

## *Parava*

### Soaring Towards New Directions in Human-Animal Relations

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**Directed by:** Soubin Shahir  
**Film Reviewed:** *Parava* (2017)

**Screenplay:** Soubin Shahir and Muneer Ali

**Production:** Anwar Rasheed Entertainments and the Movie Club

**Running Time:** 147 Minutes

**Language:** Malayalam

Human-Animal Studies (also referred to as ‘Animal Studies’ and ‘Anthrozoology’) is a discipline that focuses on the interactions and relations between humans and animals. With practitioners from disciplines as diverse as literature, anthropology, sociology, zoology, history, psychology, philosophy, and geography, this is truly an interdisciplinary field that has compelled us to re-examine the way we perceive and relate to animals. Scientific and cultural movements reveal a great deal about the way people’s attitudes towards animals have changed over the ages. Popular media, public performances, and literature act as signposts to these changing trends and for this reason are fascinating to analyse for the messages they consciously or unconsciously provide about prevailing societal values and beliefs. As Bert McCoy stated, “art depicts life and life depicts art,” and cinema is inarguably the most powerful of these art forms to throw a mirror up to societal psyche and cultural anxieties. Studies of animal depictions in films and human-animal relations in popular cinema point out that not only do filmic arts embody changing

human attitudes towards animals, they also act as allegories for cultural perceptions regarding the role of the ‘other’ (human, animal or otherwise) in human lives [1] [2]. In his book, *Animals in Film* Jonathan Burt argues that animal imagery in movies is distinctive in that audiences respond more emotionally to the animal being represented or to animal-related practices than they would to other forms of imagery. This could be because of an instinctive sense of empathy towards a fellow creature or due to the medium itself that uses particular techniques to evoke certain feelings in viewers.

Tales of human-animal relations in movies are particularly fertile ground to meditate on prevalent notions of ‘anthropocentrism’ or ‘anthropomorphism’. Anthropocentrism refers to the idea that human beings are of central importance in the cosmos and that everything else in nature, including animals, was created for the benefit of humankind. Anthropomorphism is the representation of animals ‘as having human form, or as having human thoughts and intentions’. This usually takes the form of animals being depicted as dressed in human clothes, talking in human languages and/or adopting human behaviours, feelings and mannerisms. Anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism define the way we perceive and/or study animals and hence are central concepts in ethology, animal ethics, philosophy, and cultural studies.

Movies about or involving animals typically reveal an anthropocentric stance or are strongly anthropomorphic in the way they depict the animal characters. For instance, well-known movies that celebrate human-animal relations such as *Free Willy*, *Hachiko* or even



*Snow Dogs*, are anthropocentric in that the animal characters are always subordinate to the human characters. Even when the main message of the movie appears to be the bond of love between the human and the animal(s), the stories of the movies are structured around an axis of loyalty, that the animal companion(s) bears towards the human. Even *Homeward Bound: The Incredible Journey* which is almost exclusively about three animals – two dogs and a cat – emphasizes the animals' efforts to rejoin or return to the human master and friend. This love for the human is what transforms the dolphin in *Free Willy* and the dog in *Call of the Wild*, and uplifts them. The centrality of human beings is strongly felt in the majority of 'animal movies'. Even 'animal movies' in which human characters are not present or occupy only minor roles still reinforce the 'human message' because they tend to be strongly anthropomorphic in their depiction of animal characters. Remember the talking fish in *Finding Nemo*, the kooky penguins in *Madagascar* or even the anxious mammoth in *Ice Age*? All of them are animals only in name. They act like humans, talk about human values of affection, sacrifice and courage, and act out very human tales about love, heartache and loss.

Such anthropomorphic and anthropocentric representations of animals are not restricted to Western movies. Some of these very same ideas are also highlighted in Indian movies like *Vanamohini*, *Haathi Mere Saathi*, *Teri Meherbaniyan*, *Aattukara Alamelu*, *Annai Oru Alayam*, *Chinnari Devatha*, and *Maa*, where animals are primarily tools that help humans out of difficult situations and offer them their undying love and protection. Animals are also portrayed in these movies as having

humanlike powers of observation and deduction, intelligence to divine the true nature of the human villains, and as bonded only to the human companion. For example, dogs sacrifice themselves for their master's life, or weep beside the grave of their human master, a goat acts as the protector for the female lead, an elephant calf recognises that its human captor is actually a do-gooder, and a monkey steals a key bunch and rescues a little girl from abductors. In all these movies, the animal's love for the human and their protection of human interests is what defines them and gives them a unique identity.

The film *Parava* stand this trope on its head. Released in September 2017, this debut effort by director Soubin Shahir is a skilfully woven subtle tale about what it means to love the animals that we keep. Ostensibly a story about two adolescent boys – Irshad and Habeeb – and their passion for pigeon racing, the movie peregrinates gently through the rhythms of their daily lives before it unfolds another tale, that of the unfortunate death of a beloved friend and mentor, and how it causes a rift between Irshad's elder brother and his father. At first glance, *Parava* is about the coming of age of Irshad; he falls in love and then has his heart broken, receives a sudden shocking glimpse into the complex beings that adult humans are and then settles back into the familiar realities of his life. Below the surface, *Parava* is also about the coming of age of Irshad's older brother, the angst-ridden Shaine, who shuts himself off from his family and friends in self-recrimination and anger and then quite suddenly wakes up to the reality of their love and support for him.

