

Relations

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*Human Beings' Moral Relations with Other Animals
and the Natural Environment*

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Duality of Abuse and Care

Empathy in Sara Gruen's *Water for Elephants*

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ABSTRACT

In an era of Anthropocene, habitat loss and species extinction due to anthropogenic factors, and the upsurge in animal exploitation force us to reconsider the “animal question” and relationships between humans and animals. All forms of animal abuse violate the subjectivity of the animals by othering them as objects who are mercilessly exploited. Purportedly influenced by the social consciousness of the moral rights of animals and the animal advocacy movement, Sara Gruen’s novel “Water for Elephants” (2006), exposes the horrible reality of animals being mistreated for entertainment in the circus industry through a fictitious description of the events in the Benzini Brothers’ Shows. The framework of this research is based on two arguments: the crucial link between human insensitivity or empathy erosion and animal abuse; and the significance of empathy, in particular, “entangled empathy”, in acknowledging animals as moral subjects, taking care of them, and creating the harmonious human-animal relationship in the novel.

Keywords: animal abuse; anthropocentrism; empathy; empathy erosion; entangled empathy; ethics; fiction; human cruelty; moral agency; suffering.

1. INTRODUCTION

Animals are exploited for different purposes throughout the world and entertainment is one of them (Maher *et al.* 2017). The circus is a type of regulated animal entertainment that is an essential component of mainstream western civilization. Criticism is directed not just at particular instances of animal mistreatment but also at the governing concept that permits the use of animals for entertainment (Schwalm 2007). The ideology of speciesism or our prejudicial attitude towards other animals is

one of the reasons behind the exploitation of animals and their suffering (Sunstein and Nussbaum 2004). Coined by Richard Ryder in the 1970s and later popularized by Peter Singer, the term “speciesism” is occasionally used to describe the ethically dubious notion that only humans should be given moral consideration; this form of discrimination nevertheless has to be addressed (Dhont and Hodson 2019). Humans’ condescending attitude towards the animals reinscribes or reinforces the ideology of speciesism. Whenever we think of circus, we are reminded of the seemingly inseparable worlds of humans and animals where people become so absorbed in entertainment that they do not pay any heed to the horrifying reality of exploiting animals, which is primarily caused by people’s speciesist attitudes toward animals.

Hanna Sentenac’s article (2014) revealed several instances of animal exploitation inside the circus. Despite being seriously ill, 3-year-old Asian elephant Kenny was forced to perform by Ringling Bros. circus in 1998. Kenny subsequently passed away. The next year another young elephant named Benjamin died of heart attack when his trainer began prodding Benjamin with a bull hook as the elephant continued to swim against his trainer’s instructions. The inhuman treatment of animals at the Universal Soul circus is also revealed in 2013 by a whistle blower (“5 Abuse Cases”). Thousands of animals are transported across the nation in claustrophobic trailers, held chained in filthy enclosures, and made to perform difficult acts under threat of punishment despite the horrific suffering they face in the circus (PETA). In the late 20th century, the circus business developed over time into a popular form of entertainment, but the ongoing exploitation of animals for amusement remained concealed behind the glitz and glamour of the performances. With the development of modern transportation, the circus gained tremendous commercial success and the required level of popularity that significantly contributed to the growth of the American entertainment sector (Nemec 2020). To meet the demands of the consumers the highly capitalized contemporary circuses deployed massive human and animal workforces, contemporary technology, and managerial strategies and traveled via wagon, trail, riverboat, and railway (Nance 2013).

Animal celebrities have often led to the growth of the American circus industry. The usual discourse of the entertainment industry promotes the captivity of wild animals as an ecologically significant endeavor that is meant to lessen the distinctions between humans and animals (Bell 2015). It never discusses the actual deplorable condition and the experiences of the elephants, the so-called celebrity of the circus. The illustration of the “genial circus elephant” exemplifies how caged

animals are depicted as willing entertainers (Nance 2013; Barraclough 2014). But with the emergence of animal welfare groups, this discourse of glorifying captive wild animals is subverted in the narratives of the circus industry. To train them to exhibit unnatural behaviors, animals in the circus industry are frequently chained, imprisoned in tiny cages, and tormented with a variety of instruments. They do not act out on purpose until they are forced to, and since they are kept apart from their family for training and commercial reasons, they are subjected to physical and mental torture. Animal rights activists protest against this serious issue of animal suffering in every sector of the society.

