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THE EFFECTS OF STARBUCK'S EXCESSIVE GREED: AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF *MOBY-DICK*

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Abstract: Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, a whaling story at the surface, wrenches out from its confines the deep-seated dilemma in human–nature relationship. Like all the other characters, Starbuck, the ship's first mate, has a loosely bound but matter–of–fact association to Moby Dick, the white whale. His attitude towards Moby Dick is one of what he holds as a general outlook towards a whale. Unlike Captain Ahab, he is not obsessed with that particular animal. He commoditizes it, and thereby takes an anthropocentric stance as he sets himself on a mission to hunt down the great beast. The questions, however, remain whether his approach towards the whale(s) is justifiable and whether the counterstrike that he, together with his shipmates, faces in the end of the novel has any connection to such an approach or not. This paper intends to address such issues from the perspective of animal studies.

Keywords: Animal studies, anthropocentrism, ecocritical, human-nature relationship, Starbuck

Introduction

The reaction of Moby Dick to Starbuck's attitude towards it, in Melville's *Moby-Dick*, depends on a covert human-animal relationship. Starbuck, the *Pequod's* first mate, holds an important position on the ship, and engages himself thoroughly in whaling, the sole purpose of the voyage. He is a professional whale hunter and, unlike Captain Ahab, is concerned only with whales in general, not with any particular whale. He intends to make the highest possible profit out of whaling and does not show any sympathy towards the whales. Moreover, Starbuck is a sharp contrast to Ahab in his attitude towards the whales. Though sometimes the existing scholarships see Starbuck as a rational character, the question remains, however, if he becomes reasonable to the whales, why does he face the horrible end? How does he treat the whales? Does the idea of anthropocentrism control him? Or does he maintain an animal friendly attitude? This paper addresses these issues in the light of animal studies.

Discussion

Anthropocentrism foregrounds human beings over nature in every possible aspect. Greg Garrard (2004) defines the term as the "system of beliefs and practices that favors humans over other organisms" (p. 183). These "other organisms" include animals, among others. In an anthropocentric view, nature and/or animals get the object position, and human beings

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stay in the subject position. Within this critical framework, nature has only "instrumental value" (Garrard, 2004, p. 183), because human beings judge it from the stance of their own betterment—monetary gain, to be precise. Anthropocentricism does not see any "intrinsic value" (Garrard, 2004, p. 183) of nature. This observation permits the anthropocentric people to exploit natural resources according to their own will. They do not think that nature has its own value, and that animals, as an integral part of nature, are "morally equal with humans" and "have interests and preferences" (Deane-Drummond, 2004, p. 55).This notion is in opposition to an ecocentric outlook, which foregrounds nature. In *Moby-Dick* Starbuck, the first mate of the ship, holds an anthropocentric position, to some extent. As an efficient whale hunter he tries to hunt as many whales as he can, and longs for the money out of the sale of whales. Neither does he think of the harm that he is doing to the marine ecosystem, nor does he foresee the horrible result that is waiting for him. Because of having their own agency, animals can take revenge on their exploiters. For this reason, the "[e]cophilosophers often criticise the arrogance of anthropocentrism, sometimes using the Ancient Greek term 'hubris' for this fatal flaw of overweening self-righteousness and willful misuse of power"(Garrard, 2004, p. 179). Based on this conception, one notices that Starbuck, as a human being, believes to possess the dominating power over the whales, and therefore kills them indiscriminately. Though, unlike Captain Ahab, he is not prejudiced against Moby Dick, and even tries to stop the captain from his illogical pursuit to find and kill that particular white whale, he does not have an ecocentric or animal friendly position. It is Ishmael, the narrator, if any, who upholds such a stand.

In this paper we seek to evaluate Starbuck's relationship with Moby Dick in the light of animal studies, an offshoot of environmentalism. Pramod K. Nayar (2014) thinks that "animal studies reveals the anthropocentrism that positions the animal as an oppositional and inferior other to the human" (p. 111). It tries to explore the relationship between animals and humans, and advocates that animals are worthy of ethical understanding. According to Margo DeMello (2012), animal studies is:

> [A]n interdisciplinary field that explores the spaces that animals occupy in human social and cultural worlds and the interactions humans have with them. Central to this field is an exploration of the ways in which animal lives intersect with human societies. (p. 4).

