

Human-Animal Relationship: A Study of *White Fang*

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Abstract

White Fang is a novel by Jack London. The protagonist of the novel is White Fang, a wolf-dog. This paper aims to understand the merits of the human-animal relationship and the compassionate ways in which animals comprehend things and adapt themselves to a harmonious-domestic life. Born in the wild, White Fang adapts to domestic life with Weedon Scott and his family. The role of White Fang in their life is commendable as implied in how the family treats him.

The framework adopted here is the human-animal relationship and animal emotions as explained by Margo DeMello in 'Animals and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies'. Ethologists admit that animals share with humans not only the primary human emotions of happiness, fear, anger, surprise and sadness but also secondary emotions such as

regret, longing or jealousy. White Fang undergoes many of these primary and secondary emotions as Jack London vividly portrays it throughout the novel.

Psychologist Michael Fox has introduced four categories of pet-owner relationships: object-oriented relationships, utilitarian relationships, need-dependency relationships, and actualising relationships. White Fang and Weedon Scott share an actualizing relationship in which the person's relationship with the animal is fully equal and based on mutual respect.

Animals are sentient beings. Having a relationship with animals can have a positive impact on both humans and animals. The suffering of animals demands some kind of moral consideration and empathy from humans.

Keywords: Jack London, *White Fang*, human-animal relationship, emotions, cognition, sentient, empathy.

Introduction

Human-animal interaction is vital in current times. Anxiety and stress are very common, but the time spent with a pet animal can bring a lot of positivity to grieving and stressed humans. The bond between humans is degrading in a self-centred lifestyle. Animals can be good companions to erase loneliness and depression. They are beings that are loyal, and trustworthy.

In the history of Western philosophy, animals have been devalued as lacking in reason. "In denying animals capacities for reason, language, and belief, Aristotle denies them the richness and complexity of mental experience that is evident in human beings. . ." writes Gary Steiner in his book *Anthropomorphism and Its Discontents* (63). But ethologists like Jane Goodall understand animal emotions and behaviour. She lived with chimpanzees in the Gombe National Park, Tanzania for decades and through in situ observation and experiments, discovered that animals possess reasoning skills and language abilities. Goodall in her book *In the Shadow of Man* observes that "My wonder was not only scientific as I watched in astonished delight. . . I could only watch, and marvel at these wonderful creatures. With a performance of such strength and energy, ancient man himself might have challenged the heavens" (27).

Jack London is renowned for his Alaskan novels *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and *White Fang* (1906). Both these novels explore the relationship between humans and animal companions. While *The Call of the Wild* is about the story of Buck and his transformation from a domesticated dog to a wild being, *White Fang* explores the reversal of this context, i.e., the sea change in the life of a wild wolfdog to a domesticated companion animal.

In Jack London's *White Fang*, the protagonist is a wolf-dog born in the wild with all its primal instincts but later destiny takes him on a stroll and gets him adopted by a good-hearted man Weedon Scott, who rescued the dog from ruthless hands. The novel begins in the wild and ends with the domestic life of White Fang. Jack London remarks that "The cub's fear of the unknown was an inherited distrust, and it had now been strengthened by experience . . . He would have to learn the reality of a thing before he could put his faith into it" (69).

White Fang's Submission to Grey Beaver

In every stage of his life, White Fang comes across different men ('gods' as London denotes) who capture and control him like any other dog. In the wild, he was a happy-go-lucky grey cub until his mother, Kiche, the she-wolf, surrendered before Gray Beaver to escape starvation and death. Thereafter White Fang had no choice but to succumb to the harsh reality as his mother. The fresh meat in the camp and hunger drew White Fang to Grey Beaver and he surrendered himself voluntarily to the new master.

Of his own choice, he came in to sit by man's fire and to be ruled by him. White Fang trembled, waiting for the punishment to fall upon him. There was a movement of the hand above him. . . . Grey Beaver was offering him one piece of the tallow! Very gently and somewhat suspiciously, he first smelled the tallow and then proceeded to eat it. Grey Beaver ordered meat to be brought to him, and guarded him from the other dogs while he ate. After that, grateful and content, White Fang lay at Grey Beaver's feet, gazing at the fire that warned him, blinking and dozing, secure in the knowledge that the morrow would find him, not wandering forlorn through bleak forest-stretches, but in the camp of the man-animals, with the gods to whom he had given himself and upon whom he was now dependent. (London 109)

According to White Fang, “The aim of life was meat. Life itself was meat. Life lived on life. There were the eaters and the eaten. The law was: EAT OR BE EATEN” (London 77). When the summer brought starvation, to escape death, out of little choice, White Fang had to return to Grey Beaver. “He knew an overpowering desire for the protection and companionship of man” (London 107). Kiche has been sold to a trader and White Fang experiences terrible loneliness and he cries to the wilderness.

