

[https://doi.org/ 10.48047/AFJBS.4.4.2022.851-858](https://doi.org/10.48047/AFJBS.4.4.2022.851-858)



African Journal of Biological Sciences

Journal homepage: <http://www.afjbs.com>



Research Paper

Open Access

An Anthropomorphic Reading of Thakazhy's *Vellapokkathil* and Padmanabhan's *Shekhutty*

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Article History

Volume 4, Issue 4, 2022

Received: 29 Nov 2022

Accepted : 30 Dec 2022

doi:10.48047/AF5BS.4.4.2022.851-858

Abstract

Anthropomorphism attributes human characteristics to non-human entities, like animals and plants, or inanimate objects, like stars or machines. It is widely used by writers in fairy tales, fables, and other types of animal stories. The genre particularly deals with the lives of companion animals and their affinity to their masters. In anthropomorphic stories animals are presented as if they have human emotions, intentions, and behaviors. The blending of human and animal traits allows for a unique and imaginative story telling experience. Here, in this paper, there is an attempt to bring out the anthropomorphic elements evident in Thakazhy's *Vellapokkathil* and Padmanabhan's *Shekhutty*. Both relate the story of companion dogs as they go through thoughts and emotions similar to those of human beings. As in a stream of consciousness novel, the respective authors take us through the mental and emotional states of 'Chennan's Dog' and 'Shekhutty' and bring to light the various facets of their inner worlds. Both are loyal and devoted to their masters, Chennan, a *paraya* and Damu, a rural business man. When things take the course outside their safe grounds, they are to deal with their singular plights, one left behind on the top of a drowning hut and the other disowned and branded mad. When their basic needs are denied, they show their resistance to those responsible and when their fundamental wants are thwarted, they react with all their physical power and mental strength to their adversaries. Their feelings of hope and expectation, frustration and helplessness and anxiety and despair are all vividly portrayed by the respective authors namely, Thakazhy and Padmanabhan. The dog heroes in their stories feel, react, and suffer like humans when they go through life-threatening situations. All the subtle and delicate feelings of intimacy, devotion and fidelity exhibited by these non-human agents force us believe that the line that separates humans and animals is imaginary and indistinguishable.

Key words: Anthropomorphism, interior monologue, stream of consciousness, human vs. animal.

Thakazhy Sivasankara Pillai, the legendary Malayali novelist, widely acclaimed as the author of *Chemmeen*, *Thottiyude Makan*, *Kayar*, *Enippadikal* and *Randidangazhi*, vividly portrays the rural life of Kerala (the southernmost state of India) with its distinct class differences and caste discriminations. His narratives capture the evolution of the socio-economic conditions and politico-cultural realities in the post-independence Kerala as he delves deep into the lives of people especially from the lower strata of the society. They showcase his keen observations not only of humans but also of other species that reveals his deep understanding of the different situations they go through which makes an indelible imprint on the readers even after they are long read. T. Padmanabhan's major works include *Prakasham Parathunna Oru Penkutty*, *Oru Kathakrithu Kurishil*, *Makhan Singhinte Maranam*, *Veedu Nashtapetta Kutti*, *Kalabhariavan*, *Nalinakanthi*, *Sakshi*, *Sayvinte Dog*, *Gouri* and *Kadal*. His writing often probes into the complexities of the human condition, human relationships, and societal issues. He has been credited with bringing the modern Malayalam short story nearer to the subjective intensity of the lyric.

In both stories, *Vellapokkathil* and *Shekhutty*, the heroes are two watch dogs who take up key roles along with humans and the plots mainly revolve around them. The readers are forced to believe that they also have something similar to human mind where thoughts and feelings pass through and they are let to have a peep into the inner recesses of the interior of these animals. The fictional techniques used for the development of the stories resemble stream of consciousness and interior monologue that reveal the different ways they think and feel in various crucial situations. We are driven to realize that they, rather than merely instinctual and impulsive, are able to reflect and interpret the outside stimuli. They are intuitive and imaginative to find ways and means to overcome obstacles and survive opposing forces.