Interwoven between these two stories is the



narrative of the pigeons and the humans' relations with them. The pigeons are of course important possessions for Irshad and Habeeb and their rivals in the sport; the birds are stolen back and forth and sometimes appear to be mere tools for human one-upmanship. But, as with much of *Parava*, this human prepotence is only part of the tale, the other is about the boys' fondness for the pigeons, their pride in them and their anger at the cruel treatment the birds have faced. The boys' tenderness towards the pigeons sets them apart from the other pigeon fanciers; they not only come across as more humane, their affection covers the act of pigeon keeping to one of pet keeping rather than sport breeding. Most importantly, their regard for the pigeons makes the relationship between the boys and the pigeons more equal. For although there is much evidence that the boys care for the pigeons, there are no obvious signs of the birds' affection for the boys. In this, the pigeons hold dominion over the humans; they can be trained to obey human commands, but they cannot be forced to love humans. The leitmotif of love for an animal humanising the human comes up in another interlude in the movie, where a woman bewails the death of her guard dog. The woman's anguish at losing her dog not only transforms her from a potential villainess to an average and possibly good human being, her grief also transmutes what appeared to be a mean and ferocious animal to a beloved pet.

*Parava* succeeds in other ways in redrawing the familiar canvas of human-animal interactions. Human-animal interactions as typically portrayed in Indian cinema are replete with images of physical hugs, benedictions, and caresses between the animals and the humans. Even when the animal involved is as un-

demonstrative as a snake, human-animal interactions involve images of the snake with up-raised hood, a less than subtle message about the ability of the snake to protect and harm in the same gesture. In powerful contrast, human-animal interactions in *Parava* combine moments of the sweetest intimacy possible with an unsettling feeling of consternation. The opening scenes of Irshad swallowing a fish, along with a mouthful of water, to bring it back to his house sets the tone for the film and its take on human-animal relations. The fish is a bone of contention between Irshad and his rivals in the neighbourhood and is stolen back to settle old scores. The fish is simultaneously a human acquisition, and an object of human affection and this theme is reiterated later in the film when Irshad fills his mouth with water and then kisses the dove's beak to pour it back into its throat; an action that is so reminiscent of parent birds feeding their fledgling young.

In her book *Kinship with Monkeys* [3], Loretta Cormier talks about how the complex relations between Guaja Indians and howler monkeys in Eastern Amazonia is characterised by the competing interactions of consumption and nourishment. Howler monkeys are important beings for the Guaja, and infant orphan monkeys are often adopted by Guaja women who may even breastfeed them. However, howler monkeys are also consumed as food by the Guaja, for monkeys are considered kin, and consumption of kin is a form of symbolic cannibalism in this community. Although there are no stark metaphors of eating and feeding in *Parava*, the quietly brilliant scenes of physical interactions between humans and animals in the movie that juxtapose nurturance and consumption within a single act, bring to mind



Cormier's delineation of the Guaja and their relations with their primate kin.

There are no dramatic denouements in *Parava*. Even when viewers are shown that the girl of Irshad's dreams is now married to his older brother's friend, the emphasis is on the disappointment of Irshad's calf love; the social implications of what is possibly the marriage of an underage girl is only allowed to seep in very slowly into the viewers' minds. Similarly, the movie appears to build towards the grand finale of the pigeon race, but the various strands of the movie are actually tied up in a regrettably cinematic fight between Shaine and a rival gang. At the end of the movie, the pigeons soar high again, and Irshad's hopes for his life stretch as limitless as the blue sky of the pigeons.

In her review of a book about the impact of evolutionary theory on popular culture and the performing arts, Erika Rundle writes: "If we're lucky, *Performance and Evolution in the Age of Darwin* will lay the foundation for a burgeoning field of Darwinian criticism in the-

atre and performance studies for decades to come." Similarly, maybe we can hope that *Parava* indicates new directions in Indian cinema and that this step forward is reflective of changes in Indian society about the role of animals in human lives and relations between humans and animals. Certainly, going by the last Indian movie that depicted pigeons playing a role in human lives (who can forget the box office hit of the 80s, *Maine Pyaar Kiya*), we have indeed come a long way from thinking about animals as mere courier tools that flap around to smooth the path of true love.

### Suggested Reading

- [1] P Porter, Teaching Animal Movies. In Margo DeMello (ed) *Teaching the Animal: Human-animal Studies Across the Disciplines*, Lantern Books: New York, 2010.
- [2] R Bishop, Several Exceptional Forms of Primates: Simian Cinema, *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 2, pp.238–250, 2008.
- [3] Loretta A Cormier, *Kinship with Monkeys: The Guaja Foragers of Eastern Amazonia*, Columbia University Press: Columbia, 2010.

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