He pointed his nose at the moon. His throat was afflicted by rigid spasms, his mouth opened, and in a heart-broken cry bubbled up his loneliness and fear, his grief for Kiche, all his past sorrows and mysteries as well as his apprehension of sufferings and dangers to come. It was the lone wolf-howl, full-throated and mournful, the first howl he had ever uttered. (London 107)

White Fang’s Covenant with His Master Grey Beaver

The loyalty of an animal to the provider (master) is observable in the relationship between White Fang and Grey Beaver. Even amidst the cruel treatment, the poor animal is obliged to obey his commander to avoid death and punishment. White Fang guarded his master’s property with all loyalty. Grey Beaver gave him encouragement and training, which heightened his sense of loneliness and made him strong and steadfast. Though he served his master, it was not out of love.

White Fang’s was a service of duty and awe, but not of love. He did not know what love was. He had no experience of love. Kiche was a remote memory. Besides, not only had he abandoned the Wild and his kind when he gave himself up to man, but the terms of the covenant were such that if ever he met Kiche again he would not desert his god to go with her. His allegiance to man seemed somehow a law of his being greater than the love of liberty, of kind and kin. (London 118)

The above passage reflects White Fang’s loyalty to his master. Though he doesn’t receive love, he faithfully serves Gray Beaver. But he missed his mother Kiche very much and hoped to meet her someday which never came. Poor White Fang has been traded to a cruel man called Beauty Smith. He was treated badly by the new savage master. For White Fang, he is a “mad god”. Animals can sense and identify the energy of humans—whether it is positive or not.

Entire cultures are held together by human empathy, which is a vitally crucial ability. De Waal (2016) claims that it is significantly more essential to existence (130). Animals associate with empaths better and embark on a lasting relationship. Empathy fuels our interest in others, according to De Waal in *Mama's Last Hug* (111). Animals are authentic, claims Jessica Baron in her online article 'Empaths and Animals'. Empaths have nothing to worry about sharing their emotional baggage with animals because they are neither dishonest nor deceitful. Barbara Smuts says, "Open your heart to the animals around you and find out for yourself what it's like to befriend a nonhuman person" as she wraps off *The Lives of Animals* (120). The following passage shows why Beauty Smith is a mad god to White Fang.

With the simpler creatures, good and bad are things simply understood. The good stands for all things that bring easement and satisfaction and surcease from pain. Therefore, the good is liked. The bad stands for all things that are fraught with discomfort, menace, and hurt, and is hated accordingly. White Fang's feel of Beauty Smith was bad. From the man's distorted body and twisted mind, in occult ways, like mists rising from malarial marshes, came emanations of the unhealth within. Not by reasoning, not by the five senses alone, but by other and remoter and uncharted senses, came the feeling to White Fang that the man was ominous with evil, pregnant with hurtfulness, and therefore a thing bad, and wisely to be hated. (London 141)

Beauty Smith was a brutish bourgeois. To make money, Beauty Smith forces White Fang to fight with other dogs in the match regardless of the poor dog's bruises and weakness. It is inconsiderate to think that animals are insentient. Animals should be treated with care and be free from any sort of cruelty. They do possess emotions like humans. Ethologists admit that animals share with humans not only primary human emotions of happiness, fear, anger, surprise and sadness but also secondary emotions such as regret, longing or jealousy. Animals can feel pain and they carry the emotional scars associated with that pain. People who work with abused animals, such as chimpanzees whose mothers were killed for bushmeat, former circus elephants, dogs that had been mistreated or abandoned, and former laboratory rabbits, can attest to the fact that the animals will suffer from emotional trauma for years after the incident, according to Margo DeMello. (362–363)

White Fang's Second Return from the Wild: The Bond with Weedon Scott

Weedon Scott was an empath like no other in White Fang's life. He is the first human in whom White Fang found a loving heart and he experienced the emotion of 'love' through Scott. For White Fang, Weedon Scott is his love-master and human-animal relationship is evident through the strong bond between them.

