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# Domesticating the “Other”: An Analysis of the Appropriation of Non-Humans by Humanistic Discourse in Herge’s *The Adventures of Tintin*

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## Abstract:

The humanistic narrative of Herge’s *The Adventures of Tintin* suppresses a politics of domination and domestication of the “Other” and this politics is a common thread which applies both in the context of the presentation of western civilization’s relation with non-western culture and human character’s relation with the non-human ones in the comic series. By analysis of some important non-human characters from *The Adventures of Tintin*, I shall explore the constant human attempt to bring the non-human within the humanistic discourse that is to domesticate them. Through such analytic procedure, I shall also try to figure out how a few animal characters resist the process of being humanized and the consequent harsh treatment that is meted out to them.

**Keywords:** non-humans, domestication, pets, animal rights, anthropocentrism

## The inter-racial “Other”:

In order to analyze the inter-species relationship between human and animals as depicted in *The Adventures of Tintin*, a brief look at the inter-racial relationship between the western white race and the aboriginal non-white race as depicted in the comic series, needs to be taken into consideration. As regarding the relation between white and non-white races, the relation between the human characters and the animals in the series mainly involve a question of the “Other”.

Apparently what predominates in Herge’s *The Adventures of Tintin* series are humanistic values. As Jean-Marie Apostolides (2009) vindicates in her book *The Metamorphoses of Tintin, Or, Tintin for Adults*, the humanistic values in Tintin series have a strong basis in Christianity and cartoonist Herge’s boy scouts ideology. Tintin appears in the series as the epitome of humanitarian values who unflinchingly holds on to his philanthropic ideals irrespective of race and culture. For example in *Prisoners of the Sun* Tintin saves a native Peruvian fruit seller boy from the racist abuse of two Spanish-origin (that is of dominant race) ruffians (Herge, 1949/2014, p. 18-19). I do not question the humanitarian earnestness of Tintin’s character and activities. What needs to be questioned is the fact that humanism is used to disguise the issue of domestication of the “Other” which is a recurrent theme in the series in the context of the relationship between western and non-western civilization. The western culture is presented as having a civilizing mission and though the naivety of the non-western culture is preferred over the profiteering unscrupulous section of the western society, the “Otherness” of the non-west is sharply defined throughout the series. In fact, much of the comic appeal of the series is a result of the foregrounding of the “Otherness” of the non-western culture in contrast to the western culture

which is projected as the standard. The point-of-view of the implied reader is definitely that of the western one and even the non-western reader is tempted to read from the western point-of-view in order to enjoy maximum comic appeal. Thus comedy becomes the tool which is used to create an effect of universal humanism along with its universal sympathizers and is used to hide the constant ridiculing of the non-western culture from reader's view. Whichever culture asserts its uniqueness is projected as "Other" and hence the source of comedy and the intensity of the ridicule is somewhat camouflaged by the lukewarm patronization of the west.

Another point which needs to be mentioned here is that a large part of the Tintin series centre around exploration of non-western geographical territories and cultures like the depiction of the Tibetan Himalayas and life in the secluded Buddhist monastery in *Tintin in Tibet* (Herge, 1960/2012, p.47-52); or for example the depiction of the Inca religion and civilization in *Prisoners of the Sun* (Herge, 1949/2014, p.47-61). Following Michel Foucault's notions regarding the interconnection between knowledge and power, it can be said that the desire projected in the series for gathering more and more knowledge of the non-western culture as well as the propensity towards generalizations and categorizations is actually connected to the western desire for controlling non-west. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault comments that "it is this fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection" (Foucault, 1979, p. 187)

So it can be said that *The Adventures of Tintin* series contain a desire for controlling and domesticating the "Other"ness of non-western cultures by a side-by-side use of two processes of ridiculing and exploring.

