

Fecha de recepción: 5 marzo 2019
Fecha de aceptación: 14 septiembre 2019
Fecha de publicación: 9 febrero 2020
URL: <https://oceanide.es/index.php/o12020/article/view/28/173>
Océanide número 13, ISSN 1989-6328
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37668/oceanide.v12i.28>

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Animal Representation in Recent Anglophone Science Fiction: Uplifting and Anthropomorphism in Nnedi Okorafor's "Lagoon" and Adam Roberts's "Bête"

Abstract

Science fiction in the last decades has often empowered machines and provided humans with enhanced characteristics through the use of technology (the limits of artificial intelligence and transhumanism are frequent themes in recent narratives), but animal empowerment has also been present through the concept of uplifting, understood as the augmentation of animal intelligence through technology. Uplifting implies providing animals with the capacity to speak and reason like humans. However, it could be argued that such implementation fails to acknowledge animal cognition in favour of anthropomorphized schemes of thought. Humankind's lack of recognition of different animal types of communication has been portrayed in fiction and often implies the adaptation of the animal Other to human needs and expectations, creating a post-animal that communicates its needs to the reader through borrowed words. The main objective of this article is to analyze the use of uplifting as a strategy to give voice to animals in two science fiction novels written in English, both published in the twenty-first century: *Lagoon* (2014) by Nigerian-American Nnedi Okorafor and *Bête* (2014) by British author Adam Roberts. This article examines, from ecocritical and human-animal studies (HAS) perspectives, the differences and similarities in the exploration of the theme in both novels, which are often related to humankind's willingness or refusal to regard the Other as equal.

Keywords:

Uplifting, alterity, anthropomorphism, HAS, artificial intelligence

Resumen

La ciencia ficción de las últimas décadas a menudo ha empoderado a las máquinas y ha dotado de características superiores a los humanos a través de la tecnología (los límites de la inteligencia artificial y el transhumanismo son temas frecuentes en narrativas recientes), pero el empoderamiento animal también ha estado presente a través del concepto de *uplifting*, entendido como el aumento de la inteligencia animal a través de la tecnología. El *uplifting* implica proporcionar a los animales la capacidad de hablar y razonar como los humanos. Sin embargo, podría decirse que esta puesta en práctica no tiene en consideración la cognición animal, favoreciendo los esquemas del pensamiento humano. La falta de reconocimiento de los diferentes tipos de comunicación por parte del ser humano se ha representado en la ficción y a menudo implica la adaptación del Otro animal a las necesidades y expectativas humanas, creando un post-animal que comunica sus necesidades con palabras prestadas. El principal objetivo de esta comunicación es analizar el uso del *uplifting* como estrategia para dar voz a los animales en dos textos narrativos de ciencia ficción en lengua inglesa, ambos publicados en el siglo XXI: las novelas *Lagoon* (2014) de la autora nigeriano-americana Nnedi Okorafor y *Bête* (2014) del escritor británico Adam Roberts. Este artículo examina desde una perspectiva ecocrítica y de estudios sobre la relación entre humano-animal (ERHA) las diferencias así como los puntos en común en la exploración del tema en ambas novelas, las cuales se relacionan a menudo con la predisposición o el rechazo del humano a ver al Otro como un igual.

Palabras clave:

Uplifting, alteridad, antropomorfismo, ERHA, inteligencia artificial

Science fiction has traditionally explored the limits of human nature by contrasting it with other beings, from aliens to robots and artificial intelligences. As science fiction critic Sherryl Vint argues, these texts partially respond to the human interest in connecting with – and understanding – radically different subjectivities (2010, 226). In the same way, this genre allows the exploration of animal agency through its normalization, providing scenarios where animals can tell us exactly what they want, and are allowed active participation in society. The concept of *uplifting* in current science fiction means the augmentation of animal intelligence through technology (Langford 2017); it implies providing animals with the capacity to speak and reason like humans and simplifying human-animal interaction through the use of a common language. Treating them as active agents of change, rather than objectifying them, is essential to consider the changes that would make human-animal coexistence beneficial for all.