He talked to White Fang as White Fang had never been talked to before. He talked softly and soothingly, with a gentleness that somehow, somewhere touched White Fang. In spite of himself and all the pricking warnings of his instinct, White Fang began to have confidence in this god. He had a feeling of security that was belied by all his experience with men. (London 172)

Though the human-animal bond was unknown to White Fang, there was a yearning in him to be taken care of by a man. As time passed, the wild instincts of the wolf-dog dwindled and he became closer to his new humane master. Becoming a companion animal to Weedon Scott was a slow and steady process; dodging the prime instinct of wild nature was not that easy for White Fang.

But the god talked on softly, and ever the hand rose and fell with non-hostile pats. White Fang experienced dual feelings. It was distasteful to his instinct. It restrained him, opposed the will of him toward personal liberty. And yet it was not physically painful. On the contrary, it was even pleasant, in a physical way. The patting movement slowly and carefully changed to a rubbing of the ears about their bases, and the physical pleasure even increased a little. Yet he continued to fear, and he stood on guard, expectant of unguessed evil, alternately suffering and enjoying as one feeling or the other came uppermost and swayed him. (London 174)

Efforts were made at both ends to process the human-animal relationship. Bonding is natural, but it demands time and trust to sustain itself. Weedon Scott and White Fang made it through with passionate loyalty to each other.

It was the beginning of the end for White Fang—the ending of the old life and the reign of hate. A new and incomprehensibly fairer life was dawning. It required much

thinking and endless patience on the part of Weedon Scott to accomplish this. And on the part of White Fang it required nothing less than a revolution. He had to ignore the urges and promptings of instinct and reason, defy experience, give the lie to life itself. (London 175)

The harshness that has come with maturity needs to be tempered for White Fang during the revamp. To be moulded to a new life required some rupture and remake. It is quite similar to the experience of a human adult; to be transformed into a new one, the repudiation of old ways needs to be carried out consciously.

. . . In short, when all things were considered, he had to achieve an orientation far vaster than the one he had achieved at the time he came voluntarily in from the Wild and accepted Grey Beaver as his lord. At that time he was a mere puppy, soft from the making, without form, ready for the thumb of circumstance to begin its work upon him. But now it was different. The thumb of circumstance had done its work only too well. By it he had been formed and hardened into the Fighting Wolf, fierce and implacable, unloving and unlovable. To accomplish the change was like a reflux of being, and this when the plasticity of youth was no longer his; when the fibre of him had become tough and knotty; when the warp and the woof of him had made of him an adamant texture, harsh and unyielding; when the face of his spirit had become iron and all his instincts and axioms had crystallised into set rules, cautions, dislikes, and desires. (London 175)

The wolf-dog found comfort in the lordship of Weedon Scott. Affection to the new master shone through his loyalty and love. Day by day the bond was nourished by relentless commitment to each other.

. . . it was the thumb of circumstance that pressed and prodded him, softening that which had become hard and remoulding it into fairer form. Weedon Scott was in truth this thumb. He had gone to the roots of White Fang's nature, and with kindness touched to life potencies that had languished and well-nigh perished. One such potency was *love*. It took the place of *like*, which latter had been the highest feeling that thrilled him in his intercourse with the gods.

But this love did not come in a day. It began with *like* and out of it slowly developed. .
.. The lordship of man was a need of his nature. (London 176)

Distance from the master instilled a longing for love and care in White Fang. Animals indeed feel isolated and rejected if they are not taken care of. Social bonding and mutual assistance are desired by animals too.

As the days went by, the evolution of *like* into *love* was accelerated. White Fang himself began to grow aware of it, though in his consciousness he knew not what love was. It manifested itself to him as a void in his being—a hungry, aching, yearning void that clamoured to be filled. It was a pain and an unrest; and it received easement only by the touch of the new god's presence. At such times love was joy to him, a wild, keen-thrilling satisfaction. But when away from his god, the pain and the unrest returned; the void in him sprang up and pressed against him with its emptiness, and the hunger gnawed and gnawed unceasingly.

