us to understand the world (qtd. in Yue et al. 3).

Research suggests that anthropomorphism increases our interest, care, and concern for species we perceive to be similar to us. This perceived similarity will, in turn, make people empathetic to non-humans (Batt 184). This practice is often critiqued in the context of fiction, where animal characters are frequently depicted with human traits and emotions. Such anthropomorphic portrayals are particularly common in juvenile fiction, where stories often project human experiences onto animals they do not possess. Frans De Waal critiques this tendency as the “bambification” of animals, “a form of romanticization” that obscures the true nature of animal cognition and behavior (qtd. in Mossner, “Engaging Animals” 166). Eco critic Greg Garrard similarly condemns “crude anthropomorphism,” which he describes as ignorant and insensitive, contrasting it with more nuanced, critical approaches that avoid oversimplifying animal expressions, such as mistaking a dolphin’s facial structure for a human smile (qtd. in Mossner, “Engaging Animals” 166). From an ecocritical and cognitive ethological standpoint, crude anthropomorphism, or the “bambification,” is complicated as it fosters widespread misconceptions about non-human animals, undermining more accurate and respectful understandings of their lives (qtd. in Mossner, “Engaging Animals” 168).

The development of transspecies psychology “— a theory and praxis— in which the interdependence and well-being of humans and animals can be understood in parity, in the language, concepts, and practice of psychology” (Bradshaw and Watkins 4). Identifying the trans-species nature of the psyche invalidates the assumptions that support animal objectification and questions rationales that withhold animal rights (Bradshaw and Watkins 7). “Trans-species psychology” highlights the potential for empathy to extend beyond species boundaries without relying on anthropomorphism. A study by Franklin et al. using fMRI revealed that human participants exhibited similar neural responses while viewing images of suffering humans and dogs, particularly in brain regions associated with empathy. This study indicates that our empathic responses to animals may not stem from projecting human qualities onto them but from a biological capacity to feel empathy across species. These findings suggest that our emotional engagement with animals, whether in real life or texts, may be rooted in a genuine, cross-species emotional connection rather than crude anthropomorphism (qtd. in Mossner, *Affective Ecologies* 95).

Usage of Strategic Empathy in *Tiger Boy*

Approximately 1,100 villages are located within the Sundarbans region, with 62 directly adjacent to the jungle. These communities rely heavily on forest resources such as fish, crab, and honey for their livelihoods. They often live in poverty due to inadequate infrastructure, healthcare, education, and transportation. The region is also highly vulnerable to climate change, facing threats like floods, cyclones, sea-level rise, and coastline erosion. Mitali Perkins’ *Tiger Boy* (2015) portrays life in one of such villages in Sunderbans by exploring the struggles faced by a young boy, Neel, and his sister, Rupa, as they strive to protect a tiger cub who has escaped from a reserve in

Sunderbans. The novel delves into the complex themes of climate change, environmental degradation, class structure, and gender discrimination.

In narrative fiction, character identification is an important element often associated with fostering empathy in readers. Various facets of character portrayal, including their names, descriptions, actions, and roles within the plot, significantly impact readers' capacity to identify with the characters, and this identification aids in establishing an empathetic connection (Keen, "A theory" 216). This concept is effectively demonstrated in the novel, where characters are carefully crafted to reflect the harsh realities of life in the Sunderbans. Though the novel is written primarily for children, the author attempts to use her world-making power by incorporating characters from different ages, genders, and social positions to reach the widest audience possible through broadcast character identification. Children like Neel and Ajay are depicted as joyful and closely connected to their environment. Viju and Rupa are presented as children devoid of the happiness of childhood, where both of them are forced to discontinue their education, the former due to poverty and the latter due to gender inequities. Neel's father vocally opposes the destruction of Sundari trees. Thus, he emerges as a figure of environmental activism and ethical commitment. Similarly, Viju's father migrates to Chennai after a cyclone to work due to poverty, which points to the systemic issues of inadequate infrastructure, health care, and educational opportunities on the island. The character of Gupta symbolizes greed as he cunningly acquires land from villagers, illustrating the encroachment on local resources and the power dynamics at play.