The human interest in connecting with other subjectivities does not imply that we have strategies to understand other means of communication different from human communication. Understanding the existence of different animal experiences of the world is essential if we want to start communication between species. Through *uplifting*, science fiction offers readers the chance to explore animal agency and its normalization, favouring scenarios where animals and humans interact through the use of a common language. However, Vint argues that *uplifting* fails to acknowledge animal cognition in favour of anthropomorphized schemes of thought (2010, n. pag.). Humankind's lack of recognition of different animal types of communication has implied adapting the animal Other to human needs and expectations, creating a post-animal that communicates its needs to the reader through borrowed words. Humans tend to disregard animals' real means of communication as if they were inexistent, and the absence of language has usually been the justification for the human-animal divide; recognizing that they possess different forms of communication is the basis to change the human relationship with them.

The fact that mankind commonly considers animals as a single unit speaks volumes about human disinterest in considering their individual capacities. As Derrida notes, our capacity of giving them names enables us to speak of animals as a single voice that, paradoxically, cannot respond (2008, 32). This single voice means that we consider animals as disparate as a gorilla, a camel and an iguana, to name but a few, in the same way, not allowing much variation amongst the diverse animal species. There is an invisible limit that separates all animals from the human species. Human beings should better envisage the existence of "living creatures," whose plurality cannot be comprised within the single figure of an animality that is simply opposed to humanity. Derrida considers that animals do not need words to describe their experiences of the world, but that does not mean that they are not interested in their surroundings. Animals are as aware of humans as humans are of animals; they understand symbiosis and competition, which commonly affects our relationship with them.

There is a power relationship between those who name and those who have to speak in the discourse of others. It is my view that acknowledging that communication is the basis to change humankind's relationship with other species, which at the same

time would produce a more ethical world. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein considered that if a lion could talk, we would not be able to understand it. This is understandable since "[w]e remain unconscious of the prodigious diversity of all the everyday language-games because the clothing of our language makes everything alike" (1953, 223–4). Language is linked to a way of living that varies for each species: the problem is not that animals do not speak but rather that we do not understand them. Communicating with the animal Other implies opening to various kinds of consciousness. As Budiansky rephrases quoting Wittgenstein, if a lion could speak, it would not be a lion anymore, or at least its mind would not be the mind of a lion. This is so since

[i]f the modern sciences of evolutionary biology and ecology have taught us anything, it is that life generates diversity; the millions of species on earth each reflect millions of years of separate adaptation to unique environments and unique ways of life. The mind is no exception to the facts of natural selection; it makes as little sense to expect that other species should share the uniquely human thought processes of the human mind as it would to expect that we should share an elephant's trunk or a zebra's stripes. (Budiansky 1998, xiii)

Literature can provide access to animal representations, since animals do not use words or write books to tell us about their experiences, but our filters can imply great changes in our relationship with animals. Readers' perceptions are central to analyze the main questions posed by science fiction: what it means to be human, how we can communicate with other species and, as a result, how this interaction can change us. All in all, science fiction presents different scenarios on how our world would change if we listened to animals.

Uplifting narratives provide animals with the capacity to communicate with humans through the use of a common language. Although *uplifting* texts have commonly been criticized for practicing human exceptionalism (Roy-Faderman 2015, 79); that is, by emphasizing human superiority, these narratives pose valuable truths since "a speaking animal can upset all kinds of assumptions by saying something we don't want to hear" (Fudge 2002, 89). Communicating with animals usually implies facing a consciousness that is beyond our knowledge and facing uncomfortable truths about the way we treat them. It challenges us to be posthuman in our relationship with others. As readers, we are challenged to value other skills beyond rationality, which according to Wolfe (2003, 5) may be troublesome for humans.

Despite the fact that many narratives portraying talking animals tend to romanticize the bond between animal and human, thus making the animal voices say what humans expect to hear, there is a tendency in modern *uplifting* narratives that challenge us to appreciate animals' worth beyond rationality, allowing a dialogue that can be beneficial for our coexistence. Animals have helped humans to define themselves. Redefining our relationship with them also means rethinking the limits of ethics. The two novels to be discussed in this article reflect different ways of thinking about our relationship with animals. The novel *Lagoon* (2014) by Nigerian-American writer Nnedi Okorafor (1974) introduces aliens made of technology that offer wild sea animals

the opportunity to merge with them and improve their qualities, allowing them to achieve their independence from humans. The novel *Bête* (2014) by British author and critic Adam Roberts (1965) presents uplifted domesticated and liminal animals that need to cooperate with humans in order to achieve a peaceful coexistence. The concept of liminal animals is understood from Donaldson's and Kymlicka's perspective in *Zoopolis. A Political Theory of Animal Rights* (2011), relating to animals who are not domesticated but whose existence depends on their association to human beings through coexisting in the same spaces; examples of these animals are squirrels in urban parks, foxes in peripheral areas, ants, cockroaches and the like living in close contact with humans for food and shelter.

