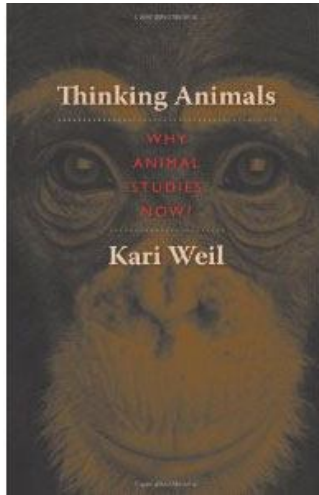


## Book Review

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### Kari Weil's *Thinking Animals: Why Animal Studies Now?*



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Review by

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The discourse of animal studies borrowed not only from the seminal works of Peter Singer<sup>i</sup> and Tom Regan<sup>ii</sup> but also got enriched by the ecological and social movements like Great Ape Project (1993) and interdisciplinary approaches like Feminism, Minority Studies/Ethnicity, Visual Studies, Post colonialism, Post humanism etc. The philosophical debates about identity, difference, representation etc have also challenged the framework of animal studies. Kari Weil's book is a comprehensive account of such theoretical issues, wrought with her first hand knowledge in the area. Her training in literary studies has enabled the author to examine and illustrate the abstruse challenges posed by postmodern uncertainty. This book is certainly a deconstructive approach to understand human-animal relationship and should be placed side by side with books like *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Post humanist Theory* (2003) by Cary Wolfe and Steve Baker's *Postmodern Animal* (2000).

The book is divided in four parts, consisting eight chapters. The first half of the book builds a promising theoretical framework, which is well balanced by incisive visual and literary texts. Her first chapter originally appeared as "A Report on the Animal Turn," in *differences* 21, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 1–23. Tracing back to the notion of Peter Singer's 'speciesism', she locates the question of relevance of animal studies in the academics. We can sense a simultaneous rise in the fields of cultural theory, deconstruction, feminism and minority studies which certainly bolstered the hermeneutical framework of animal studies as well. Insisting on the need of de-objectifying the non-human animals, Kari Weil justifies the caption of her first section of the book- *Why Animal Studies Now?*

She questions the notion of Enlightenment as freedom from slavery for human race only. The subjugated humans can speak for themselves or can be represented by someone else, but non-human animals neither can speak in this way nor can be represented as such. They are deprived of 'agency' and have always been looked upon as objects. This unilateral gaze, which symbolizes the power relations, is demeaning for non-human animals. Moreover, the framework of the whole book is a sincere and academic attempt to think beyond the dichotomies – Self/Other, Human/Non-Human, Colonizer/Colonized, Black/White, East/West etc. For this, she explores the notion of 'becoming animal', originally propounded by Deleuze and Guattari. This notion, used in animal studies, compels us to think beyond preconceived categories and force us to recast it. To support her argument further, she inquires the so called 'theoretical turns', otherwise evasive. She explains, "I want to trace the emergence of the "animal question" by focusing on three trends or moments in literary and critical theory for which the animal has become a test case: the linguistic turn, a counterlinguistic or affective turn, and the ethical turn" (7).

The non-human animals are looked down upon, primarily, because they cannot express themselves in the language which we understand. This linguistic problem obfuscates their relation with the human world and at the same time, gives opportunity to human beings to interpret their 'acts' by their will. This anthropocentric approach towards others is challenged and criticised by Kari Weil throughout the book. The ethical turn, equally evasive and abstract, is brought in philosophical domain with the publication of Derrida's essay "Force of Law (1990)". This is the ethical notion which the French philosopher has named as 'responsibility towards other', and Kari Weil touches the soul of it by mentioning "a post human ethics- ethics toward an unknowable or "incalculable" other" (17). This claim also puts the writer in the position to see and explore the potentiality of 'trauma studies' and 'posthuman studies' to shatter the hitherto problematic dichotomies as 'man as the measure of all things' versus 'unknowable other(s)'. The works of Donna Haraway (cyborg), Bruno Latour (network theory), Cathy Caruth (trauma studies), Kelly Oliver (psychoanalysis) etc have "challenged the enlightenment view of the human as sole proprietor of consciousness and agency" (18).