“Vellapokkathil”, Thakazhy's moving and heart-rending story, was written in the backdrop of the great deluge of 1924 in Kerala, known as the “Great Flood of 99” as it occurred in the year 1099 according to the Malayalam Calendar. It relates the poignant story of a house keeping dog reared by a Dalit *paraya*, Chennan who had to leave his hut with family in torrential downpour and threatening flood. After his master left, the dog expects someone would come back to rescue

him as well. The narrator takes the readers through the thoughts and feelings of the dog, while waiting for rescue, comparable to those of a human being caught up in a similar situation. He gets afraid as he looks at the violent water and threatening sky and moanfully looks at every group of passing people who are rushing to safe places from the flooded area. For the first time in his life, he feels loneliness as he is left alone on the roof of a sinking hut. He had been the constant companion of his master and an avid keeper of his house. When Chennan, his pregnant wife and four children took to boat from the drowning hut, he never thought he would be left behind. He thought they would come back for him but it turned out to be a hope against hope. The narrator observes, he produces a series of sounds similar to the sounds of a lonesome human being who is rendered helpless. "The animal produced a series of sounds comparable to the sounds of a helpless human being" (26). As he sees no one in sight, anxiety leading to anger gets over him which he lets out through his grunts and groans which are bootless.

Now, the gnawing hunger subdues him and he cannot remain quiet and walks restlessness over the hut. He begins to grumble desperately and complainingly. He imagines, while Chennan and family are having their dinner at the beach side, "As usual the master would put aside a handful of boiled rice for me today as well" (26). We can sense how his life from a fondled pet dog goes down to an abandoned cur who has no one to care for. The last traces of life begin to desert him as his vital energy that pulled him on declines. Fear and hunger mount him and he speaks in a language, as the author says, anyone can understand for it is the language of fear and hunger, a universal language. Then he is seen in a praying position, pleading to both earth and heaven. Before he was struck down by the floating monster, an alligator, he unto his last faithfully guarded his master's house and becomes an icon of loyalty and devotion.

Padmanabhan's "Shekhutty" is another anthropomorphic story in which an animal seeks human intimacy and goes through myriad mental states comparable to those of human beings. Shekhutty is brave, adventurous, romantic, committed and defying all inimical forces. He is the companion dog of Damu whom he loves not just as a master but an intimate friend and confidant. Though he is a threat to all others, to his master alone he wholeheartedly declares his allegiance and is loyal to him despite his otherwise revolting behavior. He is ready to make amends to his ways when desired and asked of him by his master. Shekhutty, suddenly, stops his ferocious ways and become obedient and docile to Damu. But he rules over his surroundings like

a king and would not allow anyone encroach his territory. He is strong and brave and a nightmare to all creepy animals. But towards Rosy, his sweet heart, he is committed and devoted and for her alone, the romantic hero spares his love and affection; care and concern. And it is for her sake he quarrels with her master who once threw a big log at him but missed him and broke his Rosy's leg. He waits to take revenge and when a convenient occasion comes, he attacks him and takes a mouthful of flesh from his ankle. But he never thought it would eventually lead him to his permanent enslavement. To prevent him from biting those who pass by, which he used to do, a strong iron muzzle was put on his face preventing him open his mouth. In fact, he was guarding his ground entrusted to his watch and those he thought encroached his area incurred his bite in which he could not find any grievous fault.

Now, Damu had to go away to some distant place on a business trip for a few days. And it happened that Shekhutty inflicted a small scar on the feet of the child of the home who came to chain him. He was suspected mad and someone advised not to feed him for forty days and they suddenly stopped feeding him. Now begins his woeful days. He is chained, muzzled and not fed. He used to be the close companion of Damu who used to treat and feed him well which made him sturdy and strong. Now, he is totally left neglected. He becomes an object of hatred and contempt and a butt of jokes for every passerby who would taunt and wound him with sharp objects. He just looks at them with feeble eyes. He gets desperate and frustrated. The edges of the iron muzzle hurt his mouth and he is in excruciating pain. He cannot even bark but can only groan and grumble. Hot tears flow from his eyes, which were once full of luster and sparkle. He still has the earlier verve and vigor inside but is now fatigued and exhausted physically. What makes him downhearted is not the thought of the impending death but the neglect of humans and the resultant helplessness. An inextinguishable craving for freedom stays with him despite the humiliating enslavement he is dragged into. The only thing that gives him hope is the thought that his master will come for him soon and the good old days he spent with Rosy.