Not only does animal suffering concern social activists, but it has also gained significant attention in the literary world (Holečková 2022). Literary texts always present a cogent series of questions about human-animal relations where empathy has a very important role to play. The issue of animal exploitation and the pro-animal perspectives in literary representation of animal ethics may always serve as a counter argument to the ideology of speciesism (McKay 2004). Fictional texts like *Black Beauty* by Anna Sewell (1877) and *Beautiful Joe* (1893) by Margaret Marshall Saunders are recognized for conveying to readers the urgency of preventing animal cruelty and suffering (Malecki *et al.* 2016). Philosophers like Peter Singer, Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, and Stephen Mulhall have expressed a strong interest in J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) (Beauchamp and Frey 2011). These fictional texts have demonstrated the influence of animals on literary imagination and the reader-impacting moral implications of literary works addressing animal concerns. The American author Sara Gruen has also addressed the concerns about animal exploitation and suffering in her novel *Water for Elephants* (2006) (Triana 2013; Lifu 2022). The novel is moralistic in nature because it clearly deals with various forms of animal abuse through vivid images of animal suffering and implicitly condemns animal abuse through the symbolic depiction of the animals being freed from their cages or rather from all types of abuse at the novel's conclusion. Being set in America during the Great Depression of the 1930s (Pfening 1976), it deftly captures the growth and collapse of the American circus through a fictitious description of the happenings in the Benzini Brothers' show as recounted by Jacob Jankowski, the protagonist of the novel. Drawing heavily from the traveling circuses in and around America, the fictional text sets out to investigate the activities of circus owners to expose the crooked practices that lie beneath the pomp and splendor of the magnificent performances and the horrifying reality of the abused animals in the name of entertainment (Triana 2013). Animals are subjected to

abhorrent suffering and oppression in the entertainment industry, like the circus in the novel, employing effective control and violent methods. The deliberate exploitation of animals generates ethical concerns in this novel, which critiques the anthropocentric worldview by underlining the violation of the animals' subjectivity. The literary portrayal of animal brutality and suffering compels readers to participate in an empathic engagement with the animals in the novel (Keen 2006; Bernaerts *et al.* 2014). The fictional characters in the novel can be divided into two categories those who lack empathy or do not display any empathy at all in their behaviouristic attitudes toward animals, and those who uphold an empathetic relationship with the captivated animals or accomplish their ethical obligations to them.

This study applies Simon Baron Cohen's concept of "empathy erosion" and Lori Gruen's concept of "entangled empathy" to investigate the issue of animal abuse and find out the solutions to this issue through an alternative ethic in the novel *Water for Elephants* (2006). This study is predicated on two arguments: the first is that animal exploitation and suffering are primarily caused by our lack of empathy or complete erosion of empathy, and the second is that empathy, or more specifically, "entangled empathy", enables people to connect with animals more deeply and improve their situation. How "empathy" and "empathy erosion" operate simultaneously in the novel is a question that this research aims to problematize by analysing the fictional representation of human-animal relationships in the novel.

2. ANIMAL ETHICS AND ITS APPROACHES

Animal ethics, which gained popularity in the 1970s, is concerned with the normative aspects of the interaction between humans and animals, specifically, the moral status of non-human animals (Armstrong and Botzler 2003; Aaltola 2012). Kant defends our indirect obligation to animals by pointing out that treating them cruelly can affect how we treat other people. He contends that since responsibility is a result of reciprocity among rational beings, humans have no obligation to animals (Beauchamp and Frey 2011). The utilitarian philosophy of animal ethics, which addresses the relevance of sentience in animal ethics, has refuted the concept that cognitive abilities serve as the yardstick of moral considerability: "the question is not, Can they *reason*? nor, Can they *talk*? but, Can they *suffer*?" (Bentham 2014, 500). Bentham's well-known statement endorsing the utilitarian viewpoint initiates a serious discussion over the