### **The non-human "Other":**

So it can be said that the classical humanism which is at the very heart of Tintin's humanitarian activities is biased and inherently flawed in dealing with the question of "Other" when it comes to the context of inter-cultural relationships. It hides a desire for controlling and domesticating the "Other". It is also the case that this humanism which is at the heart of the relation between human and animals in *The Adventures of Tintin*, also contain the same propensity for taming the "Other". In this context the Tintin series is very significant as it can be analyzed to throw light on the problematical issue of distinction between pet animals and wild animals. The comic series can be also be analyzed to reveal how human language is closely connected to the anthropocentric view of animals as depicted in the series.

### **Question of pet: the representation of Snowy**

The relation between Tintin and Snowy are meant to represent the ideal bonding between human and the animal. Jean-Marie Apostolides tries to locate Tintin-Snowy relationship within an ideal Christian master-servant framework. While Tintin represents the higher human spirituality, Snowy represents the base animal physicality and both need to be dependent on one another in order to attain the ideal living. But as again, as Apostolides rightly pointed out the "similarities and differences that unite Tintin and Snowy likewise generate between human and animal species a relationship not, strictly speaking, biological but much more poetic." (Apostolides, 2009, p.51) This unreality, or rather, poeticism of this relationship is very significant because it throws light on the general issue of domestication of animals. The idealized relationship between the human and the animal cannot escape the anthropocentric framework that bounds the relation. Snowy is continuously endowed with human attributes and it is this inability to respect the "Other"ness of the animal and the incessant desire to appropriate the "Other"ness of the animal within the humanistic discourse that is at the center of making "pets". The term "pets" implies a denial of

individuality of the species and an affirmation of a relation on the basis of ownership. The legal theoretician and animal rights activist Gary L. Francione comments in his blog regarding domestication of animals that we “regard the dogs who live with us as refugees of sorts, and although we enjoy caring for them, it is clear that humans have no business continuing to bring these creatures into a world in which they simply do not fit.” (Francione, 2012, para.9)

A very interesting point regarding the issue of making “pets” in context of *The Adventures of Tintin* is the interconnection between bestowing human attributes to non-humans and that of ownership. It is very clear that nearly all the tamed animals in the Tintin series which are property of particular owners, generally take over the characteristics of their owners. Though it may be the fact that the way a pet animal is trained affect their behaviors, their behavior is used in the Tintin series only to emphasize the characteristics of their owners and never the animal without its relation to its owner exists in the series (with some exception in the presentation of Snowy). That is why the super-aggressiveness of the dogs of villainous characters are foregrounded to emphasize the viciousness of their owners in spite of the animals themselves being completely oblivious to the mechanism of human vice. For example, natural aggressiveness of the tamed cheetah becomes a means to portray the whimsical aggressiveness of its owner Mohammad Ben Kalish Ezab in *The Red Sea Sharks* (Herge, 1958/2012a, p.31). Snowy is allowed to retain some sort of animality and hence he, in his little fits of disobedience to Tintin, provides his basic alienation to the humanistic discourse of Tintin. The simple reason is because Snowy is not a human being and that is why he needs not act like one. But then, Tintin’s humanistic discourse appropriates Snowy’s non-human discourse because after all, Tintin is Snowy’s owner. That is why when domesticated Snowy snobs other street-dogs, the perspective is not that of the dog itself. On a general level Snowy’s looking down on other street-dogs reflect actually the perspective of human pet owners for whom the pet animal’s status as human property automatically endows them certain anthropocentric virtues like civility and gentleness and hence, superior to those animals which are not human property. Going back to the inter-racial context, it may also be the fact that Snowy’s snobbery may actually reflect the implicit sense of racial superiority and patronization embedded in humanistic activities of Tintin himself, and hence in the viewpoint of cartoonist Herge.

The idealized relation between Tintin and Snowy, though not condemnable in itself, it sets a particular anthropocentric paradigm by which other animals in the series are judged. As will be seen later the human character’s reaction to animals in *The Adventures of Tintin* depend upon how much of the animal’s “Other”ness can be domesticated and how much of the animal can be dragged into the humanistic discourse of the narratives. The very fact that human language is put in Snowy’s mouth implies a human need for interpreting the mind of the animal in terms of human thinking. It is this constant process of interpretation in human terms which is the pre-condition for human love for their “pets”. Even though language sometimes is used to convey Snowy’s physical urges like hunger and thirst, the fact that language is intimately connected to rationality--- rationality which is the very connotation of being a human, indicates the assertion and imposition of rationality-oriented anthropocentrism on the non-rational animal. J. M. Coetzee in his 1999 novella *The Lives of Animals* criticized the centrality of reason in human discourse in the following manner.

