

**The Man-Animal Bond and Conflict: Exploring Voices of the Unheard in
The Tusk that Did the Damage by Tania James and *Larger than Life* by Jodi
Picoult with Literary, Critical and Theoretical Perspectives**

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Abstract

Studies that examine the relationship between literature and the environment are often referred to as "ecocriticism" or "environmental criticism." Environmental literature seeks to explore the ecological aspects present in literary works, while ecological writings analyze how nature is represented in scholarly texts. Researchers and scholars approach these works from an environmental perspective, aiming to offer fresh insights into their content. Among the many issues concerning humans and the environment, human-wildlife conflict stands out as a significant concern. Numerous species across the world face endangerment or threats due to various forms of environmental degradation. This conflict is particularly important as it primarily impacts local communities, especially farmers. Tania James' novel, *The Tusk That Did the Damage* and Jodi Picoult's *Larger than Life* explore the issue of human-wildlife conflict and bonding. This research study focuses on examining how this conflict is portrayed in these two works. Tania James is an Indian American writer. She teaches in the MFA

program at George Mason University and lives in Washington DC. Tania James has authored the novel *Atlas of Unknowns*, the short story collection *Aerograms*, and her second novel is *The Tusk That Did the Damage*. In 2016, the novel was shortlisted for the International Dylan Thomas Prize and long listed for the Financial Times/Oppenheimer Award. Jodi Picoult is the author of twenty-two novels, including the New York Times bestsellers *Lone Wolf*, *Between the Lines* and *My Sister's Keeper*. She lives in New Hampshire.

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Ecocriticism, Zoopoetics, and Zoocentrism: Exploring the Intersection of Literature and Ecology

In contemporary literary studies, there is a growing interest in how literature and culture engage with the natural world and nonhuman life. This has led to the development of fields such as ecocriticism, zoopoetics, and zoocentrism, which challenge human-centered perspectives and encourage more inclusive ways of thinking. Ecocriticism explores environmental themes in literature, shedding light on humanity's relationship with nature. Zoopoetics examines how animals are represented in literary texts, revealing the complexities of their existence beyond mere symbols or metaphors.

Traditionally, animals in literature were treated symbolically — as metaphors, allegories, or moral lessons (e.g., fables and parables like *Aesop's Stories*). Zoopoetics moves beyond this representational function to consider how animals themselves contribute to the shaping of human creativity. Instead of being reduced to symbols of human concerns, animals are recognized as having their own agency and presence that influences artistic production.

Zoopoetics asks how literature can approach or approximate animal forms of expression. While humans cannot directly inhabit an animal's consciousness, writers and poets experiment with language, rhythm, and form to capture the strangeness, otherness, or vitality of non-human life. For instance, mimicking the movements of a bird in verse, or structuring prose in ways that reflect non-human temporality, can be seen as zoopoetic gestures.

By rethinking how animals are represented in texts, zoopoetics becomes an ethical practice. It challenges anthropocentric tendencies to reduce animals to caricatures or resources

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and instead calls for attentiveness to their uniqueness. In this sense, zoopoetics overlaps with zoocentrism — both advocate inclusion of animals in moral and cultural frameworks, but zoopoetics does so through the medium of art and literature.

Expanding the Literary Canon

Zoopoetics also invites us to re-read literary history. From ancient epics and fables to modern eco-literature and experimental poetry, animals have always been central to storytelling. Zoopoetic analysis uncovers how writers across cultures have engaged with animal lives — whether through empathy, imitation, or co-creation — and how such engagement reshapes literary form itself. Jacques Derrida’s reflections on the “gaze of the animal” inspired discussions of how animals disrupt human-centered language and philosophy. Contemporary eco-poetry often experiments with non-linear narratives, fragmented rhythms, or sounds to evoke the presence of animals beyond symbolic use.

Zoopoetics is not just a literary curiosity; it’s part of a broader cultural and ethical shift. In an age of ecological crisis, it asks us to reconsider the boundaries between humans and non-humans and to find creative ways to listen to and learn from other species. It bridges art, ethics, and ecology, suggesting that literature itself can be a site of interspecies dialogue.

Zoocentrism goes a step further, advocating for an ethical and philosophical approach that recognizes animals as central to our shared world. Together, these perspectives reshape how we understand and portray human-animal relationships, fostering a deeper sense of connection and responsibility toward all living beings.

