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The Canine Cine Star: Dog Actors in Indian Cinema

Harshita U Urs

Research Scholar

Department of Studies and Research in English,
Tumkur University, Tumakuru, Karnataka.

Email: harshitaurs19@gmail.com

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Abstract: Indian cinema has come a long way, with over five hundred and odd movies shot annually. It happens to be one of the most famous and popular film industries in the world. If Raj Kapoor, Amitabh Bachchan, Shahrukh Khan are loved and appreciated for their acting, canine actors like Tuffy, Moti, Pluto too are rejoiced by the audience. Animal presence in films makes the plotline family oriented and audience young and old enjoy alike. Nonetheless, films like literary works are carriers of socio-political, cultural nuances; the canine appearance discloses prevailing practices and ideologies. This paper critically analyses the breed and non-breed distinction that acts as a marker of human owner's socio-economic status. Also, seeks answers to how these notions act as a political propaganda for discrimination and hostility towards one category of dogs. The paper tries to present how human identity politics gets defied through their relationship with dogs. The two film texts *Kummatty* and *Mughizh* portray lot of instances in which humans as a community understand themselves through their engagement with dogs. Both texts depict human suffering due to the presence or absence of a dog, barring the categories of breed and non-breed, they celebrate the existence of a dog. If humans define themselves through their relationship with dogs then what does the future of excessive presence to one or neglect of the other lead to? This paper addresses the harms of favouring one category over the other and tries to provide a balance.

Keywords: Breed dogs, Non-breed dogs, Bollywood, *Kummatty*, *Mughizh*.

Cinema is a powerful media for influencing the good or maltreatment of animals. Dogs have had a special place in the hearts of the audience, with their on screen loyalty, friendship, bravery and obedience. Their unconditional love has touched and moved many hearts, be it as protagonists or a minor character, their presence adds essence to the movie. In fact, Indian cinema is one of the most sought after entertainment industries in the world due to its vibrant music, dance, costume, and plotline. This industry has given some of the best movies to the world cinema, including some films with celebrity dog actors like *Mera Naam Joker*, *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, *Entertainment*, and many others. Commercial films like *Entertainment*, *Charlie 777*

promote thoroughbred pedigree dogs like Labrador, Golden Retriever or German shepherd as worthy of care and shelter. Non-breed dogs are associated with indigent and destitute. Strangely, many movies have a dog assisting the human actors, say for example, Moti from *Mera Naam Joker* and the dog in Charlie Chaplin's *A Dog's Life*, portrays an indigent man's association with a dog. A mongrel is metonymic to poverty and haplessness. In their recent research article on the effects of dog movies on the adoption of breed dogs in the United States, Sarah Weir and Sharon E Kessler identify that the dog heroes in movies contribute for an increase in demand for particular breed dogs, which according to the writers has a negative impact on dog welfare and also infuse unrealistic expectations among dog owners. (Weir and Kessler) It is perhaps clear that the presence of dog in cinema is not restricted to entertainment rather they embody complex themes and emotions.

Another compelling way of showcasing a dog is through anthropomorphism. Anthropomorphism is ascribing human-like qualities to animals, and is a common feature in most films. Such humanised dogs are talented actors who by their performance portray human-like emotions, and easily connect with the viewers. Many anthropomorphised dogs tend to understand their human counterparts and behave according their mood. The popular Hutch telecom services advertisement, showed a dog and a little boy's companionship. The background music "*You and I in this beautiful World*" was an instant hit and the anthropomorphised dog that helped the little child with everything that he did, symbolically suggesting the trustworthiness of the telecom brand and the universally acknowledged fact that dogs are loyal beings. The pug breed soon became a household name and Hutch network synonymous to loyal and quality services. Another distinct way of anthropomorphing dogs is by making them narrators of their own stories. In films like *A Dog's Purpose*, *101 Dalmatians* and many others, the dogs speak to one another or to the audience directly. These movies are appealing as they tell humanised stories, and amplify emotions like love, sorrow, friendship, loyalty, etc. Correspondingly, Bollywood doggie hero, Tuffy in *Hum Apke Hain Kaun* is an anthropomorphised dog which pulsate the emotions of the humans around and throughout the movie is a joyous presence. Perhaps, Tuffy is instrumental in getting Nisha and Prem married, (role played by Madhuri Dixit and Salman Khan) and thereby giving a happy ending for the movie. Undoubtedly, dog presences in movies signify deeper complex themes and are not restricted to entertainment alone. But rather they embody abstract themes and emotions.