The most original contribution of Kari Weil, which reveals her close association with deconstructive school of thought, is combining the notion of 'critical empathy' and 'anthropomorphism' in "critical anthropomorphism", which she takes "in the sense that we open ourselves to touch and to be touched by others as fellow subjects ...the irreducible difference that animals may represent for us is one that is also within us and within the term human" (20).

As a scholar trained in visual studies, Kari Weil also discusses in details the issue of visual (mis)representation of animals. This second chapter is the best example of 'philosophical ruminations on animal being'. As her apt case studies, she picks up works of two visual artists to counter the body-mind dichotomy in the western tradition, since Descartes to Heidegger. *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* by Bill Viola is about the relation of a buffalo with her environment, time and dwelling whereas Frank Noelker's *Chimp Portraits* (2002-2006), exemplifies their proximity to human life.

The most thought provoking section of the book is where the writer ponders over the human relationship with pets. Pet animals are like silent projection of their master's psyche and deprived of their agency as well. The act of training is like a 'contact zone' between master/slave dialectics and if done with real humanitarian intentions, can redefine this relation for better goals. By picking up some major works from modernist literature, she also deals with the emotive framework of literary texts. Explaining elaborately from Thomas Mann's short story "Tobias Mindernickel", Edgar Allen Poe's "Black Cat" and Guy de Maupassant's "Flu", she makes us aware about the unnoticed act of violence done to animals. Continuing her deconstructive method, she tackles the theory laden issues like "empathy" and "madness" quite commendably. The story of Virginia Woolf "Flush" narrates the story from dog's point of view and reveals dog's domestic relationship with woman.

The third section of the book deals with the touching emotions like 'death' and the response to it in the process of grieving. How do we moan and react on the death of human, contrary to animals? This question is dealt thoroughly in the short story of Leo Tolstoy "Strider" and in the fictional works of J M Coetzee, especially *Disgrace* (1999) and *The Lives of Animals* (1999). Women have different response to animal death than men, which is very well exemplified in the later part of the book with the help of Judith Butler's notion of "grievable life" in her politically charged book *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), where she opens our eyes towards the victims of post 9/11 and how their deaths are looked and (mis)represented. Since the loss of animal is invisible, hence, it remains beyond representation. But to question this attitude, she gives a very touching interpretation of David Lurie's choice at the end of Coetzee's novel, *Disgrace*, towards the death of the dog as "giving up". His spiritual salvation takes place via a death of an animal. This also raises the sentimental issues like "killing the animals well", "animal euthanasia" and the moral choice of "eating animals." This awareness and a change in consciousness can really bring "ethical turn" in our everyday practice.

The last section of the book is based on an ethical notion, *bêtise*, borrowed from Derrida's book *The Beast and the Sovereign* (2009). She explains, "*bêtise* is that combination of knowledge and lack of understanding, of cruelty and impassivity, that is "proper" to man because of his sovereignty, because he believes that he is free to do otherwise than kill and be cruel" (133). This finally becomes a moral choice to make changes into the anthropocentric attitude towards others - non-human animals, nature, women etc. One way of doing and achieving this would be, according to Kari Weil, to "unthink" the relationship between human and non-human animal. As she declares in a deconstructive manner, "much like the "women" in women's studies, the "animal" in animal studies must be placed under erasure (23)."

This book is not only an academic attempt to show the interdisciplinary nature of animal studies but also a sincere formulation of everyday ethics. The students of literature should see it as a deconstructive practice and we all can learn from Kari Weil to "unthink" ourselves and our relations to "others".

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Singer, Peter. *Animal Liberation*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1975.

<sup>ii</sup> Regan, Tom. *The Case for Animal Rights*. London: Routledge, 1984.

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