Zoocentrism and Intrinsic Moral Value

Zoocentrism is the ethical perspective that argues that some animals possess intrinsic moral worth, independent of their utility to humans. This view challenges the long-standing belief that animals exist merely as resources or instruments for human benefit. Instead, zoocentrism recognizes that animals, as sentient beings capable of experiencing pain, pleasure, and a range of emotions, deserve to be acknowledged within the moral community. By attributing intrinsic value to animals, zoocentrism emphasizes that their lives and well-being matter in their own right and should not be dismissed simply because they are non-human.

At the heart of zoocentrism is the rejection of the idea that humans inherently occupy a

superior moral position in the natural order. As per the zoocentrism, human beings belong to animal kingdom and his occupying space is based on his moralistic values. This stance opposes anthropocentrism, which places human beings at the center of ethical and philosophical frameworks, often justifying exploitation of the non-human world. Zoocentric thought instead argues that human dominance is not a valid basis for moral hierarchy. By denying the assumption of human superiority, zoocentrism opens space for more egalitarian relationships between humans and other living creatures, where respect and responsibility replace domination and exploitation.

Ethical Inclusion of Animals

One of the main goals of zoocentric philosophies is to expand the scope of moral consideration to include animals as legitimate members of the moral community. This involves recognizing that animals have interests — such as the desire to avoid suffering, to seek nourishment, and to live freely according to their nature — that deserve moral weight. Ethical inclusion means that the well-being of animals should be factored into human decision-making, whether in areas such as food production, scientific research, or environmental policy. By granting animals ethical recognition, zoocentrism promotes a shift from seeing them as mere property or tools toward understanding them as beings with rights, needs, and dignity.

Emerging as a prominent field in the 1990s, ecocriticism explores the connection between literature and the natural world. It challenges traditional human-centered perspectives in literary studies, advocating for greater environmental awareness and a focus on ecological sustainability. Scholars like Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell have been instrumental in shaping ecocriticism, emphasizing the power of literature to influence ecological consciousness and inspire a deeper appreciation for the environment. Zoopoetics, a concept introduced by Jacques Derrida and later expanded by Matthew Calarco and others, explores how literature and poetry give voice to the experiences and agency of animals. Unlike ecocriticism, which addresses broader environmental concerns, zoopoetics focuses on the creative ways writers represent animals, honoring their perspectives and presence in the world. Through language and storytelling, zoopoetics seeks to bridge the human-animal divide, fostering empathy and a deeper understanding of their lives.

The central theme explored in both *The Tusk That Did the Damage* and *Larger Than Life* is the complex and often tragic conflict between humans and animals. These novels thoughtfully examine the deep and intricate connection between human beings and the natural world, particularly the ways in which people coexist with—and often encroach upon—wildlife and their habitats. The authors highlight that while humans and animals are inherently linked through shared ecosystems and overlapping spaces, conflict arises when this delicate balance is disrupted. This disruption typically occurs when human expansion—such as deforestation, agriculture, urbanization, or tourism—invades the natural territories of wild animals. As a result, both species are forced into close contact, often with devastating consequences.

When humans interfere with the natural migratory paths, breeding grounds, or feeding areas of wild animals, it leads to a collision of needs and survival strategies. These interactions can become dangerous and unpredictable, frequently resulting in physical harm or death for both humans and animals. Human lives and livelihoods—such as crops, homes, and livestock—can be destroyed, while animals may be injured, captured, or killed in retaliation or as a preventive measure. Moreover, the novels explore not only the physical consequences of such conflicts but also the emotional and psychological dimensions. Animals, especially intelligent and social species like elephants, are portrayed as sentient beings capable of experiencing trauma, grief, and resistance. The exploitation of animals for labor, entertainment, or other human purposes is depicted alongside the ways humans suffer loss and fear due to animal encounters. In some cases, animals retaliate or resist, demonstrating that they are not passive victims but agents in their own right. Ultimately, both novels serve as a powerful critique of the imbalance in human-animal relationships and challenge readers to reconsider the ethical and ecological implications of human dominance over the natural world.

The Tusk that Did the Damage and *Larger than Life*, both the novels reassure the need of environmental sustainability and reinforce the coexistence of man and animal. The writers of these novels portrayed the importance of rights of elephants, the bond and conflict between man and animal, trauma and suffering of both human and animal, illegal poaching of elephants for their tusks, exploitation and much more. It helps the readers to have an understanding and awareness towards non-human animals and their right to live in peace.

