



Interspecies Kinship and Ecological Harmony in Dhan Gopal Mukerji's "kari the elephant"

S. Sumithra

Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. John's College, Palayamkottai, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India
(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India)

Received: 03 May 2025; Received in revised form: 29 May 2025; Accepted: 03 Jun 2025; Available online: 07 Jun 2025
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Abstract— This paper explores the intricate human animal relationships and kinship depicted in "Kari the Elephant" by Mukerji, focusing on the profound bond between a young Indian boy and Kari, a five month old elephant. The narrative illustrates how Kari is treated as a family member, emphasizing the emotional connection and mutual care that defines their relationship. Drawing on theories from scholars like Harriet Ritvo and Eric Fudge, the paper argues that Kari embodies moral agency and individuality, challenging traditional views of animals as mere objects. The setting of the Indian jungle serves as an active participant in this bond, highlighting the interconnectedness of humans, animals, and nature. The boy's interactions with Kari and other animals, such as the snake, crocodile and monkey, further illustrate themes of respect, coexistence and ecological balance. Through these relationships, Mukerji presents a vision of harmony with nature, where both human and animal exist in a shared, interdependent world. The paper concludes by emphasizing the importance of recognizing the emotional and ethical dimensions of human-animal relationships in literature.



Keywords— Jungle, Human animal bond, Kinship, Ecological Harmony, Companion Species.

Introduction

One of the earliest Indian writers to achieve literary fame in the US was Dhan Gopal Mukerji (1890–1936). After relocating to the United States in 1910, Mukerji, who was born in Calcutta, gained renown for his English language works that exposed Western readers to Indian mythology, culture and folklore. Mukerji's writings, especially his children's novels, were instrumental in overcoming cultural barriers and providing Western readers with an insight into India's natural and cultural environments. Mukerji won the prestigious Newbery Medal in 1928 for his later work, *Gay-Neck: The Story of a Pigeon*, and his most well known book, "Kari the Elephant", which was released in 1922 and became a classic in American children's literature. "Kari the Elephant", was a short story that was originally published as a part of collections of stories in his *The Jungle Books*. It tells the story of a young boy and his elephant, Kari in the jungles of India. It gives a vivid description of animals, the jungle, and human animal

bond. Mukerji craft a tale that emphasizes empathy, coexistence, and the beauty of the natural world. In this story Mukerji not only focuses on the titular elephant but also includes representations of various animals, each contributing uniquely to the story's moral and ecological framework.

Human Animal Relationship and Kinship

In "Kari the Elephant", the narrator, a young Indian boy, forms a profound bond with Kari, a five month old elephant. From the beginning, Kari is treated not merely as an animal, but as a family member, friend, and even a saviour. The narrator, who is nine years old when he begins caring for Kari, the narrator utters "Perhaps we grew together; that is probably why I never found out just how tall he was" (Mukerji 3; ch.1). He gradually learns how to feed, bathe, and tend to the elephant, developing a deep understanding of Kari's preferences and behaviours. The narrator says "Every day I used to take him to the river in

the morning for his bath. He would lie down on the sandbank while I rubbed him with the clean sand of river for an hour" (Mukerji 3-4; ch.1). As Harriet Ritvo argues, "Domesticated animals often become part of human social structures, forming roles akin to family members" (Ritvo 34). This evolving relationship illustrates the boy's growing sensitivity and emotional connection to the animal, reflecting a significant example of interspecies kinship.

The relationship between Kari and the narrator is built on a foundation of mutual care and companionship. While the boy tends to Kari's daily needs, Kari in turn, protects the boy and even saves a life, demonstrating the depth of their bond. "I thought some water animal was going to swallow me. I heard the squealing of Kari and I knew it was his trunk about my neck. He pulled us both ashore" (Mukerji 7; ch.1). Kari is more than just an animal; he is a dependent companion who is treated not as an object, but as a sentient being with moral and emotional agency. As Eric Fudge mentions, "To recognize the animal as a subject means allowing it a kind of kinship, where we do not deny its difference but recognize its presence in a shared world" (Fudge 8). Fudge's framework aligns with the way Kari the Elephant presents animals not as voiceless or mindless beings, but as subjects with individual personalities and ethical presence. Kari's actions especially his moral agency in saving the drowning boy reflect this recognition.

He is neither a mere pet nor a beast of burden, but a respected companion whose emotions, intelligence, and agency are fully acknowledged. The author states that "Kari was like a baby. He had to be trained to be good and if you did not tell him when he was naughty, he was up to more mischief than ever" (Mukerji 9; ch.1). Kari is not simply a passive recipient of care, but an active participant in the relationship, one who teaches the boy patience and dedication through their shared experiences. He points out "Kari loved human being; the more she saw them the happier he felt. He glided by them like a human child. I was very proud of him and his behaviour" (Mukerji 53; ch.4). Donna Haraway a Post humanist talks about the concept of "Companion species where animals and humans form co-evolving relationships based on respect and mutual dependence. Companion species are those with whom humans share their lives in ways that transform both" (Haraway 17).