Human superiority to animal or nature is a product of anthropocentric thinking, and animal studies is strictly in opposition to it. People, like Captain Ahab or Starbuck, think that they are not part of nature and that there is no special bond between humans and nature. This sort of thinking leads them to exploit nature according to their own will but such an attitude to nature brings about their own downfall. Yet, to Ingold, the reality is that "humans are as much a part of nature as are animals" (as cited in DeMello, 2012, p. 34). Moreover, human beings have specific responsibilities towards animals. Starbuck does not subscribe to any of the above-mentioned ideas. Moreover, he cannot avoid the responsibility of human cruelty towards the sperm whales. Instead of getting a fixed remuneration, the hunters get a share of the ship's overall profit, and to increase the amount, they try to hunt as many whales as they can. Like the other shipmates, he takes part in the brutal killing—only for profit. The following description of a hunting scene further clarifies Starbuck's attitude towards the sperm whales:

> [D]arted dart after dart into the flying fish; at the word of command, the boat alternately sterning out of the way of the whale's horrible wallow, and then ranging up for another fling. The red tide now poured from all sides of the monster like brooks down a hill. His tormented body rolled not in brine but in blood, which bubbled and seethed for furlongs behind in their wake. (Melville, 2004, p. 232).

By being harsh towards the animals, Starbuck embraces an anti-ecological position, and gradually invites his own doom. He does not think that to live peacefully on earth humans should keep a balance between human values and the welfare of animals and plants in ecology. Donald A. Crosby (2002), in this respect, argues:

> First and most obvious is the demand that we strive to be ecologically responsible. We must abandon the delusion that nonliving and living parts of nature are there simply to be utilized by us, in any way that we see fit. We must exhibit by our actions, both individually and collectively, a reverence for ecosystems, species, and particular life-forms. (p. 143).

However, for Starbuck the whales are significant only because they constitute a source of money. He disavows their intrinsic value and finds their instrumental value important, where the "[e]nvironmental philosophers, including biocentrists, ecocentrists, and ecofeminists, call for a shift away from anthropocentric theories to theories that emphasize the intrinsic value of nonhuman life, or that of nature in general" (Fairbanks, 2010, p. 80). We think, because of holding such a belief he becomes the victim of Moby Dick's revenge since nature has a strong command on human beings. On the one hand, it furnishes the lives of human beings in many ways and, on the other hand, it can be hostile to human beings, in response to the mistreatment to it. According to Margo DeMello (2012) "[i]f an animal is not treated with respect, that animal's spirit can seek vengeance against those who mistreated it" (p. 67). As a human being Starbuck should have obeyed the agency that animals have. Instead, he utilizes them to the last point of usability. He not only objectifies the whales but also marginalizes them. Besides, animals are exploited and harmed not only in their lifetime, as Kalof and Fitzgerald (2003) mention, their "dead bodies" are also exploited. One notices that after killing the whales, Starbuck, along with other crew, dissects the dead bodies in order to extract meat and oil. They do not show the least sympathy towards them even after their death. One may argue that he is killing the whales for his livelihood. Yet, the question remains to what extent the cruelty can be permissible.

True, Starbuck does not treat Moby Dick as ruthlessly as Captain Ahab does. Central to Starbuck's concern is the economic value of the whales. For him, the killing of whales is acceptable only when it is essential and when the situation is under control. He is aware of the risks and vulnerabilities in whaling. As Ishmael reports,

> Wherefore he [Starbuck] had no fancy for lowering for whales after sun-down; nor for persisting in fighting a fish that too much persisted in fighting him. For, thought Starbuck, I am here in this critical ocean to kill whales for my living, and not to be killed by them for theirs; and that hundreds of men had been so killed Starbuck well knew. What doom was his own father's? Where, in the bottomless deeps, could he find the torn limbs of his brother? (Melville, 2004, pp. 102-103)

Starbuck is guided by a sound judgment. He becomes the chief mate of the ship because of his judicious reasoning. He establishes a strong authority on the ship, second

only to Captain Ahab's. Sometimes even Captain Ahab respects Starbuck's judgment and apparently guards him throughout the chase. While the other mates and harpooners have to take part in the hunting expeditions, the captain allows Starbuck to stay safe on the deck. When, occasionally, the latter leads such operations, he remains kind and passionate towards the subservient harpooners. They, in response, remain entirely obedient to him. While Captain Ahab cows them by fright, Starbuck makes them obedient by being sympathetic and careful to them. He never engages them in any activities that may endanger their lives. Starbuck even gives them orders in a friendly manner because

> Starbuck was no crusader after perils; in him courage was not a sentiment; but a thing simply useful to him, and always at hand upon all mortally practical occasions. Besides, he thought, perhaps, that in this business of whaling, courage was one of the great staple outfits of the ship, like her beef and her bread, and not to be foolishly wasted. (Melville, 2004, p. 102).

