

**"THE UNSPOKEN GUIDE": AN INTERDISCIPLINARY EXPLORATION OF
CANINE-HUMAN INTERSPECIES COEXISTENCE AND COMPANIONSHIP IN
SOUTH ASIAN LITERATURE**

THE ABSTRACT

THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE AWARD OF DOCTOR OF
PHILOSOPHY (ARTS) AT JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY

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2024

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This thesis emerges from the necessity of locating silenced voices of the those, who have always been marginalised and ignored in our cultural matrix. Dogs, specifically free-ranging dogs, who cohabit our habitats with us, have rarely been granted a valid space within the academic purview of South Asian Literature. Their presence only comes in literature in the backdrop, through sound of their barking, or their passive representations as parts of the environment. This thesis takes the pointer of this presence of dogs in literary works, mainly focussing on the fictional works, spanning from generally 1930s to our present times, i.e., 2020s and how these works comment on the changing dynamics of canine-human interspecies relationships in relation to other factors of like changing societal demography, urban planning, legislature and the construction of public mindset towards the other-than-human animals. These literary fictional works with their subtle nuances also comment on the intrinsic correlation between power, autonomy, and socio-cultural hierarchy that permeates the interspecies connection between canines and individual human beings, and how these portrayals also in their own ways, reflect, reconstruct and challenge the dominant narrative of the privileged, human-centric perceptions of the mainstream culture.

In the contemporary Indian socio-cultural context, free-ranging or semi-domesticated or street dogs are labelled under the 'liminal animals' within the urban human setting. This thesis is not structured chronologically. But the broad categorisation will mark the earliest literary work selected here from the 1930s while the most recent work would be our contemporary time, 2021. Following the cues of Donna Haraway's notion of 'companion species', this doctoral project explores and attempts to redefine the nuances of living

vulnerably with canines, who are not demarcated with a specific, domesticated labels within the human habitats, within the ambit of South Asian literary landscape. Following an interdisciplinary approach in this thesis I attempted to establish two ideas: the first point is how the literary works on canine-human relationships portray another aspect of interspecies dynamics amidst a speciesist, anthropocentric mainstream body of narratives, while the second point constructs canid-human interconnections as a viable lens which reflects the changing face of India and South Asia's transforming socio-cultural landscape in terms of multispecies living and anthrozootic coexistences. The use of this specific word, "anthrozootic", connects us with the notion of animal's presence as a significant one, in the historical time frame of urban development. My argument will endeavour to establish that, it is necessary to construct a historiography of the human-canine interaction in Indian subcontinent by following the transformations of legal procedures, history of medical sciences in the context of animal control and a parallel reading of these literary representations which also tells the other side of the narrative. This historiography will be capable of addressing the issues of animal cruelty, specifically on canines ranging from colonial period to contemporary 21st century India and how it has the tenor of a more nuanced justification of the dehumanization of the marginalized in our society. The thesis is centered around the two key words, which I feel, should be specified. One is 'intersectionality' while the other one is 'entanglement'.¹ The perspective of the word 'intersectionality' is crucial here, as this entire thesis is an attempt to narrativise the unique positionality that the dogs not only occupy and elicit responses in multilayered ways in our cultural field but also create an alternative notion of multispecies living with all its vulnerabilities in contrast to the

¹ Lori Gruen, "Expressing Entangled Empathy: A Reply," *Hypatia* 32, no. 2 (March 2017): 452–62, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12326>.

anthropocentric shift. The thesis is centered around the two key words, which I feel, should be specified. One is ‘intersectionality’ while the other one is ‘entanglement’.²

This thesis contextualises the representations of dogs in the fictional works in tandem with the socio-political and administrative changes related to the nonhuman lives. It also sheds light on the way dogs were moving from the place of marginalisation to a position of added importance and visibility in societal perceptions. It also demonstrates the way, canine presence gradually emerges as a political metaphor of the underprivileged, oppressed within the matrix of hierarchically superior, dominant hegemony. Each chapter is centered around one aspect of this interspecies narrative and the thesis is starting from a vantage point where the dogs are towards the margin, but as we progress through the chapters, they increasingly come into the centre. The first chapter titled as *Our Best Friend: Representations of Disability in Canine-Human Relationships in South Asian Literature* attempts to throw into the relief the critical role, the disability or different-ability plays in the fundamental connections between dogs and humans when one of them, or both of them share this very unique space, in a dominant, mainstream, ableist culture. The second chapter, titled as *Death and His Brothers: Canine- Human Coexistence and Struggling Times in South Asian Literature* is a negotiation between the symbolic representations of dogs in populist imaginations and existential precarity for being at the receiving ends of not only human aggression but also the sufferings individuals in every political upheaval. The third chapter titled as *Strangers, Underdogs and Magical Experiences with Our Canine Companions in South Asian Literature*, looks at specific points of South Asian literature, which illuminate our notions of nomadic identities essentially centering around the moveable physical space of canine individuals. This chapter also brings into the discussion the way the canine presence can be translated as a political statement of vulnerable existence in contrast to the dominant,

² Ibid.,

mainstream, hegemonic speciesist notion. The fourth chapter of this thesis, *A Dog's Day: The Canine Life Writing in Literatures of South Asia* positions dogs as the independent autonomous individuals in literature which also grants them a focality of reference, that underscores the rising awareness on interspecies cohabitation in our contemporary times.

By actively locating their presence, this work aims to unearth these silenced resistances and intends to construct a historiography of canine representation in South Asian Literature, from the alternative angle, a perspective that will promote in seeing them as authentically as possible, without the filters of anxiety of zoonotic diseases and commonly given superimposed negative human attributes. In that way, this work contributes to the emerging discourses of critical animal studies from South Asia and its peripheries. This thesis addresses to raise our awareness and accountability towards our fellow creatures by locating their contributions in human civilisations and in this way, aims to pay a tribute to these unspoken narratives of animal-human coexistence, mutual companionship and time-tested interspecies survival during the trying times. This research endeavours to unearth those hidden narratives which thrived, nurtured and motivated on the principles of tolerant, empathetic understanding across the species-specific barriers. In many ways, this thesis aims to construct the alternative narratives, which articulated the personal, subjective take on interspecies interconnectedness in a grand way through the micro-narratives of individual struggles, and thus document a train of counter-cultural narrative against the grain of anthropocentric speciesism.