“For seen from the outside, from being a man who is alien to it, reason is simply a vast tautology. Of course reason will validate reason as the first principle of Universe--- what else should it do? Dethrone itself? Reasoning systems as systems of totality, do not have that power” (Coetzee, 2001, p.123)

Again in *Tintin in Tibet* Snowy has the vision of an angel guardian imaged in the shape of a dog warning Snowy not to drink alcohol in order to prevent becoming a human, while on other hand another dog-imagined Satanic angel tempting him to commit the vice to whom Snowy ultimately obeys (Herge, 1960/2012b, p.19). Now, this image can be a subversion the boundary between human and non-human norms. But the fact that the framework is of the much known Christian morality concerning vice versus virtue, and that issue is about drinking alcohol which is a noted Christian vice in itself, it is a case of the subjection of animal to an quintessentially human paradigm. The situation creates a comic effect by an implicit ridicule of the animal's alienation from the human Christian discourse. So the need of the time is to de-center the centrality of reason and to try to locate a new paradigm outside the framework of humanity where human as a particular species will get no discursive favor and will co-exist with other species as just another species with no assumed superiority over others. This is the very essence of post-humanism propounded by Cary Wolfe. For Wolfe "the philosophical and theoretical frameworks used by humanism to try to make good on those commitments reproduce the very kind of normative subjectivity—a specific concept of the human—that grounds discrimination against nonhuman animals and the disabled in the first place." (Wolfe, 2010, p.xvi)<sup>i</sup>

### **The Friendly Apes:**

The animal which, after dog, ranks really high in Herge's list of friendly animals based on their anthropomorphic similarity to humans, are apes. Science has confirmed apes as precursor to modern human beings and this is a probable reason why human is so keen on finding human attributes like higher reason and emotions in a species which otherwise has many physical similarities with human. Even when Barbara Smuts, in the abstract her article "Encounters With Animal Minds" states that in "my (her) relationships with baboons, dogs and other animals, I have encountered the presence in another of something resembling a human 'self'" (Smuts, 2001, p.293), the word "human" should not be taken lightly. Her main focus is to gather first-hand knowledge about animal behaviors aimed at better inter-communicability between human and non-human species and thus, to penetrate the uncharted "Other"ness of non-human species and to bring them within the human paradigm. So, the "human normative subjectivity" (Wolfe, 2010, p.xvi) as stated by Wolfe, remains. In *The Adventures of Tintin* also the trend of humanizing the apes is recurrently witnessed. Two episodes where this trend most prominently occurs are *The Black Island* and *Tintin in Tibet*.

*The Black Island* follows the twofold process of first emphasizing the impenetrable "Other"ness of the species through demonization of the animal and then domestication of the same through humanization of the species. In the first part an aura of monstrosity and evil is created by using some gothic paraphernalia like rumors of alleged killing by the monster and the secluded gothic castle where the alleged monster dwells. *The Black Island* is a true adventure episode in all senses and here Tintin as the epitome of humanity engages in a gradual exploration of the mystery and it is here that the process of domestication starts. At the end of the episode through a burlesque turn of events, the violent nature of the animal is not only completely domesticated but also the animal is made to look pathetic with a leg broken (Herge, 1938/2013b, p.61). Even readers discover that animal has a human name that is "Ranko" and naming an animal is generally one of the commonest form of anthropomorphism. The episode only provides this much knowledge that ape was initially a "pet" of the villains who exploited his natural violent nature for their own villainous ends and at the end of the episode it ended up being a good "pet" within the walls of an European zoo. So the perspective of the animal is completely subdued by

the humanistic narrative of human morality and nowhere is the true perspective of the animal visible without human mediations.