One may discover an overt conflict between Starbuck and Captain Ahab throughout the novel. This is, in fact, a conflict between an "anthropocentric economic ethic" (Guo, 2009, p. 136) and an "anti-ecological-consciousness" (Yan, 2011, p. 167). Starbuck posits himself against Captain Ahab who demonstrates excessive courage, and thus accelerates his own and other shipmates' destruction. Starbuck is always careful to materialize the ship owners' demand. He resists everything that goes against their interest. For example, in the chapter "Ahab and Starbuck in the Cabin", Starbuck finds a severe leakage in the ship. He requests Captain Ahab to stop the voyage in order to examine the problem because he is afraid that the leakage will "waste in one day more oil than [they] may make good in a year" (Melville, 2004, p. 361). He is concerned because this trouble might cause a great loss for the owners. Captain Ahab, in response, asserts, "the only real owner of anything is its commander" (Melville, 2004, p. 362), and continues his quest. Nevertheless, Starbuck does not deviate from his economic interest. He knows that this particular whale does not contain more oil than the other sperm whales, and that Moby Dick spoils almost all of its assailants. He does not see any necessity to hunt it, and endanger the ship and its crew. He even becomes disloyal to his captain—though he knows that his life will be at risk—and declares, "Captain Ahab, if it fairly comes in the way of the business we follow; but I came here to hunt whales, not my commander's vengeance" (Melville, 2004, p. 139).

Such a standpoint posits him in sharp contrast to Captain Ahab, who changes the main goal of the ship, ignoring the owners' interest. Ahab forces all the crew to chase and kill Moby Dick but fails to win Starbuck over. Starbuck not only refuses to work according to Captain Ahab's motivation, but also tries to convince him to cease the quest. Yet, he fails to persuade Ahab. At one point Starbuck attempts to detain Ahab or even kill him in order to stop the mad quest, but he fails. He finds Ahab sleeping, and points a loaded weapon at him; however he realizes that he is unable to use the weapon because of some inevitable reasons. He feels that a strange force prevents him from killing the captain, and that "[t]he yet leveled musket shook like a drunkard's arm against the panel; Starbuck seemed wrestling with an angel; but turning from the door, he placed the death-tube in its rack, and left the place" (Melville, 2004, p. 388). He subscribes to religious beliefs and knows well that to seek vengeance against an animal is profane, and tries to use his faith to convince Captain Ahab. Eventually, he finds his attempt weak against Ahab's strong monomania.

Starbuck's conflict with Captain Ahab continues to the end of the novel—though finally Ahab succeeds in controlling him, and both of them accept the same fate. Starbuck protests Ahab's notion of vengeance. To him, Ahab's pursuit is worthless and offensive—"'Vengeance on a dumb brute!' cried Starbuck, 'that simply smote thee from blindest instinct! Madness!'"(Melville, 2004, p. 139). However, we think that Starbuck's address is debatable, because Moby Dick is a precious sea animal—one of God's valued creatures and an indispensable part of nature. By calling it both dumb and brute, he ignores the proper respect that it deserves. Though Starbuck is rational towards Moby Dick, his "reason and sensibility is based on anthropocentrism, for in his eyes, Moby Dick is not any more than a dumb beast" (Guo, 2009, p. 140). He—unlike Captain Ahab—does not have any monomania towards the whale, yet at the same time, he does not express any ecofriendly attitude either. He finds that the whales are only for the use of human beings, and defies the idea that they are important parts of nature as human beings are.

Animals are precious creatures of God as human beings are. One may even argue that they are superior to humans in some cases. For example, animals are self-dependent for their food—albeit with some exceptions. Humans have no right to abuse animals, they can, however, use the animals by showing due respect, because "these living possessions must be treated with appropriate care" (Preece & Fraser, 2000, p. 246). Hence, Starbuck's indiscriminate killing spree is not acceptable. Fairbanks (2010) believes that "[t]raditional, predominantly anthropocentric views such as Christianity or Greek philosophy, conjoined with a consumerist model of the good life, have conditioned the attitudes, values, and beliefs of human beings, with disastrous consequences for the environment" (p. 80). We think, this "consequence" affects human beings most, and in *Moby-Dick* Starbuck is an appropriate example of such a horrible consequence.

Conclusion

Starbuck, one of the thousands of whalers, commoditizes Moby Dick. To him, neither does this particular whale have any exceptional value, nor does it generate hatred. In the same way, Moby Dick does not have any particular complaint against him. As for Starbuck, Moby Dick's attack has more than one implication. It is a challenge against his indiscriminate exploitation of the species. It is also a protest against his "hidden flaws of the anthropocentric economical ethical thought" (Guo, 2009, p. 142). Starbuck sustains both the anthropocentric perception and the "anti-ecological-consciousness" (Yan, 2011, p. 167), and these two notions are responsible for his doom. In the name of making profit he destroys the sperm whales, and consequently, annihilates the ecological balance. His conduct towards the whales posits him against the animals, and transforms him into an object of revenge. While Captain Ahab chases a particular white whale and becomes a victim of its vengeance, Starbuck hunts several whales and sees them as commodity. His observation is anthropomorphically biased, for which he deserves punishment and he gets it when Moby Dick attacks the *Pequod* and kills all the shipmates—except Ishmael. Starbuck dies, in a sense, for maintaining an anthropocentric point of view, which is in conflict with the thinking of animal studies.

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