Harmony with Nature

The setting of the Indian jungle is not merely a backdrop, but an active participant in shaping the human animal bond. From the outset, Mukerji portrays the natural world as a space of interconnectedness and mutual dependence. The natural environment is not passive scenery; rather, it plays a vital role in nurturing the

relationship between the boy and Kari. Through daily river bathing, they engage in peaceful ritualistic interactions that foster unity among humans, animals, and natural elements, resulting in mutual happiness. This depiction accentuates the eco-centric viewpoint of the plot, emphasizing nature's role in creating moral and emotional bonds. The boy's habit of gathering food from the forest demonstrates an awareness of how both human and animal existence relies on nature and should not be exploited. The boy denotes, "I had to climb all kinds of trees to get the most delicate and tender twigs" (Mukerji 5, ch.1). Kari's innate behaviour demonstrates her role as a component of the natural ecosystem and represents her integration into both the human and plant-based worlds. The author states, "Kari, however, put out his trunk and helped himself to whatever fruits he liked eating them with great relish"(36; ch.3). Lawrence Buell an American literary critic mentions "Nature writing constructs landscapes not merely as settings, but as agents of experience and meaning" (Buell 1995).

The author also has a strong connection with nature, he used to bathe and pray while standing facing the east, reciting these words "O Blossom of Eastern Silence, Reveal to us the face of God, Whose shadow is this day, and Whose light is always within us. Lead us from the unreal to the Real, From sound into Silence, From darkness unto Light, and From death into Immortality" (Mukerji 41; ch.3). The spiritual quote reflects a longing for unity, truth, and enlightenment ideals mirrored in Mukerji's portrayal of the bond between the boy, the Kari, and the natural world. Mukerji's story embodies the Eastern ideal of living in an ecological and spiritual harmony with all living things. Furthermore, the river represents the ecological balance and interdependence of all living organisms in the narrative. As Ramachandra Guha states in *Environmentalism: A Global History* "Traditional Indian views saw rivers as sacred entities, essential for not just physical survival but spiritual balance" (Guha 2000). Kari's daily travel to the river to drink and bathe demonstrates how the boy learns to adapt his life to the elephant's natural routines. By ensuring that Kari receives water in addition to food, the boy's duties highlight the relational aspect of caring in an ecological environment. Kari's adventures in the jungle highlight his dependence on forest resources, as the boy often mentions, "It is better for animals to be where the jungle is, for the jungle is sweeter and kinder than the wilderness of stones the city" (Mukerji 59; ch. 4). Additionally, Cheryll Glotfelty, a foundational ecocritic, argues, "Ecocriticism takes an earth centred approach to literary studies" (Glotfelty 1996).

Illustrations of several creatures

While the primary focus is on kari, the elephant Mukerji includes other animals such as the snake, the crocodile, and the monkey that contribute to the broader themes of respect, coexistence, and survival in the natural world. Timothy Morton an ecology critic argues in his book *The Ecological Thought* "Even the smallest creatures disrupt anthropocentric perceptions and must be considered in ecological thinking" (Morton 2010). Kari the central figure, is portrayed as a symbol of strength, intelligence and loyalty. Here, Kari is not just a domestic animal but is also associated with wisdom, empathy, and compassion, The boy says, "I watched Kari and the other animals, the more I came to understand why Kari and I loved each other. We had a soul in Common" (Mukerji 124 -125; ch. 9). Secondly, the snake's appearance represents natural danger rather than wickedness. It presents concepts of vulnerability, comedy, and dread. Similarly, Mukerji's portrayal of the snake serves to remind readers of the danger and unpredictability of the natural system. "One day I saw a snake curling up in a banana grove and Kari raised his trunk in warning" (10; ch2). The crocodile, which represents a predatory aspect of nature, directly threatens Kari and the boy. The protagonist's bravery and resourcefulness are tested during this confrontation. It symbolizes a force of nature that is neither villainized nor sentimentalized: natural terror and predation. The authors says,

One winter we came to jungles on the seashore where I saw crocodiles lying on the banks of the Delta in the daytime, with their mouths open and little birds going in and out of them, cleaning their teeth, and eating all the insects that poison their gums. Unfortunately, elephants have no birds to clean their teeth. And, there too, even in the water you could smell animals that lived on other animals (78-79; ch.6).

The next topic of discussion is Kopee, the monkey who appears in "Kari the Elephant" and has a small but significant symbolic part in the story. In contrast to Kari's kind and noble disposition, Kopee, who was introduced as a naughty companion, provides comic relief. The variety of animal behaviors and temperaments found in the animal kingdom are reflected in his antics, which include stealing bananas and making fun of kari. Kopee is never demonized despite his mischievous behavior; rather, he is shown as a component of the natural ecosystem, driven more by instinct and curiosity than by hatred. The narrator added,

Monkeys, as you know, are annoying creatures. I had a pet monkey of my own

named Kopee, who was red faced and tawny coated. He never came near the elephant, and Kari never thought of going near him. Whenever we went out, this monkey used to sit on my shoulder, and if we passed through bazaars where mangoes and other fruits were sold, it was very difficult to keep Kopee from getting into mischief (31-32; ch. 3).

As Greg Garrard a Professor of Environmental Humanities argues "Nature is not benevolent but balanced in ecological writing, with predator-prey dynamics part of the whole" (Ecocriticism, 2004). Thus, Mukerji creates a textured portrayal of multiple animal species, each contributing a distinct moral, symbolic and ecological meaning.

CONCLUSION

Mukerji's "Kari the Elephant" intricately portrays the profound bond between humans and animals, illustrating shared emotions and moral agency. Through the setting of the Indian jungle and diverse animal representations, the narrative advocates for harmony, respect, and interdependence within the natural world, emphasizing the significance of ethical human animal relationships.

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