In *Tintin in Tibet* Herge brings back the cryptid creature named Yeti rumored to having been seen in the Himalayan ranges. Just as in *The Black Island*, here also Herge creates an aura of fear and cruelty centering around the figure of Yeti. It is an interesting fact that the rumors about alleged monstrosity of the Yeti are perpetuated by the illiterate native Nepali Sherpas. In contrast to that Captain Haddock represents the western skepticism whose sense of superiority is linked to the privileged status given to scientific rationalism in the western school of thinking and again it is rationality which is the principal attribute of being a human. Tintin on the other hand represents another privileged current in western humanism --- here a Christian humanism centering around love, affection and duty which that is exclusively human virtues. Now in *Tintin in Tibet* the presentation of the non-human species that is the Yeti is curious combination of both the discourses of rationalism and humanism. The physical picture that we have of Yeti in *Tintin in Tibet* (Herge, 1960/2012b, p.61) is basically gorilla-like and can be traced to the long tradition of intermixture between scientific knowledge and public imagination concerning humanoid apes in post-Darwinian phase, King Kong being a famous fictitious product of this tradition. To this picture which is loosely an image based on scientific knowledge is added human emotions as a part of the humanistic narrative of *Tintin in Tibet*. Though the brute physical strength and agility of a non-human species is retained in the Yeti, the rumored cruelty is replaced by human emotion reflected in the love for the human character named Chang Chong-Chen. In this way the "Other"ness of the non-human species is again domesticated and dragged within the humanistic narrative of Tintin. It should be noted that the Yeti's story of love and care for Chang is voiced by human Chang himself in retrospective and thus it becomes a case of a human giving a humanistic voice to the non-human. The last frame of the episode creates an effect of mild pathos by endowing the Yeti for the first time the subjective position, privileged so long only for human characters, by making the animal look lingeringly as the march of humanity returns back to their own place (Herge, 1960/2012b, p.62). This privileged subjective position, I think, is very much linked to the so-long presentation of the animal in the light of having human emotions. It is the Yeti's possession of human emotions which finally entitles it to the subjective position in the last frame. Or the image may present Herge's fictitious creature's secret anthropocentric desire to be fully included within the humanistic discourse. Now the question is what if the Yeti, as is not improbable for a carnivorous animal, have really kept Chang for killing and eating his flesh. Then also would it have been endowed the privileged subjective position as in the last frame of *Tintin in Tibet*?

### **The parrot and the llama: points of resistance**

Bianca Castafiore's gifted parrot to Captain Haddock in *The Castafiore Emerald* and the llama in *Prisoners of the Sun* provide a point of resistance to the ongoing process of humanization of non-humans. The bird is not only physically engaged but also is subjected to constant expectations of satisfying humans, one of the expectations being to satisfactorily reproduce human language. The parrot in *The Castafiore Emerald*, unknowingly subverts human desire for imposing human language on non-humans by mimicking parts of heard human language on situations totally unsuitable for those words. The animal thus becomes a reflector whereby human language is reflected and a gap is exposed between signifiers and signifieds, between signs and context. Thus by both acting as the medium for subverting imposed human language and by aggressively revolting against signs of human affection, examples being the bite on Captain Haddock's finger(

Herge, 1963/2011, p.10), the bird strongly refuses to be a human pet in spite of being physically empowered by human.

Another example is the llama in *Prisoners of the Sun*. The animal throws liquid from its mouth at any sign of both human affection and physical abuse. Its refusal to being dragged within human interactive discourse is so strong, that Captain Haddock develops a personal rivalry with the animal in the course of the adventure. His initial warming up to the llama, as happens with most humans when interacting with their pets, is similar to interacting with a child which is a human but a powerless and non-rational human. So, the very affection of a human for a non-human pet is essentially linked to the so-called pet's powerlessness and dependence on human. The picture of Captain Haddock's initial warming up to the llama (Herge, 1949/2014, p-2) is not without an air of ridiculing the animal. When his advance is aggressively refuted by the llama who, at the end of the day, is only a property of human, develops a personal enmity with the animal and takes revenge on the llama at the very end of *Prisoners of the Sun* (Herge, 1949/2014, p-62). The revenge in spite of the gloss of comedy, is also meant to teach the non-human species stubbornly refusing to be dragged into human interactive discourse, its proper inferior status. Of all the animals in *The Adventures of Tintin*, the llama in spite of being exploited by human for human purpose that is for carrying loads, most strongly refuses to be a human pet. It has an indomitable non-human will, if not power.