In both *Larger than Life* and *The Tusk that Did the Damage*, the authors explore the

deep emotional and social lives of elephants, particularly focusing on the traumatic experiences of orphaned calves. In *Larger than Life*, Alice, a dedicated elephant researcher, witnesses a brutal elephant massacre and risks her career, safety, and reputation—to rescue a helpless calf left behind. Similarly, in Tania James' *The Tusk that Did the Damage*, a young elephant also loses its mother to poachers and is later captured and tamed. Both narratives emphasize the devastating impact of maternal loss on elephant calves and the subsequent efforts to save them. Alice's work in observing elephant behavior sheds light on the complex ways in which elephants learn from one another, especially how elder females guide and mentor younger ones in preparation for motherhood, passing down crucial social and survival knowledge through generations.

The two novels exhibit notable parallels, particularly in their depiction of elephants' extraordinary olfactory capabilities. Both authors emphasize the elephants' ability to identify individuals and recall places or people through scent, even after extended periods, highlighting their exceptional memory and cognitive complexity. These heightened sensory faculties, coupled with profound emotional intelligence, render the elephants in both narratives powerful and evocative symbols of resilience and remembrance. Moreover, the novels compellingly portray the intricate bonds of affection, mutual dependence, and emotional connection between humans and elephants. In James's novel, the narrative perspective is partially assumed by an elephant, whose account chronicles its harrowing experience as a victim of poaching and its subsequent domestication. Over time, the elephant forms close relationships with its human caretakers, ultimately culminating in a tragic incident where it kills one of them before returning to the wild.

Picoult's portrayal of the bond between an orphaned calf and a researcher who risked her job to rescue the elephant is captivating. The writer has shown the struggles and effect taken by the protagonist to save the life of an innocent elephant calf which helps the reader to understand the dependency and also it shows how the elephant is developing the immense bond and vice versa. The writer has also shown the struggle of returning the calf to the wild and eventually fails in that. Even when the protagonist left the calf for one-week in order to find a place for her, she refused to eat and became very sad and week. That shows the bond an elephant had on its human. Elephant is more dependent on human than the human ever will be. The protagonist in the novel *Larger than Life*, says the words “thought I could not live without

her, when all along, she was the one who could not live without me”.

Picoult highlights the individuality and emotional depth of elephant personalities throughout the novel, particularly in their social interactions and inner lives. Much like humans, each elephant possesses a distinct temperament, set of preferences, and unique way of relating to others. While some are outgoing and playful, others may be quiet or more solitary. Simply placing two elephants together doesn't ensure a bond will form—just as two strangers don't automatically become friends. Their ability to connect depends on compatibility, underscoring that elephants are as uniquely individual as humans.

Conclusion

The emerging theory of zoopoetics emphasizes the concept of representing or giving voice to animals in ways that go beyond traditional anthropomorphism. Rather than treating animals as mere symbols or metaphors, zoopoetics asks how animals might participate in meaning-making. It questions whether literature can provide space for animals to express themselves in ways that humans can interpret—without erasing their otherness. In the novel *The Tusk That Did the Damage*, the writer gives voice to an elephant by making it one of the narrators of the story, allowing the elephant to recount its own journey. The author conveys the struggle and trauma of a tamed elephant through the animal's perspective. The novel further explores the elephant's relationship with its caretakers and with other elephants, particularly focusing on how elephants communicate and understand each other's emotions.

Zoocentrism is an ethical perspective that gives central moral importance to animals, often focusing particularly on non-human animals. It stands in contrast to anthropocentrism, which centers human beings as the most significant entities, and to biocentrism or ecocentrism, which extend moral consideration more broadly to all living beings or ecosystems. These two novels, *Larger than Life* and *The Tusk that Did the Damage* are a reminder that elephants, like humans, have rich emotional lives and should be treated as individuals, not as interchangeable members of a species.

When managing or caring for elephants whether in sanctuaries, zoos, or conservation projects it is essential to prioritize their personalities, social bonds, and freedom, instead of forcing them into human-defined roles. Human–elephant conflict often arises not because elephants are inherently vicious when its safety and needs are questionable. The main reason

for their growing viciousness is due to its survival instinct. When human habitation encroaches on their habitats and disrupt their lives, their evolutionary process towards timidity takes a U turn. While humans attempt to tame or hunt elephants down for their tusks, the elephants which are sentient beings with deep emotions, memories, and relationships in reality, get agitated and become aggressive. Transforming a wild elephant into a captive one may create dependency, but it also strips them of their natural rights. The true irony is that elephants, despite the harm done to them, can still show remarkable tolerance toward humans. Therefore, the focus should not be solely on human safety around elephants, but on creating conditions where both humans and elephants are safe from harmfulness and exploitation. Protecting their autonomy and respecting their nature is the only way forward for genuine coexistence.

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