moral standing of animals. For utilitarians, sentience becomes the main criterion of moral standing of animals which specifically emphasizes pain and suffering of animals that they share with the human beings (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2003). Suffering becomes a tool of defining the moral status of animals: “Originally defined in relation to physical pain but more recently also defined to include mourning, grief, and other painful emotions, suffering has long been the primary focus for many writers on animal rights, from Jeremy Bentham to Peter Singer” (Baker 2019, 4).

By placing vulnerability at the centre of the contentious debate over the moral position of animals, it opens up the possibility of undermining the anthropocentric understanding of the world. With the publication of Peter Singer’s book *Animal Liberation* (1975), the animal liberation movement gained prominence in response to animal exploitation, and its practical objectives are to put an end to both human oppression and animal misery (Gruen and Weil 2012). In the 1970s, when Singer and others promoted reason that is wholly separated from emotions in cases of moral concern for other animals, the connection between sentimentality and animal advocacy was temporarily lost (Aaltola 2018). The separation of emotion from reason and the preference for the latter as the foundation for animal ethics are two issues with this mainstream philosophical viewpoint on animal ethics that have drawn criticism from feminist theorists whose ideology moved from an ethics of justice to an ethics of care by developing a praxis built on compassion, care and empathy (Gruen and Weil 2012; Gruen 2015; Donovan 2016; Gruen 2017). To build a society that values greater respect, compassion, and equality, empathic development is urgently needed. Shortly after Singer’s defence of reason, Mary Midgely tried to clarify the role of emotion in comprehending moral concern for animals and stressed the interplay between reason and emotion. She made the argument that emotions, particularly empathy, paved the way for non-human animals to have moral importance (Aaltola 2018). In addition to Midgely, Nussbaum, and the feminist care tradition researchers, other frameworks are also employed to suggest a new animal ethics, including the importance of emotions (Aaltola 2018). Animals are valued by feminist care approach of animal ethics in all of their heterogeneity, including the unequal power dynamics in human-animal relationships where animals are primarily employed as resources (Donovan and Adams 2007; Gruen 2015). One must meet the world with compassion regardless of the skin color, sex, or species of other individuals if emotion is what defines a moral human being (Aaltola 2018). Animal philosophy needs to prioritize emotions as a legitimate and essential component of

“moral agency” (Pluhar 1988, 34) since failing to do so raises the likelihood that animal philosophy will revert to the logic of dominance. Compassion, sympathy, and empathy are frequently discussed within the care tradition of animal ethics. Empathy identifies connection with and knowledge of the circumstances of the other, as opposed to sympathy, which has a more detached perspective toward the other. Lori Gruen’s idea of “entangled empathy”, which she uses to approach animals and formulate animal ethics, is crucial in this movement of legitimizing emotions for recognizing the moral agency of animals (Gruen 2015). Lack of empathy or erosion of empathy may be detrimental factors in human-animal relationships. Cohen argues that humans’ “empathy erosion” significantly affects how we treat others, considering them more like objects than subjects (Baron-Cohen 2011; Aaltola 2013; Franklin 2013).

3. “EMPATHY EROSION” AND/IN ANIMAL ABUSE

Martin Buber’s notion of the “I-it” pattern of thought, in which one connects with a person or object in order to exploit them or it for some reason, might be related to Simon Baron-Cohen’s concept of “empathy erosion” (Baron-Cohen 2011, 11). In many societies and individuals’ interactions with non-human animals, encountering empathy erosion has been a regular occurrence. It is very clear today how modern animal industries treat animals as objects of control, manipulation, and exploitation while their experiences are no longer taken into consideration and their suffering has very little significance (Aaltola 2013). In the novel *Water for Elephants* (2006), it is plausible to interpret August’s cruel treatment of animals, animal slaughter, the circus owner Uncle Al’s decision of keeping the animals in a helpless state for financial gain, and the audience’s enjoyment of cruelty in a performance as actions resulting from “empathy erosion” and objectification of animals.