Neel's father is initially portrayed as an environmental activist who strongly condemns the cutting of Sundari trees. Due to dire economic situations, he is compelled to craft furniture from the trees he sought to protect. His father's sudden transformation creates a deep internal conflict in Neel's mind, which is further intensified when he finds that his father plans to hunt the cub for Gupta. This disillusionment challenges the lessons of integrity and environmental stewardship his father taught him. Neel and Rupa are determined to save the tiger from Gupta, even if it means opposing their father. Ultimately, Neel's father understands the gravity of his actions and redeems himself by confronting Gupta and his men to save Neel and the tiger cub. This transformation reinforces themes of redemption and moral awakening, along with eliciting a strong emotional response from readers. All the characters in the novel reflect "common human experience, feelings, hopes and vulnerabilities" (Keen, "Strategic Empathizing" 488).

Another formal aspect frequently associated with fostering empathy in narrative fiction is the narrative situation, which includes elements like point of view and perspective. According to Suzanne Keen, the reader's empathetic responses are greatly determined by the narrative situation, the way the story is mediated between the author and reader through the narrator's position, their relationship to the characters, and the representation of the characters' consciousness ("A theory" 216). The narrator shapes the reader's understanding of the story's moral landscape. The narrator offers commentary on the actions of each character. For example, the narrator states, "*Gupta's taken over our island, and now he wants our tigers, too? Someone has to stop him!*" (Perkins 18). This direct remark persuades the reader to view Gupta's actions as unjust. Readers are encouraged to sympathize with the islanders and view the antagonist's actions as morally wrong through this narrative approach.

Adult fiction frequently relies on the reader's emotional memory and subtle narrative cues to evoke empathy. Contrary to this, children's fiction must consider the cognitive development of its audience. To ensure that the young readers understand and engage with the text, children's literature, including *Tiger Boy*, commonly uses a more direct narrative style to portray emotions and actions. *Tiger Boy* uses illustrations that help readers relate to the characters and settings.

These visual elements enhance the reader's experience by providing additional context and emotional cues, encouraging them to foster empathy and understanding without relying on prior emotional knowledge.

The writer urges the reader to empathetically connect with the protagonist, who recognizes an animal's pain and associated emotions of compassion (Malecki 372). Neel's intrusive thoughts about the death of the cub, whether by humans or other animals, create a sense of mental agony that further deepens his emotional experience. This mental agony is illustrated by his nightmare about "a pack of vultures tearing up the cub's body to shreds" (Perkins 49). The nightmare aggravates his anxiety about locating the tiger cub before it falls into the hands of Gupta. Neel's unwavering determination to protect the tiger exemplifies his empathetic connection with the cub, which is captured in his poignant thoughts: "*Stay alive, baby. Your mother wants you home. That's where you belong—safe and sound on your island*" (Perkins 50). Through the portrayal of Neel's internal dialogues and feelings, readers are encouraged to empathize not only with human characters but also with animals. Thus, this narrative technique can be seen as an indirect route to trans-species empathy, thereby broadening their capacity for compassion and understanding across species boundaries.

***Tiger Boy* as a Narrative of Trans-species Empathy**

Tiger Boy is set in a village in Sundarbans, a critical habitat for the Royal Bengal tiger and the world's largest delta. The mangrove ecosystems within the Sundarbans are particularly unique and ecologically significant. It supports a variety of species, including the estuarine crocodile, the Irrawaddy dolphin, and the water monitor lizard. This setting is integral to the story, reflecting the complex interdependence between the environment, animals, and human inhabitants of the region.

The reserve's hungry, thin female tigers gave birth so rarely nowadays. When three cubs were born ten weeks ago, rangers visited all fifty or so of the inhabited islands to share the good news. Grateful villagers offered extra sweets and flowers to their statues of Bon Bibi, the protector of the Sunderbans. When word came that one of the babies had died, the whole island mourned (Perkins 15).

The distinctive ritual of celebrating the birth of tigers and mourning their death foregrounds the cultural ethos of the islanders that seeks to protect and celebrate the nature around them. This practice illustrates islander's perception of animals as an integral part of their existence, thereby challenging human exceptionalism.

The escalating instances of human-tiger interactions resulting in mutual aggression between humans and wildlife, particularly tigers, represent a significant challenge in the Sunderbans. Perkins effectively captures the poaching practices existing in the Sunderbans through Gupta, who represents dominance and human exceptionalism. His status as an outsider becomes significant in the novel, where he considers the rituals frivolous. Gupta exploits the poor living conditions of the islanders by making them cut Sundari trees for him to make furniture and find the tiger cub immediately to sell on the black market. By making the islanders against the ideals they stand for, Gupta is presented as the epitome of avarice.