As he closes his eyes, he can see his beautiful Rosy before him and he mistakes everyone coming to him in his sleep for Rosy. "When the dusk was casting its shadow everywhere, he was lying in half-sleep. In his reverie he heard a voice from beyond the paddy fields. "Eh... Dhame... He too heard it. He forgot his pain and fatigue for a moment. He raised his long ears. Again, the same sound- Eh... Dhame... Every bit of his body became emotional. He

struggled to stand on his feeble legs” (883). He was certain that his master was coming to rescue him. His heart was being filled with boundless emotions. He would place his face affectionately at the feet of his master. He was excited at the thought of the imminent bliss that was awaiting him (883).

To borrow the psychoanalytical vocabulary of Freud, here there is someone who tries to fulfill his unfulfilled desires through dreams. Shekhutty, rendered physically helpless, can only dream now like humans and he mistakes his dreams for real. Like humans, Shekhutty ruminates his good old days with Rosy his beloved. Even in his last moments it is her memories that gives him comfort:

In dream, he was recalling the days he first saw and fell in love with Rosy from the next door. An old man was then touching his muzzle with a walking stick which interrupted his soothing dream. He did not like it. Who dares disturb his sweet time with Rosy? It must be that Vellu who has an eye on her. He would not let it though he or anyone else would dare it. He jumped barking ferociously. . . (884)

Even in sleep he is an envious lover. Though his intense love for Rosy and the hope that his master would come animate him once again, soon he is filled with the feeling of wretchedness and helplessness as he knows that he is condemned to end up in chains as a mad dog.

Now begins an interior monologue as Shekhutty feels sympathy for the people who ridicule and humiliate him. They would not dare if he were out of chain and muzzle. They exploit his present plight and the vulnerable condition he is forced into. He goes to a hallucination and he feels he is haunted by a group of devils; they come after him and he must escape. From the nearby temple, ear piecing sound of fireworks is heard; loud sounds of drums are heard. Everywhere there are burning torches. He thinks the devils are onto him and this is his end. He tries to bark and no sound comes out. He is writhing in pain. He pulls at his chain with all his remaining strength and it breaks. He runs for his life in every way and reaches the bottom of a mango tree. He cannot run anymore and cannot even move. He dreams of his beloved and when a vulture puts his beak and claws into his body, he thinks it was Damu who at last came for him. His eyes are wet with a last tear of happiness. Thus, unto his last he keeps aflame his twin devotion: to Damu and Rosy.

Both Thakazhy and Padmanabhan create relatable characters while maintaining some essence of their animal characteristics. The dogs accept their assigned roles as watch dogs and do it with loyalty and fidelity and they express their unflagging devotion to their masters. But when their trust in humans begins to fail, they go through a sort of existential angst. They feel desolate, not knowing what to do or where to go. As fear and hunger gnaw at their being, they are worried and distraught. They cling onto the threads that connect them to life as long as they can. They fight to survive by keeping the flame of their hope alive that moves them on for some time. They do not want easily to succumb to the teeth and claws of the waiting alligator and vulture. They seem to be convinced that their masters Chennan and Damu would at last come and deliver them from their present dilemma. They do not want to depart uncared and unwept after leading an unsung life. But when their hope begins to wane, they stop all fight. They are already exhausted physically and mentally by hunger and fear. The hungry animals are to become prey to satiate the hunger of the carnivorous agents of death. In both stories nature is an active participant and witness to all these poignant events. The hut, wind and water also play their accompanying roles and serve as the setting of the stories.