My main aim in this article is to explore how the aforementioned novels portray the conflict between human and non-human when their capacities level off, that is, when animals are given a superior intellect in terms of rational processes that equals that of humans. I intend to analyse how in both texts the process of uplifting opens a fundamental ethical debate on animal instrumentalization in our current world, offering outcomes that depend on the human characters' willingness to regard the animal Other as equal.

Thus, I will first focus on *Lagoon*, by Okorafor, and how it represents the complexities of the human-animal relationship when uplifting makes animals stand up for their rights. Secondly I will compare it to *Bête*, by Roberts, using an ecocritical and HAS approach and examining particularly the differences and similarities in the outcomes they offer, which seems to depend on the human character's willingness to accept the animals as individuals with equal rights.

Detachment: Wild Marine Animals in *Lagoon*

One of the most complete theories on animal rights is the one proposed by Donaldson and Kymlicka in *Zoopolis* (2011). The authors consider that animals can be loosely grouped depending on their relationship with humans, and each human-animal relationship needs different sets of regulations so that both can coexist in fair conditions; they consider that peaceful coexistence between humans and animals can be achieved if we take into account the needs of the different groups of animals and interact taking them into account. *Lagoon* is divided in three sections called "acts": welcome, awakening and symbiosis; each of them opens with the first person narration of a different creature that has been changed through alien power: a swordfish, an asphalt road that comes to life through the people's folkloric perception of it as a living entity that is paved with the bones of the people who have died in crashes, and finally a bat. All of them wake to a new reality and only the road needs to be stopped by the aliens because its only power is destruction. It is my interpretation that the road represents the power of human culture coming to life and at the same time the potential for violence in human nature. The animal narrators are not trying to cause harm to humans: the bat is just enjoying its new senses before being accidentally killed by a plane:

The pilot of the Nigerian president's plane has no clue that the plane he is flying has just killed the most enlightened bat on earth. After obliterating this bat as it passes, the plane flies on toward the airport on the strangest night in the city of Lagos's history. (2014, 225; italics in the original)

This incident comes to show the dangers for animals when crossing those territories occupied by humans who have not taken into consideration the effects of their occupation for other creatures. Finally, the first narrator of the story is the most relevant since it is present throughout the novel and communicates with the human protagonists: it is a swordfish who is trying to reverse human action by breaking a fuel underwater line that pollutes the sea in Lagos, Nigeria: "She is on a mission. She is angry. She will succeed and then they will leave for good. [...] *Her* waters. Even when she migrates, this particular place remains hers. Everyone knows it" (2014, 3). The rest of the acts are narrated through an omniscient narrator and follow the human protagonists until the following section of the novel. The main human protagonist is the marine biologist Adaora, who teams up with soldier Agu and rapper Anthony Dey Craze. The three of them are drawn together by an invisible power and they realise they have always felt different from the rest of the people. It is through them that the alien Ayodele begins her introduction in the human world, which she eventually abandons when she realises that she hates humans and she should sacrifice herself in order to merge with them and improve them from inside.

Okorafor's novel presents aliens that are made of technology and who treat animals as the rightful citizens of the sea. They ask for their permission to settle in the sea and in exchange they merge with the animals who want it and who have their wishes granted in terms of enhanced senses, enhanced strength, enhanced mental capacities and so on. Following Donaldson and Kymlicka's theory, wild animals should be given sovereignty to exert freedom and self-governance over their territory. Throughout history, humans have colonized and exploited the land without considering the rights of ownership of its inhabitants, these being other people or wild animals. Recognizing wild animal sovereignty would imply to limit human actions in their territory.