By trapping the lions, horses, and Rosie, the elephant in confined spaces where they are unable to stand up straight or even turn around, their fundamental freedom of movement is denied while still being expected to be in good condition for the performance. They are exploited in every way imaginable, and when they are no longer profitable to the owners, they are mercilessly slain. In the novel, the cruel slaughtering of the aged and frail horses might be seen as the deeds that result from the erosion of empathy. Pete executes August’s orders by slitting the throats of a deteriorating grey horse, an undernourished bay horse, and so on. Pete begins by killing a grey horse, who is screaming as blood shoots

six feet from a huge hole in its neck. The bay horse, who is chained next to the grey horse, is so afraid that its nostrils are dilated, and its muzzle is pointed straight up in the air. Pete watches the horses until they are dead, then he wipes his nose and goes back to his work (Gruen 2011, 178-179). The captivated animals are not properly fed either and for instance, August forces Jacob to feed the cats rotten meat (Gruen 2011). The hard decisions are always taken by Uncle A1 at the cost of the lives of animals multiple times throughout the novel. Uncle A1 has decided to take over the circus after Fox Brothers' failure, but unless the Fox Brothers company lowers the price, the exotic or ring stock animals are not even fed or watered. Uncle A1's empathy has been turned off when he treats the animals as objects of manipulation for material wealth (Baron-Cohen 2011).

The novel very skilfully depicts the hostile relationship between August and the animals. To be able to empathize with others, one must go through two stages of empathy: recognition and response. To develop empathy, one must be able to relate to the emotions of others and react to them appropriately (Baron-Cohen 2011, 18). But August throughout the novel consistently prioritizes his own needs over those of the animals, suggesting that his empathy is completely turned off. When Rosie, the elephant refuses to comply with his demands, August becomes utterly furious and cruelly torments her with a bull hook until her eyes become narrow and her gigantic ears flatten on her head (Gruen 2011, 176). August's inhuman treatment of animals, specifically Rosie, in the novel grabs the attention of the readers. By identifying some of the symptoms, such as people's inability to manage their anger, Baron-Cohen (2011) in his book *Zero Degrees of Empathy* demonstrates how to recognize zero degrees of empathy in individuals (143). During the performance of Rosie and Marlena, August constantly thrashes the elephant with the bull hook making Rosie agitated and escape the show by running aimlessly. Rosie's disobedience to August's commands incites August's anger to the extreme and his madness is beyond comprehension when he begins to beat her while yelling aggressively:

This sent the rest of the animals into a panic – the chimps screeched, the cats roared, and the zebras yelped [...]. When she processed to squealing and shrieking, many of the men turned away, unable to take any more [...]. The remaining men found Rosie lying on her side, quivering, her feet still chained to a stake. (Gruen 2011, 279-280)

August's outbursts of anger, such as the elephant-thrashing episode, are just one indication of his inability to control his anger and what Baron-

Cohen refers to as his “zero degree of empathy”. The history of the circus also contains several accounts of actual instances of elephant exploitation. Animals’ sensitive skin is frequently lacerated by being struck with sharpened bull hooks; for example, a Ringling Brothers document depicts an elephant being hooked during a performance and leaking blood all over the floor. Although the circus owners and the trainers directly abuse the animals via physical torment, the spectators or consumers unknowingly take part in the abuse by objectifying the animals and finding enjoyment in the show where nature is restricted and cruelty is so openly displayed:

The audience loves it. Each time Rosie trots ahead of August and stops, they roar with laughter. And each time August approaches, red-faced and waving his bull hook, they explode with glee. Finally, about three-quarters of the way around, Rosie curls her trunk in the air and takes off at a run, leaving a series of thunderous farts in her wake as she barrels towards the back end of the tent. (Gruen 2011, 207)