An interesting fact is that just as in *The Adventures of Tintin* comedy covers up the domination and domestication of the non-western culture by western culture, in the context of domination of non-human species by human also comedy acts as a weapon. It needs to be noticed that like most animals in *The Adventures of Tintin*, Herge's sketching of the parrot and the llama has an obvious anthropocentric angle. By subtle portrayal of human gestures like smiling and frowning on the faces of the animals, the animals are even more projected in the light of human beings. The interaction thus occurs between a proper human and a non-human with imposed human features on it. Thus the perspective which is emphasized is obviously that of the proper human. The very absurdity of imposing human characteristics on non-human species create a ridiculous effect and in such situations of comic interaction between human and non-human like that between the llama and Captain Haddock in *Prisoners of the Sun*, the comic effect evolves out of what happens to the human character where the non-human character is simply used as foil to derive the comic effect. Thus the comedy with the central emphasis on human perspective becomes the cover under which the non-human is subjected to mal-treatment and physical abuse without conveying any shock to the readers.

### **Conclusion:**

It is true that the importance of *The Adventures of Tintin* cannot be denied in its promotion of a universal humanism, in its depiction of a delightful utopian world where all the dark and unknown aspects of the world lose their real potency. Here repeated accidents do not cause any serious physical injury; here a solar eclipse can save the lives of human as in *Prisoners of the Sun* (Herge, 1949/2014, p.58-59); here even villains, after death, are not denied the favor of being escorted by comically drawn demonic angels as in *The Broken Ear* (Herge, 1937/2013a, p.61). This constant subjection of the "Other" to mild ridicule and comedy in order to fit within the humanistic narrative of *The Adventures of Tintin*, though delightful, is not without its potential danger. The humanistic narrative suppresses the species-politics which humans as a species continuously engages in and appropriates complex issues like commodification of animals. In the same way racial and cultural politics is also suppressed by the discourse of universal humanism. The problem in *The Adventures of Tintin* pertains to the question of the relation between human

and non-human in general. A paradigm centering round human specifications has emerged since the beginning of human civilization which tries to incorporate non-human within the same paradigm and which presents those non-human which do not conform to this paradigm as the eternal “Other” and thus the enemy of human species. Violence on such non-human thus becomes automatically justified like the shooting down of the crocodiles in *Prisoners of the Sun* (Herge, 1949/2014, p.38-39).

This brings us to the larger debate regarding the sentimental appeal on question of treatment of animals versus securing unconditional rights for the animals themselves. The sentimental appeal to do with least cruelty on animals as possible which many animal welfare organizations practice, is never free of the species-politics with which is humanism is intimately connected. Such sentimental appeal for mercy on animals stays away from challenging the basic foundation of animal exploitation that is using non-humans for human purposes. It is linked to seeing the animals as an inferior sympathy-inciting species over which human as a superior species ought to feel pity for.<sup>ii</sup> Instead a more pluralistic paradigm needs to emerge where the centrality of human specifications will be de-centered and non-humans should have equal rights as humans. This view is based upon seeing human as one among the innumerable species on earth without any added superiority.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> R.G.Frey in his book *Interests and Rights: The Case Against Animals* used the same premise of animal’s essential difference from human paradigm that is their incapability of reason, emotions and desire, in stripping animals of their rights.

<sup>ii</sup> The word “animal” itself contains human propensity to incorporate all non-human species, irrespective of the individuality of the species, within one category termed “animal”. In the creation of this clear binary between human and animals which overlooks the peculiarities of the numerous species grouped under the label “animal”, it is again the human characteristics being used as the standard for categorization which is to be noticed.

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