Something more alluring is the opening statement of the short story *A Dog's Tale* by Mark Twain "My father was a St. Bernard, my mother was a collie, but I am a Presbyterian." This statement has little to do with the fact that a dog is narrating its identity, rather the question is what is dog's identity and how does identity of the dog play a role in cultural discourse. Erica Fudge, quotes Orhan Pamuk's work "*I am a Dog*" to present identity politics in a Eurasian sphere. Set in Turkey, a place poised between Europe and Asia, has commendable influence of the west and hosts some of the best coffeehouses, a space for recreational and cultural exchange. There is a dog that lives on the pavement of a coffee house; his master is a storyteller and makes his living narrating stories for people who visit this coffee house. However, here the story is narrated from the perspective of the dog named Red, and what interests Fudge is the distinction this dog makes when he differentiates himself from the European ways of having a dog. (Fudge) She then explains how this dog being born in an early modern Ottoman sphere, perceives certain cultural difference between the East and West, the story is presenting the ideas of free and the enslaved a notion that is anthropocentric. The dog that Fudge quotes enjoys his freedom and also laments the enslaved condition of pets in Europe.

This article thus focuses on how non breed dogs are discerned due to the presence of breed dogs by taking two popular Indian regional language movies, namely *Kummatty*, a 1993 Malayalam film, and *Mugizh*, 2022 Tamil film. These films facilitate investigation of various cultural themes and narrative styles. On contrasting these films, a critique on the lives of dogs in human society can be developed. It is also true that both films have child protagonists and a dog companion, their perspective of breed and non-breed dogs are of pivotal interest for this paper.

Susan McHugh in her seminal work *Dogs*, uses mutts as tool to create new models of self (human) and society. She believes "loyalty, lust and higher social status of breed dogs have repercussions on the ordinary ways in which people come to see themselves with dogs." (McHugh) To second her belief, Nassiruddin Shah's 2018 Hindi movie *Aiyaary* presents the struggles of a guard trying to protect a few mongrels near a construction site in suburbs of Delhi. He fails to shelter them and also loses his job eventually for doing so. Here the mongrels and the watchman are looked down upon, due to their socio-economically insignificant status. (Shah) In yet another Bengali movie *Pariah*, a roadside vendor who feeds the stray regularly is confronted and killed by local goons for trying to rescue dogs from dog meat mafia. (Chatterjee) *Pariah* and *Aiyaary* present the

underprivileged conditions of the dogs and their human owner in a complex ontological discourse. Wendy Woodward calls J M Coetzee's *Disgrace*, "a critique of dogs sufferings due to lack of government intervention in animal sufferings which is concomitant with the problems of historically disadvantaged living in an economically moribund area in Eastern Cape." (Woodward) In other text *Simpatia*, the killing of the dog Thor by the military personnel comes in the wake of Spanish communal furry and economic crisis in Venezuela, when people are fleeing the country and abandoning their pets, to exercise power and identity. These texts reveal the fact that local politics decide the plight of dogs in the State.

Speaking of treatment of dogs being concomitant to the sufferings of economically underprivileged in *Pariah*, when the elderly woman is confronted at the middle of the night, the dualistic nature of hypermasculinity is displayed. Hypermasculinity is a condition in which men exercise violence and hatred over self, women, animals or nature in order to instill terror. The goons say "Will the dogs that you feed help you? Call your dogs, old lady! You will die a dog's death!" Here the word dogs signify violence, hate crime and trauma. A dog's attitude is parallel with violence induced by the goons. It is also true that this old woman has dispossessed all the material wealth and lives on the pavements serving food for her customers in a dingy makeshift hotel. She has no legal or social security to which she could cling to, she is on her own accord, living a dog's life, viz "like a dog." This way the disadvantaged position of the human counterpart disables their ability to protect the mongrels in their vicinity. Hence proving Susan's view of "breed dog as a tool for helping people to construct and maintain social differences as part of modern industrialism." (McHugh)

Defending how our perception of breeds is intricately connected with the cinematic representations of dogs, this paper analyses the two film texts as an attempt to equate the non-breed dog and a thoroughbred one. Film director Aravindan's films are not easy to grasp and *Kummatty* has an allegorical approach. The film is set in rural Kerala unlike *Mughizh* which is set in a contemporary metropolitan Chennai. *Kummatty* has a very unique plotline, with a blend of folklore and the picturesque cinematography, presents a young boy, Chindan who has caged bird as his pet. Kummatty, a wanderer who comes to the village and befriends the children, they sing, dance and play together. The children have slowly started enjoying the company of this strange looking old man, although with initial hesitations they approach him and later get along really well. The old man's playfulness and spontaneity is a contrast to the monotonous life of the villagers. He is a free spirit who

sings and dances, has no family, is not answerable to anybody. A free spirit who joyously plays with the village children, Kummatty has supernatural skills. He once performs magic and the children are transformed into different animals. Chindan is becomes a dog, he drifts away from his friends and goes astray for a brief moment. Eventually Kummatty transforms all the children to their original self, but Chindan who has gone astray, is still under the magical spell and his journey as dog is subject of concern for this paper.