Okorafor's novel portrays animals from a classic human-animal studies (HAS) perspective. HAS offers an interdisciplinary approach to the complex relationships established between humans and other animals; its classic standpoint is that animals should reclaim their territory and avoid human interaction. Considering our past history with wild animals, this may seem advisable. Uplifting as a result of animal intervention helps the animals in *Lagoon* to obtain full control of the ocean. As Vint considers, technology has been traditionally used as a human tool and it has been used to instrumentalize animals at the same time (2010). However, technology in *Lagoon* is external to human beings and thus it is liberating. Since alien technology does not come from human beings, it is not humanizing. It respects the multiple ways of existence, sentience and personhood. Aliens seem to understand animals because they share some of their characteristics. The alien Ayodele does not have a name and she mentions that humans have given it to her. Naming gives humans power and the sense of controlling things that they cannot explain. Later she confirms: "I don't need a name," she said. "My people know me. But you may call me Ayodele" (45).

Not only marine creatures are offered this alien symbiosis. It happens to every creature who wants it, and the right to choose stands as an innovation in this kind of narrative. The fact that all species are modified, and their capacities boosted does not mean that they are improved in a similar way. The animals talk to the aliens because the aliens want to listen. However, there is

almost no communication between animals and humans. They can communicate telepathically, but they choose not to do so. It makes sense if we consider their wariness towards those who have harmed them. Their distrust is grounded in the human protagonists' attitudes towards the uplifted sea creatures: there is a moment in the novel when a character narrates listening to the swordfish: "It spoke like a member of that group Greenpeace!" (262). The characters laugh about this interaction, but they do not reflect on its connotations, although they understand that they are not welcome in the sea anymore. The alien explains the newly acquired independence of marine animals: "It's the people of the waters," Ayodele said. "They are tired of boats and human beings" (240). This is also present in another passage:

Why? What had they done? He knew the answer. He, Adaora, Anthony – everyone else – they were human. They didn't belong here in the deep. So they would die here and it would be right. Best to leave these waters to the ocean animals, and the aliens. (245)

Vint considers that those in power only give status to those who are perceived as equals (2007, 94). Uplifting implies establishing a relationship amongst equals, and in establishing their power animals are effectively acting like humans defending their territory. The land and the sea become nations at war and animals basically respond to humans in their territory through direct attack. These marine creatures are not perceived as equals, but they are left alone because they are very powerful. The idea that a separation from humans is correct is emphasized by the fate suffered by animals living in liminal spaces and even vulnerable humans in the novel. Liminal animals are those who benefit from human interaction, even if it is only opportunistic. There is an enlightened bat that is happily enjoying her newly augmented senses when it is crushed by a plane, and there is a spider that is also thrilled about her new changes and opportunities and is run over by a car. When panic strikes in Lagos the citizens are wary of any aliens and they turn against each other. There is a mute and mentally handicapped child who is taken for an alien and shot to death: "The bullet splashed into the mute boy's left eye. He stumbled to the side and then sat down hard. He lay back. Comfortable now. His mind focused for the first time in his life. If he had had anything to say, he could have said it" (191). It is very relevant that he lacks the capacity to defend himself from other humans, since his helplessness mirrors an animalistic lack of recognition of human signals of violence and defencelessness.

However, Donaldson and Kymlicka do not entirely agree with the idea of breaking all human-animal interaction. They consider that interaction can be positive given the right conditions. Humans have a right to migrate and travel – as do whales and other sea creatures – as long as humans regard animals as right owners of their biological space. The construction of new spaces of freedom can give way to new social formations that do not require of human-animal separation. These critics consider that there is positive intervention based on human efforts to assist wild animals (2011, 159). For instance, there are already mechanisms to prevent whales from colliding with shipping lanes through the implementation of whale monitoring systems. As the authors say considering a specific type of whales called right whales: "humans are already recognizing an obligation to respect the sovereignty of

whales as a side constraint on their activities as they traverse right whales' habitat" (189).

When the cruelty of people makes the alien Ayodele sacrifice herself for the greater good she tells the protagonists that she hates humans because she has seen what they are capable of, but she still believes that there is a chance for coexistence as long as humans improve "within" (268). She merges with the protagonists and other humans without giving them a choice, unlike her behaviour with animals, and thus some humans become transhuman, improved by the alien technology. At this point, the novel anticipates the profound distrust that will come from humans who have not directly participated in this hybridization process and Okorafor hints that humans will try to resist change and even destroy those who have changed, since enhanced beings would negatively affect their privileges and power. The novel ends with the threat of an imminent human attack to repress any alien advances, which comes to represent the human fear of change and loss of privilege that needs to be suppressed if human beings ever intend to treat any Other as equal.