Perkins indicates the significance of tigers in the Sunderbans by choosing them as important characters in the narrative. According to Sobel, children are inherently attracted to baby animals (7). The choice of the cub as the main character is a conscious effort to foster empathy in young children based on their instincts and natural emotional connectedness. Perkins deviates from the traditional use of anthropomorphized narratives that often serve to evoke empathy in readers. The novel presents the tiger cub with a sense of amusement, awe, and admiration;

Her legs were short, her belly low to the ground. Two round ears, edged with white fur, twitched forward. Her golden nose quivered, tipped by a semicircle of black fur and two angled nostrils. Thin, white whiskers shimmered in the light, and a pink tongue poked out from above her white chin. A dazzling pattern of small black stripes was etched across her white-and-golden fur. (Perkins 76)

This admiration for the tiger cub reverberates among the young readers rather than creating a sense of fear towards the tigers, who are often portrayed as man-eaters. Thus, the description provides a base for bonding with nature.

The novel challenges the anthropocentric notion that animals exist solely for human use by portraying animals as sentient beings with intrinsic value, deserving respect and care. The narrative resists the simplification of animal experiences and avoids projecting human emotions onto the tiger cub. Neel finds a resemblance between his fear of being physically removed from his island without his loved ones and the comforts of his home in a foreign land, and the tiger cub is lost in a strange land with human predators waiting to kill. His fear is evident through Neel's reflection, "She was far from her mother! And so alone!" (Perkins 90). Neel's empathy for the tiger emerges from a recognition that all living beings have the right to live freely and safely in their natural habitat.

Similarly, the novel portrays the pain and anguish of the tigress who lost her child. Rangers try to calm the mother tiger to avoid the situation of her escaping the reserve in order to search for her cub and killing numerous people during her search for her lost cub. The overwhelming emotions and intense fear experienced by the mother are explained by one of the rangers, "And how her mother wants her! She almost escaped again yesterday, but we managed to keep her inside without having to tranquilize her. She's been prowling tonight on the other side of the fence, with her other close by" (Perkins 105). Instead of anthropomorphism, it can be seen as the universality of the motherly feelings experienced by animals and humans alike to protect and care for their young ones. These instances underscore a universal sensation of loss and familial attachment that transcends species boundaries.

Likewise, the Tiger cub also exhibits its urge to return to its mother by answering to its mother's loud growl with a soft mew. Perkins renders the moment of reunion brilliantly: "With a little bound and no backwards look, Sundari raced toward her mother and brother ... The three creatures became one ecstatic of golden, white, and black fur, cavorting in the moonlight" (Perkins 109). Through this, the author evokes empathy for the mother tiger and the cub based on our natural ability to feel empathy for other species, which is rooted in genuine cross-species association. Neel's empathy extends beyond mere sympathy; it is an acknowledgement of the tiger's autonomy and the broader ethical implications of human actions on non-human life. By doing so, the novel critiques the commodification of wildlife and encourages a more compassionate, ecologically sensitive understanding of the interdependence between humans and animals.

Conclusion

Martha Nussbaum argues that literature plays a crucial role in education and moral development, offering insights into human lives, choices, emotions, and social connections (qtd. in Lindhé 26). Similarly, *Tiger Boy* seeks to cultivate empathy towards all living beings on earth, not through anthropomorphism but by targeting our natural capacity to empathize with others. The narrative employs broadcast strategic empathy, targeting young readers to develop an understanding of the value of all life forms. The novel critiques exploitative human behaviors, particularly through the character of Gupta, who plans to kill a tiger cub for profit. By opposing the commodification of

wildlife, the novel advocates for a worldview that appreciates the natural world for its intrinsic value rather than its utility to humans. Perkins's narrative critically engages with themes of conservation and animal rights. It encourages young readers to reconsider their relationships with non-human life to minimize harm to individual animals while protecting ecosystems and biodiversity. This approach aligns with Mossner's assertion that literature can help readers understand "what it is like to experience the world through a different set of senses," reminding us that all "conscious, thinking, and feeling beings" are worthy of respect ("Engaging Animals" 176). Children's literature like *Tiger Boy* advocates a shared sense of humanity among young readers to develop a more respectful and compassionate attitude towards all living beings, thus contributing to a broader ethical discourse on environmental conservation.

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