“Kummatty” is a mysterious person in the story. He is like Pied Piper, his inexplicable supernatural abilities draw the curious children closer, the trickster brings a fruit out of nowhere and the children are thrilled by this magic. Kummatty gives them biscuits in the shape of birds, to mark the beginning of their innocent friendship. They all sing, dance and play together. As their friendship progresses the children become extremely attached to the old man. Children adore Kummatty but being a nomad with wayward instincts has to keep moving. However, his new found friends insist him to stay a little longer. As a parting gift, performs a trick for the children, he gives each of them a mask to wear, chants verses and throws a spell, they soon turn into donkey, monkey, cow, horse, peacock, goat, and Chindan becomes a dog. He is chased by another dog in his disguised state and Kummatty does not notice Chindan’s absence and brings the children back to their original being. He is thrilled by his magical power absent-mindedly bids goodbye to the children and leaves the village. Like it was mentioned earlier, it is Chindan’s transition from human to dog that is of special interest in this paper. Chindan as a dog, walks far from his people and reaches a house with lot of dogs. A young girl about the age of Chindan, adopts Chindan, the dog, and ties a leash as a mark of adoption. He is provided food and shelter, the girl too loves doggie Chindan. However, there are other big dogs in the house like Great Dane, German shepherd, Doberman, and so on. These well-bred dogs bark, growl and grunt at Chindan, a mongrel. The mongrel falls sick and stops eating. The veterinarian suggests leaving the dog back in nature, and the girl’s father persuades her to let go Chindan the dog, in exchange of a Pomeranian. This incident of a breed dog being preferred over a mongrel explains how human society looks down upon the non-breed dogs. This attitude of humans has affected the sustenance of the mongrels.

In the other film text, *Mughizh*, the child protagonist Kavya, who fears dogs and her father brings home a Beagle named Scooby. Kavya who is scared of dogs, slowly befriends Scooby and there begins their human-animal bond. The movie presents minute details of how the family and the dog get accustomed to each other.

Scooby's presence brings hope and happiness in the family. But this joy is short lived, Scooby's sudden departure after the accident, casts a shadow of grief and sorrow. The parents are unable to help Kavya get over her guilt, she blames herself for the negligence and the film provides deeper engagement of human-animal bond. Kavya's mother, Radhika a homemaker too is deeply attached to the pet. As the family grapples in grieves over the loss of their beloved pet, a mongrel finds its way into the house. Soon, the mongrel replaces Scooby and the family reconciles. The movie presents a breed dog being replaced by a non-breed, unlike most movies, that prefer a thoroughbred.

The child protagonist in the film *Kummatty*, does not understand the social hierarchy and desires Chindan the dog over other pets. But the father injects the idea of breed, identity politics, so on and so forth. Derrida defines 'différance' as a technique to diversify difference. Talking about his cat seeing him naked, he says, "there is no nudity in nature; it is simply how we understood ourselves as a being in contrast to an animal." The question of self is thus, altered in the presence of an animal. Similarly, the identity of the self, when associated with a mongrel is altered in presence of a breed dog. Derrida comes up with an anomalous space within which humans and nonhumans exist without any identity markers, he calls it border crossing. (Bruns) He recognises the fluidity of the self and other. Similarly, petting and eventually adopting a mongrel pup by Kavya, describes a transgression. When dogs are viewed without the breed and non-breed lens, a more congenial and compatible co-existence is achieved. The climax of *Kummatty*, portrays the concept of freedom, as a balance between human and animal world. Chindan after transforming into human form releases the caged bird. The caged bird is allegoric to his own captive state. He comes to understand the importance of freedom. As a gesture that looks beyond breed stereotype, Chindan promises renewed human-animal relationship. Hence, both film texts present an enhanced connection of the human and the animal.

Conclusion

Susan McHugh envisions an analogous condition where "sympathetic engagement with mutt has helped people move beyond the strict confines of breed to mutual canine-human benefits." The two chosen film texts have child protagonists whose love and compassion for animals are influenced by their human adult counterpart. Their innocence makes them consider dogs as sentient beings and they nullify breed and non-breed binary. Chindan as a dog has come close to attaining enlightenment. Both films deals with human-

animal relationship the promote diversity of life. Dogs in these texts not just only have a symbolic presence, they are considered beings with consciousness. Dogs in the two film texts have a particular connection with the place and the breed sensitive discourse. They remind us that no matter how much humans progress, the yardstick to measure is through treatment of other animals. It is also true that humans are an off shoot of animals and are a part of nature. Posthumanist theorists propose human-animals to gradually co-constitute one another. Co-constituting is proven apt through the way dogs in the film texts *Kummatty* and *Mughizh* help to create a balance and inclusive attitude for harmonious co-existence.

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