After uplifting is created by alien technology, human-animal cooperation seems essential for the survival of all species; even if wild animals have been empowered by alien technology, the need to associate with modified humans against a common adversary – humans who have not been changed – is still pressing because the end of the novel hints a major, international attack on Lagos. Those humans who opened themselves to change are vulnerable to the rest of the population and so are the animals. In order to establish a new order in which all species can coexist peacefully, the characters have to promote social change and communication will prove essential. At the same time, animal sovereignty has to be collaborative: animals need to establish the basis for coexistence with other living creatures, including humans.

Cooperation: Domesticated and Liminal Animals in *Bête*

Bête is narrated from the point of view of a human whose consciousness has merged with that of several uplifted animals. The narrator is a plural consciousness lodged in a single Artificial Intelligence (AI) chip that at the same time has passed through different animals before and is currently located in the body of a fox. This complex narrator is not revealed until the end of the novel, when the reader is told that the main voice and narrator is Graham Penhaligon, a former butcher who experiences the emergence of *bêtes* or canny animals, which are the names given in the novel to uplifted animals. We follow his evolution throughout the novel, since he first condemns uplifted creatures because he does not believe that they are animals anymore, but computers, until his eventual realization that humans and animals are the same.

The novel starts with the tension produced by the newly-acquired capacity of speech of domesticated animals. In this case, these uplifted animals have been modified by animal rights activists who implant AI chips in them. This is a very different scenario than the one presented in *Lagoon*. Uplifting in *Bête* seems to fall in what Roy-Faderman considers human exceptionalism (2015, 79). Animals do not enjoy an augmentation of their own capacities, but rather they are provided with an unwanted human perspective of the world, a consciousness imposed in imitation of human cognitive processes, with the purpose of granting them basic rights. According to Demello, anthropomorphism

can have advantages in certain situations. Quoting her, “the portrayal of animals as subjects allows the existence of mental life to supervene with forcefulness and credibility” (2010, 358). In *Bête*, it is only the uplifted animals’ resemblance to human beings that triggers their acceptance into society and grants them basic rights. The fact that animals are using human words and want to work and pay taxes means that they see the advantage of adapting themselves – as domesticated animals have historically done – to human conventions.

Bête starts with the animals chanting anti-specieist messages that make humans feel guilty for wanting to slaughter them. Although most humans in the novel consider those messages unnatural and artificial, Roberts narrates how societies are forced to create new political regulations to account for their new rationality and the fact that they can pass the Turing test. The Supreme Court suspends the killing of canny animals and eventually makes it illegal to execute any talking beasts.

Domesticated animals have lost their space in the world, so it is essential that they share the territory with humans. Both compete for natural resources and the mere existence of the uplifted animals threatens the social order and demands adaptations and new rules of coexistence. Donaldson and Kymlicka explain in their theory of animal rights that domesticated animals living with humans need to be assigned citizenship. The real world application would imply the use of mediators to elicit the animals’ needs and preferences in order to safeguard their interests in the community. As happens in the case of wild animals, Donaldson and Kymlicka do not consider possible the avoidance of human-animal interaction, particularly for domesticated animals (2011, 73). Domestication creates a particular sort of relationship between humans and animals, and a central task of any political theory of animal rights is to explore the terms under which that relationship can be rendered just. Cooperation is equally defended by the most peaceful sectors of the uplifted population in *Bête*, which are led by a lamb that communicates its intentions to the protagonist in this manner: “I don’t want the human population of these islands to tar all the bêtes with the same brush. There is a road out of madness, and it is negotiation road. It requires you humans coming to an agreement with the right tribes of bêtes” (2014, 188).

However, while uplifted animals begin to thrive in rural communities, humans are increasingly relegated to life in the cities, where food is scarce, and jobs are lacking. Humans cater for their own basic needs and there is a return to the primitive in which humans become more and more animalistic. The “brutes”, as they are called by the bêtes, are the target of uplifted animals since they can outsmart them out of their territory. The animals evolve with their implants and go from reciting vegan propaganda to expressing their own opinions and needs, eventually planning like human beings and putting in motion warlike strategies to fight humans. These animals explore their recently acquired abilities and the plurality of minds that allows them to exchange information from one AI chip to another.