The elephant Rosie is involved in a relationship of gazing with the Spectators in which the spectator or the gazer retains power and Rosie is relegated to becoming the spectacle or the other. Cruelty in a performance, or, to put it more precisely, the tools used to intimidate the animals are not always deployed. The novel’s depiction of elephant performances expertly illustrates cruelty as a performance and cruelty in the performance, two of the most glaring aspects of animal acts (Carmeli 1997). Rosie’s acts in the circus can be defined as cruelty as a performance where members of the audience find pleasure in the forced animal acts. Basically, the audience takes on the role of the main abusers of animals who behave like “psychopaths” and according to Baron-Cohen, behaving like psychopaths is a type of zero degree of empathy: “Sometimes the mindless aggression is not triggered by a perceived threat but by the need to dominate, to get what one wants, a complete detachment from another person’s feelings, and possibly even some pleasure at seeing someone else suffer” (Baron-Cohen 2011, 51). The elephant poses with her trunk curled in the air while wearing a man’s hat on her head, following August’s orders, and the crowd laughs as they are much delighted. Standing next to her and brandishing a bull hook, August grins like a proud father (Gruen 2011, 205). Separated from the natural habitat, Rosie is forced to do some human behaviours and entertain the spectators. The elephant’s typical behaviour of taking off and replacing her hat is trained by humans and performatively textualized exclusively to exercise human control over nature. In the live performances of the circus, the postures and movements of the animals, such as horses and elephants, are nothing but human constructions and purposeful human behaviour. This anthropomorphic motif

is an important strategy used by humans to approach and tame animal bodies and the trainer's presence continuously reminds the spectators of the forced and controlled behaviour of animals (Carmeli 1997). Similarly, the violent events such as butchering horses, hitting Rosie with a bull hook, feeding big Cats dead meat, etc. evoke animal abuse and the pain that animals go through.

"If sentient animals can feel pain as we do, then their suffering is morally relevant. Dehumanisation and repressed empathy are closely linked to cruel behaviour towards animals" (Reeves 2004, 35). The perpetrators of animal abuse treat the animals cruelly as a result of their zero degree of empathy (Baron-Cohen 2011). The fictional depiction of overt and covert violence perpetrated against animals by humans can be categorized within the broad spectrum of animal abuse occurring throughout the world and calls for an immediate solution of universal consideration that would create a space for empathy and respect in place of the dualistic notions of objectification and dominance.

4. ENTANGLED EMPATHY IN ANIMAL CARE

Entangled Empathy is an experiential process involving a blend of emotion and cognition in which we recognize we are in relationships with others and are called upon to be responsive and responsible in these relationships by attending to another's needs, interests, desires, vulnerabilities, hopes, and sensitivities. (Gruen 2015, 18)

The novel *Water for Elephants* (2006) illustrates how the characters like Jacob, Marlena and Kinko engage with an empathic engagement with the nonhuman animals. It also produces the feeling of entangled empathy in the readers. The fictional narratives can also suggest morally important insights about the treatment and consideration of the nonhuman animals and this novel also asserts that argument.

While August's treatment towards Rosie is always inhuman, Marlena and Jacob share a close bonding with the elephant from the very beginning onwards by acknowledging Rosie as an individual animal. Their first encounter with Rosie begins with feeding her various foodstuffs and recognizing Rosie's smiling face. Naming the elephant and interpreting the elephant's behaviour in "human" terms immediately remind us of the process of anthropomorphization which is severely critiqued as "non-scientific" but Gruen questions this problematic notion of science by indicating the role of empathy in understanding different patterns of behaviour (Gruen 2015).

Jacob, the novel's narrator, pays close attention to the elephant's minute expressions of terror as a result of August's constant torture with the bull hook, which include narrowing her eyes and flattening her ears against her head. The process of entangled empathy begins as soon as Jacob pays attention to the elephant's species-typical behaviour and interacts with Rosie in an empathic direction, setting the bull hook aside and addressing him with high reverence.