White Fang was in the process of finding himself. In spite of the maturity of his years and of the savage rigidity of the mould that had formed him, his nature was undergoing an expansion. There was a burgeoning within him of strange feelings and unwonted impulses. (London 177)

Fang's Fraternity with Scott's Family

What is of value to Weedon Scott was valued by White Fang and what was dear to the master was cherished and guarded by him. This is how White Fang overcame his inhibition in accepting the new people in his life, the family of Weedon Scott.

There were many persons to be considered. . . . blood-ties and relationship he knew nothing whatever and never would be capable of knowing. Yet he quickly worked it out that all of them belonged to the master. Then, by observation, whenever opportunity offered, by study of action, speech, and the very intonations of the voice, he slowly learned the intimacy and the degree of favour they enjoyed with the master. And by this ascertained standard, White Fang treated them accordingly. What was of value to the

master he valued; what was dear to the master was to be cherished by White Fang and guarded carefully. (London 203)

The master's disapproval of something was a pang for White Fang. The bond with Scott meant so much to him that even a slight reproach was hard to take.

But most potent in his education was the cuff of the master's hand, the censure of the master's voice. Because of White Fang's very great love, a cuff from the master hurt him far more than any beating Grey Beaver or Beauty Smith had ever given him. They had hurt only the flesh of him; beneath the flesh the spirit had still raged, splendid and invincible. But with the master the cuff was always too light to hurt the flesh. Yet it went deeper. It was an expression of the master's disapproval, and White Fang's spirit wilted under it. (London 205)

White Fang saved Judge Scott, his master's father from an escaped prisoner Jim Hall, who had been sentenced to fifty years. "He was innocent of the crime for which he was sentenced. . . Jim Hall was being "rail-roaded" to prison for a crime he had not committed." (London, 219). Judge Scott was ignorant and "he was party to a police conspiracy, that the evidence was hatched and perjured, that Jim Hall was guiltless of the crime charged" (219). The wolf-dog killed the intruder and saved his master's family. He sacrificed his life in the dual and the repercussions were one broken hind leg, three broken ribs that pierced his lungs, internal injuries three bullet shots and blood loss.

Then they turned to White Fang. He, too, was lying on his side. His eyes were closed, but the lids slightly lifted in an effort to look at them as they bent over him, and the tail was perceptibly agitated in a vain effort to wag. Weedon Scott patted him, and his throat rumbled an acknowledging growl. But it was a weak growl at best, and it quickly ceased. His eyelids drooped and went shut, and his whole body seemed to relax and flatten out upon the floor. (London 221)

Proper medication and care helped the resilient wolf-dog come back to life. Being born in the wild and having harsh experiences, he was no ordinary creature. He was resilient enough to cope with brutality.

White Fang had come straight from the Wild, where the weak perish early and shelter is vouchsafed to none. In neither his father nor his mother was there any weakness, nor in the generations before them. A constitution of iron and the vitality of the Wild were White Fang's inheritance, and he clung to life, the whole of him and every part of him, in spirit and in flesh, with the tenacity that of old belonged to all creatures. (London 222)

The wolf-dog turned out to be an amulet for the Scott family. He became their adored pet and his life changed from the wilderness of the Yukon to domestication in the hands of humans. He did indeed discover a new fascinating life with them.

It was a gala day. All Sierra Vista was gathered around. The master rubbed his ears, and he crooned his love-growl. The master's wife called him the "Blessed Wolf", which name was taken up with acclaim and all the women called him the Blessed Wolf. (London 223)

Conclusion

For a wild creature, adapting to domestic ambience is quite tough. But White Fang made through it with sheer willingness. He had his primal instincts and the wilderness had a strong hold on him. But apart from this, he yearned for care from a human, whom he considered his master. Values of loyalty, faithfulness and love were brought into the domestic sphere with all its beauty in its own way. Both Weedon Scott and White Fang held in high regard the bond that grew between them. The presence of White Fang brought harmony to the Scott family. The human-animal relationship has its own merits and it adds meaning to life. Animals are sentient beings and they help in improving the psychological well-being of humans around them. Having a relationship with animals can have a positive impact on both human and animal life. The suffering of animals demands some kind of moral consideration and empathy from humans. Understanding animal emotions is a requisite. According to Erica Fudge, we can scarcely comprehend what humans are without an understanding of animals (6). It is high time to accept animals as they are by appreciating their uniqueness and admiring not only the similarities but also the differences they possess. One can always count on animal companions for their loyalty.

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