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Dominic O'Key, *Creaturely Forms in Contemporary Literature: Narrating the War Against Animals* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 206pp.

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Creaturely Forms in Contemporary Literature drives the attention of animal studies towards modern prose fiction in order to interpret the presence and significance of animals within modernist literary narratives to expose the “war against animals” in the same milieu (3). The book’s opening query revolves around how it is possible to engage in an interpretive practice attuned to animals in literature, and embedded within this enquiry is a significance that extends beyond a mere understanding of semantic and symbolic roles animals assume in fiction. While this is not charting new territory, the novelty in Dominic’s work lies in his engagement with the thematic terrains of creaturely melancholia, trouble and love, which offer innovative reading practices that may aid in tackling the “representational problems of animals” in literature (4). O’Key reinterprets selected works of W.G. Sebald, J.M. Coetzee and Mahasweta Devi and redirects attention to the structural aspects of their literary composition—which he refers to as ‘creaturely forms’ (5)—that exhibit a heightened sensitivity towards the existence of animals in these works. O’Key engages with Eric Santner’s and Anat Pick’s respective conceptualizations of creaturely to forge a pathway where he introduces the pivotal role of literature which can provide a nuanced understanding of creaturely life that goes beyond the dichotomy of human exceptionalism and animal vulnerability. Essentially, O’Key’s understanding of ‘creaturely’ extends the examination of animals in literature beyond their mere existence, directing attention to their portrayal, reception, and engagement within the narrative.

The first chapter, titled “The War Against Animals”—inspired by Dinesh Wadiwel’s titular book from 2015—examines the contemporary global crisis, when commercialization renders animals disposable. O’Key expands on the war against animals that points to both the commodification and depletion of animals for human gain coupled with persistent cognitive-material distribution of the concept of humanity—a construct that disregards other life forms classified as animal, whether or not they are human. While addressing and also critiquing the war against animals—an approach that may fail to recognize the realities of human-animal cohabitation (9), I believe that O’Key’s undeterred focus on capitalism’s extractive nature regarding animals reinforces Derrida’s notion of violence on animals (2002)

as well as Krithika Srinivasan and Rajesh Kasturirangan's notion of care infused with violence (2017). He references Sylvia Wynter and Judith Butler, who flesh out the idea of exclusive appropriation of the notion of humanity, and carves out the underlying goal for the consecutive chapters on Sebald, Coetzee and Devi, analyzing how their works engage with the themes of "colonialism, anti-semitism and apartheid" (18). These writers, O'Key maintains, strive to reassert the agency and dignity of the animals, all the while scrutinizing the exploitative control modern society exerts over their lives.

The second chapter, titled "W.G. Sebald's Creaturely Melancholia," argues how Sebald's writings bear witness to the ways in which modernity has simultaneously eliminated and exhibited creaturely life. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) and *Austerlitz* (2001) are both located in an environmentally scarred world in the late twentieth century, that serves as a testimony to his creaturely melancholia, driving his efforts to "re-member" (43), therefore highlighting the shared suffering between humans and animals and cultivating a heightened creaturely awareness. More precisely, these assertions allow to construe Sebald's strategy of establishing connections as a mode of memorializing fractured existence within modernity and embodying a melancholic endeavor to resist the prevailing anthropocentric influences. In *The Rings of Saturn*, pointing at the confusion between distinguishing a Herring and a Cod fish in the novel, O'Key foregrounds Sebald's use of images that "misrepresent its supposed linguistic referent" (64), which may also be read as a manifestation of modernity's broader tendency to exploit, instrumentalize and/or neglect animals. O'Key's attention to this elision of difference does seem to pay attention to the stabilization of the stereotype of the nonhuman animal where the animal individuality is neglected and the animal is typecast into homogenization. In *Austerlitz*, on the other hand, the zoological garden underscores a disjunction in human-animal interactions and paves the way for a new kind of melancholic rapport between human and nonhuman realms.

In "J.M. Coetzee's Creaturely Trouble" O'Key conceptualizes the challenges inherent in integrating pro-animal perspectives within the fabric of fiction. O'key's attention to Coetzee's literary works, acknowledging and rejecting the expectations set by literary realism—which often requires a sacrificial element involving animals as a part of plot development—warrants further examination. While In *Disgrace* (1999) Coetzee recognizes the inescapable implications of the prevailing human-animal conflict, the author also leaves room for a narrative possibility where survival of the animal (Driepoot in this case) becomes conceivable. This interpretation also offers a vision of posthumous posthuman relationality (DeFalco). By locating Driepoot's death in an "extra-textual future" (106), O'Key may be hinting at the limitations of a biocentrism of care and alludes to the potential for care that transcends life itself. O'Key observes that trouble encompasses both ethical dilemmas, faced by the characters in their relation to animals, and the artistic challenges inherent in conveying these dilemmas.

The final chapter, titled “Mahasweta Devi’s Creaturely Love,” centers on Devi’s array of formal techniques that function as counterforce against the prevailing anthropological mechanisms inherent in postcolonial advancements. Devi uses the concentrated and intense nature of short stories to counteract the predictable narrative progression of postcolonial development. O’Key argues that Devi’s short stories portray interspecies solidarity through creaturely love that does not align with the traditional ideas of love (130). Reading the subaltern as not mere victims, and shifting traditional views of “postcoloniality as planetarity” (155), makes O’Key’s analysis compelling by offering a reimagining of postcoloniality that acknowledges the complex nature of life on this planet and seeks to foster a sense of multispecies care and love. O’Key’s interpretation of the animal’s otherness, however, seems confined by the animal’s physical vulnerability, where the animal needs to die in order to maintain its incomprehensible alterity.

O’Key, in his conclusion, offers a brief analysis of creatureliness in few other contemporary literary works, closing on the observation that, while literature cannot directly alleviate the animal suffering, it can at least bear witness to it and resist in perpetuating enduring narratives of human superiority. Thinking of modernist literature, in Rancierian fashion, “a regime of visibility” (24) and the one that “unsettle(s) the logic of representation” (64), O’Key forces a reconsideration of animal presences and significance within literary narratives, contemplating the subjective nature of representation and questioning how animals are symbolically and metaphorically constructed in texts. Overall, O’Key’s volume is an important text for readers interested in literary animal studies, postcolonial animal studies and environmental humanities, as it offers, without being preachy at any point, a peek into our affected planetary present.

Works Cited

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