Entangled empathy is a way for oneself to perceive and to connect with a specific other in their particular circumstance, and to recognize and assess one's place in reference to the other. This is a central skill for being in ethical relations. (Gruen 2015, 70)

In response to Jacob's behaviour the elephant's behaviour also changes, which is evident when she swings her trunk across the ground in front of her while fanning her ears like gigantic leaves and smiling (Gruen 2011).

When August brutally beats Rosie, the novel shows how Marlana and Jacob experience intense pain and suffering. The narrator also demonstrates how they share a close bond with the elephant by responding to her traumatic experiences. The entire narrative encourages readers to empathize with the fictional characters. Being responsive in a relationship is the first step in developing entangled empathy, which is an experiential process that is concerned with the relationships with the other. When Rosie lifts her trunk, yells, and scampers sideways after the ruthless torture of August, Marlana chokes back a sob and Jacob reaches for her hand (Gruen 2011). Gruen's concept of "entangled empathy" criticizes the abstract or more generalizing ethical reasoning by focusing on subjective experiences of individual animals (Larsen 2020).

Being responsible for the wellbeing of the animals is also an important criterion of a relationship of entangled empathy in human-animal relations. When Jacob enters the circus' menagerie, he notices the miserable conditions of the polar bear, camels, and hyenas who are confined in cages away from their natural habitats and feels an empathetic response well up within of him. When Jacob takes care of an individual animal's "needs, interests, desires, vulnerabilities, hopes, and sensitivities", his initial feeling of empathy for the trapped animals transforms into a sense of responsibility: "One of the chimps needs a cuddle, so I let him ride on my hip as I make my way around the tent [...]. The chimp flashes a toothy smile and kisses me on the cheek" (Gruen 2011, 185).

Even after repeatedly torturing Rosie with a bull hook, August is unable to prepare her for the circus performance, and Jacob and Marlana struggle to see Rosie suffer at the hands of August's cruel treatment until

Jacob learns the method of training Rosie. In order to build a caring view and engage in an experiencing process that is a combination of emotion and cognition, Jacob's "entangled empathy" for the elephant goes beyond just feeling what others are feeling. Greg can only get Rosie to follow his orders when he speaks to him in Polish, and knowing this crucial fact enables Jacob to better understand Rosie's wants and interests in their relationship and to be both responsive and responsible for them. August, Marlana, Rosie, and Jacob spend considerable time preparing Rosie's performance before the *matinée*, when Jacob begins serving as August's personal Polish Coach for training the elephant (Gruen 2011, 287).

Despite having witnessed a great deal of animal brutality, suffering, and death throughout his life, Jacob, the novel's veterinarian, never fails to empathise with the animal victims because of "empathetic overload" or "empathetic distance". Jacob becomes known as a veterinary doctor in the circus after his identification of the main cause of Silver Star's lameness, the star performer of the liberty act or the main attraction of the circus. From the moment he becomes aware of the horse's illness until the time of his demise, he takes care of his well-being. Jacob makes sure the injured horse has enough room so that his wellbeing is not jeopardised, and he monitors every little aspect of his behaviour:

I can't see Silver Star, which means he must be lying down. That's both good and bad: good, because it keeps the weight off his feet, and bad because it means he's in enough pain he doesn't want to stand. (Gruen 2011, 105)

Marlana recognizes the horses as unique individuals and she cares for them as if they are members of her own family. Even though Jacob cares for these horses on a daily basis by cleaning their stalls, restocking their water and food buckets, and grooming them for the show, those "horses are an extension of Marlana" (Gruen 2011, 255-256). While it was extremely difficult for Jacob and Marlana to end Silver Star's life when there was little possibility of him surviving, their choice to do so reflects their "ethical agency" and shows how they strive to reformulate their entanglements via more meaningful and conscientious choices and acts (Gruen 2015). Marlana says laying a hand on his neck: "In that case, promise me it will be quick. I don't want him to suffer" (Gruen 2011, 125).