Chennan's Dog has no name for it is every dog who trusts his master and guards his house faithfully despite the adverse situations. But Shekhutty has, unlike other dogs, a distinct identity and he asserts it even when it was tested by hostile forces. He affirms his self as he goes through various vicissitudes of his life. While Chennan's Dog fights the opposing natural forces, Shekhutty must fight, in addition, human agents who attempt to curb and restrain his freedom. When the former tries to keep external enemies at bay, the latter has to ward off both internal - created by his mad thoughts- as well as external enemies. While Chennan's Dog possesses many aspects of his lowly *paraya* master who himself was a docile servant, Shekhutty assumes a superior stance and affirms his position as his master Damu who has a clear stand and opinion in the matters of his household. Chennan's Dog can be compared to a *gruhastasrami* according to the Indian tradition while Shekhutty represents an angry young man who goes through the different experiences of adolescence such as identity crisis, defiance, and romance.

“Vellapokkathil” and “Shekhutty” are studies in human-animal relation and they bring home certain similarities between them through different instances in the stories. According to Aristotle, human beings have a *zoe*, bare life they share with animals as their basic drives and

instincts are the same. As is evident from the two stories, the animals also see food, drink, and protection from hostile conditions as the basic needs of life. When they are denied of these essential existential aspects of life, they are rendered helpless and utter a language that is universal and not species specific. They express their fear and hunger in a language, not necessarily verbal, but understandable to anyone. Besides, they have the crave for love and affection and need someone to care for and share love with. They have the urge for freedom the denial of which would be like testing their tolerance and they would tend to break their manacles of slavery.

Anthropomorphic stories ask the readers to see non-human entities and inanimate objects through a different lens and not to neglect them as secondary creatures or to consider them as insignificant. They are beings, though not explicitly endowed with speaking ability, who can feel joy and sorrow and experience affection and dejection. These can be sensed through the different noises they produce such as barking, whining, sniveling, and whimpering and various physical expressions they exhibit such as looking, wagging, scratching, and raising paws. Chennan's dog and Shekhutty express their needs and wants through their varied behaviors especially when they most need human presence and care in their miserable conditions. But they do not get what they seek but only disregard and dejection in return. Chenna's dog is even seen praying when all his hopes in humans fail.

As is evident in these stories, animals could make a commentary on human behavior and the social structures they are part of. Both dogs are upset and distraught at the callousness and cruelty of humans. Chennan's dog was beaten hard by the thieves and Shekhutty was inflicted pain by the sharp edge of a bamboo. They resist and react at the human injustice and they want to tell them that it is not proper to hurt others when they are vulnerable and helpless. They too have a valid point of view which also must be considered when dealing with them. They can offer an alternative view to the human understanding which is only partial. If humans need a balanced and wholesome vision, they need to heed to them as well without prejudice or malice. It would teach them how to make amends to their biased thoughts and unfair behavior.

In both stories, the animals conform to their respective geographical conditions and social scenarios which is evident in their responses to the surrounding stimuli. They exhibit responses and reactions proper to the spaces they are placed in. Chennan's dog belongs to Kuttanadu, a

landscape below the sea level while Shekhutty occupies a higher plane. They are in a way nativized and a local sensibility is infused in their being which points to a new possibility in anthropomorphic stories. Though there are universal dimensions in all animate objects, there are also particular manifestations when placed in different spatiotemporal situations as is evident in the stories under study.

Animal stories are a rare phenomenon among Malayalam short stories and they do not constitute a distinct genre in the language. “Shekhutty” could be seen as a pastiche of “Vellapokkathil” as they belong to two totally different times and there is every possibility to assume that Thakazhy’s “Vellapokkathil” (1935) may have influenced Padmanabhan’s “Shekhutty” (1994) especially in the ascription of human traits to animals. Both stories effectively portray the dog heroes and the vicissitudes they go through as they assume human thoughts, dreams, emotions, and feelings. Both the writers have succeeded in anthropomorphizing the companion dogs in such a way that the readers tend to feel that it is one of their species who is suffering being estranged and excluded.

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