Despite the fact that animals and humans are in constant communication and contact, Roy-Fadernam considers uplifted animals become something new and different from humans but also from animals (2015, 88). There is no real communication between humans and animals but only between animals and

technology (the post-animal). Those animals who remain “dumb” – that is, who do not have an AI chip to enhance their intelligence – are considered inferior by both humans and uplifted animals. Essentially, animals have had to stop being animals in order to be taken into account. Therefore, otherness is here emphasized by the comparison between uplifted and non-uplifted animals. According to Wolfe, the systematic exploitation and killing of animals based on their species serves as a starting point for use by some humans against other humans (2003, 8). Animals have been exploited historically for human benefit because humans rely on the superiority of their own species. This argument has also been used to animalize and marginalize some humans, like indigenous tribes under colonialist occupation and in colonialist discourses (Vint 2010, 4).

For the many similarities between humans and animals, the novel ends with the division into animal and human spaces, but it is hinted that uplifted beings may obtain all the benefits of living in organised societies in the long run through their use of plural consciousness and their advantages over “brutes”, or animalized humans. Cooperation has served the purpose of survival for all the species but the fact that bêtes consider non-canny animals inferior poses the risk that the original animals – as well as the increasingly brute humans – end up being abused, since uplifted animals have no allegiance in terms of species but in terms of common goals with those who share the same capacities independently of species.

Conclusion

It would seem that no matter what, animals have the short straw when it comes to their relationship with humans. Wild animals in *Lagoon* are able to rule their territory in their own terms and be free from human interaction thanks to their merging with alien technology. The lack of anthropomorphization does not guarantee the animals success but it evidences their independence. However, this situation can only be maintained as long as those humans who are spectators of change decide to embrace it and give the new situation a chance, which by the end of the novel appears unlikely.

Domesticated animals in *Bête* take sole possession of the countryside thanks to human uplifting, their similarities with humans making communication more accessible. However, the fact that they force humans to live in crowded cities that can barely sustain their numbers does not provide a scenario where all creatures work to build sustainable and fair futures together.

Although it may seem that uplifting drives a wedge further between humans and animals, the two novels explored here show the evolution of uplift narratives in the 21st century. An important innovation is that, while the modification of animals in narratives such as David Brin’s *Uplift Universe* series of novels (1980–1998) and Dean Koontz’s *Watchers* (1987), has traditionally been considered from the benefits obtained by humans, *Lagoon* and *Bête* focus on the benefits of uplifting from the animals’ standpoint. For the first time, technology is a tool for animals that allows them to improve their lives independently of humans. It can be argued that the vulnerability of their situation arises from the general lack of knowledge to deal with such situations that demand for animals to be treated as equals. This is precisely the point made by Donaldson and Kymlicka:

It is simply not tenable for ART [Animal Rights Theory] to assume that humans can inhabit a separate realm from other animals in which interaction, and therefore potential conflict, could largely be eliminated. Ongoing interaction is inevitable, and this reality must lie at the centre of a theory of animal rights, not be swept to the periphery. (2011, 8)

This can be taken as an important message in both novels, since they emphasize the conflicts of communication amongst earthlings as perceived from an impartial Other – be it alien or artificial. Their endings offer doubt about the possibility of an agreement between humans and other animals and they are quite pessimistic, in fact, considering that human beings are reluctant to share their privileges of land and the control of resources. Braidotti considers the potential benefits of narratives like this when she states: “considering new ways of coexisting with animals in science fiction could help build new perspectives that do not deny our common past history but that can transform the possibilities for the present” (2013, 268). In my opinion, these texts offer readers the opportunity to question their personal standpoint in relation to other creatures and may arouse their curiosity to explore the field of HAS.

This modern type of science fiction goes towards questioning the divide between human and animal because in the early 21st century it is beginning to dawn on humankind that there needs to be a change in our relationship with animals and a consideration of doing what is ethically right, not only for animals but also for ourselves. As Armstrong puts it, “today, living inexpertly with animals and our own animality amidst the ruins of modernity, we are especially in need of narratives that attempt translation between the animals we are and the animals we aren’t” (2008, 225). Humans need to acknowledge their belonging to the animal world, at the same time considering that a different set of skills does not make a species superior to the others, but just unique in its own way. As Demello points out, the human-animal divide is not universal but culturally and historically dependent and variable (2010, 33); therefore, we humans have the power to alter that division in a way that it benefits all creatures and this is precisely what is explored in the novels under scrutiny here. We just need to have the will and the adequate cultural shift.

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