Even Walter or Kinko's relationship with Queenie, the dog, the oldest domesticated animal species, the one who remains most entangled with humanity, can be characterized by what Gruen calls "entangled empathy". Challenging the hierarchical boundaries between human and non-human animals, a form of interspecies kinship is developed between

Walter and Queenie as Queenie lives in a close and constant relationship with Walter, sharing the same space in the train. The dog is always addressed either as Queenie or the girl and the dog acts by responding to clapping sound of Walter, “When we finally come to a stop, he jumps to the ground, turns, and claps twice. Queenie leaps into his arms and they disappear” (Gruen 2011, 105-106). The narrator effectively analyses Queenie’s behaviours to explain a dog’s experiences or to depict a dog’s point of view. Her joy, anger, pain, fear is well narrativized through examining her species typical behaviours and some instances from the novel would clarify the argument further.

When Jacob is accommodated a place in Walter and Queenie’s room, he is not welcome by Queenie at all but with due time Jacob begins to share a close bond with Queenie, “Since Queenie is on my lap anyway, I stroke her. It’s the first time she’s let me touch her. Her body is warm, her hair wiry” (Gruen 2011, 198). Here, Jacob’s careful attention to Queenie’s features of the body and specificities of her behaviour influences him to engage with Queenie emotionally. When Jacob enters the room, “Queenie raises her head, sees that it’s me, and sets it back on her Paws” (Gruen 2011, 242). When Walter instructs Queenie to lick Jacob’s face, Queenie follows Walter’s instructions up until Jacob steps in to defend himself and urges him to stop since Queenie’s tongue roots in his ear and she dances on his face (Gruen 2011, 198). Here, the entangled empathy as an alternative methodology to the traditional ethical theories has worked out properly by acknowledging “the particularity of others, their experiences, and the significance of those experiences” (Debes 2017, 430).

Walter acts as a moral agent by carrying out all the ethical responsibilities of Queenie, his companion animal throughout:

Because the lives of domesticated animals are so vulnerably and completely in our human hands, we realize that we have great ethical responsibility towards them, and that our ethical responsibility towards these beings must necessarily be even greater than that towards wild animals which exist relatively independently apart from us human everyday life. (Larsen 2020, 81)

When Queenie recovers from diarrhea, Walter teaches her how to walk on her hindlegs with utmost care. Once Queenie disappears, Walter is inconsolable, and it is evident from his frantic search for her that Queenie is an integral part of his life and he is only concerned with her welfare: “Walter yells from the corner. ‘Nothing’s okay! Queenie was all I had. You understand that?’ His voice drops to whimper. ‘She was all I had’” (Gruen 2011, 262).

Various factors, such as attention to the specific behaviour of the fellow species, emotional engagement with them, moral awareness, and responsibility for the well-being of the animals, are evaluated in Jacob's relationship with the majority of the circus animals, Marlena's relationship with the horses, and Kinko's relationship with Queenie. These factors collectively lead to a morally charged and multi-layered notion of empathy that can be characterised as "entangled empathy" (Gruen 2015; Aaltola 2018).

5. CONCLUSION

The following points can be derived from the central arguments of the paper:

1. Concerns about the increasing prevalence of animal exploitation have been raised in both animal ethics and literary representations of human-animal relationships. *Water for Elephants* (2006) is one such novel that delves deeply into the issue of animal abuse and finds out the possible causes of human cruelty, with "empathy erosion" in humans being one of them. The novel's depiction of the circus animals under the custody of their trainers and the owner supports the argument that humans' coercive behaviour toward animals is connected to their probable lack of empathy or erosion of empathy.
2. Empathy proves as an important tool in nurturing the harmonious human-animal relationships and reminds us of our ethical agency or in particular, moral responsibility toward animals. Through empathetic interactions with the animals, the intentional animal exploitation by humans or human-animal conflict can be altered. One such interactional process is Gruen's "entangled empathy", which has been proved to be one of the most useful theories in analyzing the novel's characters' capacity for responsiveness and responsibility in their relationships with the captivated and victimized animals by attending to their needs, interests, and vulnerabilities.
3. Finally, it can be stated that the textual analysis of the novel using the notions of "empathy erosion" and "entangled empathy" paves the way for less anthropocentric thinking about human-animal relationships.

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