

DIFFERENT WORLDS : THE CONVERGENCE OF THE HUMAN AND THE ANIMAL WORLD IN PETER GOLDSWORTHY'S *WISH*

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Abstract

The Australian novelist Peter Goldsworthy's second novel is a very curious amalgam of Science and Linguistics where he has brought about a number of startling ideas together. He has dealt with the so called taboo subject of love between a human being and an animal and in the process has raised several questions regarding animal rights and the ethicality of using animals for various experimental purposes. The relationship that is portrayed by the writer is both full of humane feelings and at the same time quite touching in its entirety. In this paper an attempt will be made to show how Goldsworthy has woven a yarn that shows how the human and the animal space converge in spite of being in many ways dissimilar and while telling a story that is gripping and interesting, has also dealt with some serious issues.

Peter Goldsworthy's third novel *Wish* which was published in 1995 is different from his two previous novels in that it has a very unusual theme- the love and physical bonding between a human being and an ape. While Goldsworthy had dealt with and depicted the various aspects of the intricate human relationships in his earlier novels, *Maestro* and *Honk If You are Jesus*, in this novel he turns his attention to this completely new theme.

The main character in this novel is John James, a teacher of Basic Auslan or Australian Sign Language. He is known to everyone by his nickname 'J. J.', and when the novel opens we find him to be divorced and unemployed. The mode of narration used by Goldsworthy is that of the first person narrative form so that 'J. J.' tells his own story. We find him recounting the events that have occurred a few months back and thus we travel with him to the past as he describes the events. Thus when we first meet him, he is looking for a job and is finally allotted a Wednesday night Basic Auslan, Level 1 class in the Deaf Institute. We come to know that he is different from the others as both his parents are deaf. So he finds himself in a strange situation- he has to communicate with his parents through signs though he himself is perfectly capable of hearing. He moves easily from one sphere to the other but, strangely enough, he does not feel

comfortable with English as a means of communication. As he himself declares at the beginning of the novel :

English is my second language. Sign was- is-my first. I still think
in Sign, I dream in Sign. I sign in my sleep. . . (4)

Thus he feels somewhat alienated from his deaf parents-they cannot share his enthusiasm for music. He, on the other hand, creates his own space, a private world which is totally closed to them. Thus there seems to be always a gap which carries him far away from his parents. They also get the feeling that since ‘J. J.’ is not deaf, he will not understand them or sympathize with them.

It is during his Basic Auslan class that he meets Clive Kinnear, the Animal Rights activist, and his wife Stella Todd, a veterinary doctor and a poet as well who are the foster-parents of Eliza or Wish. He comes to know about Wish from them- though he is puzzled to hear that Eliza is mute but not deaf as she was born without vocal chords. It is only later, on his second visit to Clive and Stella’s house, is he told that Eliza is in fact a very special gorilla. He is even more surprised to find that they are trying to mould Eliza into becoming a kind of a spokes-animal for her species so that she would be able to articulate their demands, like human beings. Thus, at the end of Book one, ‘J.J.’ finds himself in a very strange situation – he is offered the job of teaching sign language to a gorilla who is not like an ordinary ape but is in fact far more intelligent. He is in a dilemma, whether to accept this offer or not, but at the same time deep in his mind he is also curious to meet Eliza.

To his disappointment, his first meeting with her is without any surprises- Eliza refuses to communicate after some time, though she is clearly curious about ‘J. J.’ since he is the first stranger she has met. Stella explains to ‘J. J.’ that Eliza might have taken his presence as an intrusion on her private space and thus refuses to respond. But soon ‘J.J.’ has to change his mind after getting definite proof that all her hand movements are not copied or mimicked blindly but that there is a clear thought pattern in her signing. Her excitement in learning new signs from ‘J. J.’ is clearly evident and it is very similar to a child’s enthusiasm at discovering a new world of signs. Even her joy at coming to know the sign for a new word is reflected beautifully and is very much human:

. . . there was human joy in the deep blackness of those eyes: they
shone with the exhilaration of each new discovery. (113)

‘J. J.’ communicates to Eliza his nickname- Sweet-Tooth which amuses her and she herself uses the Wish Hand to express her hope of seeing him again which is not only an innovation on her part but is also very touching :

Eliza stepped back and repeated my shape for tomorrow, but with
the Wish Hand, I saw, not the Point Hand: the first two fingers
crossed in hope. It was a beautiful touch, an improvised variation ,
another poem which moved me as much as anything else I had
seen during that extraordinary morning. (117)

So, the relationship between ‘J. J.’ and Eliza begins on a note of friendliness and warmth. Later, ‘J. J.’ reads *The Education of Koko* which Clive gives him. He comes to learn how the gorilla Koko had reacted when she was asked some standard questions regarding death and its aftermath. ‘J. J.’, however, is troubled by one discrepancy- he comes to know from the book that adult gorillas have the intelligence level of a three or four year old human child. Thus, Koko is no exception and her answers or sign-speech also roughly corresponded to the intelligence level

of a small child. But, as ‘J. J.’ can understand clearly, Eliza cannot be put at the same level as Koko because she is far ahead in terms of her intelligence, creativity and sense of humour.

Eliza’s fondness for her signature Wish sign creates a new feeling of surprise, excitement and expectation in the mind of ‘J. J.’. To him it is nothing short of a miracle :

An expression of great beauty, a Sign poem. I shivered suddenly, Involuntarily; . . . the poetry of these shapes was exhilarating, magical. Goose bumps pricked my neck and back ; it seemed, once again, an overturning of natural law, like being spoken to by a stone, a tree , a hill. (123)

It is because of Eliza’s constant use of the Wish Hand that ‘J. J.’ names her Wish. He notices that this particular sign seems to suit her perfectly, expressing, as it does , a number of feelings crowding her mind :

Those crossed fingers spiced her signing with a special flavour, a mix of hope and wistfulness, a subjunctive mood of ifs and coulds and shoulds not often found in Sign. Eccentric, perhaps, even ungrammatical – but always moving. (125)

‘J. J.’’s lessons with Wish gives a completely new turn to his life. For him, it is a wonderful feeling to teach sign language to Wish and feel that she has the ability to absorb instantly each new sign and wait for the next one impatiently. Thus ‘J, J.’’s sense of excitement and appreciation is described by Goldsworthy thus :

Those first weeks with Wish energized me in that same way. Her long black arms reached out to me each afternoon- recharging my enthusiasm, forcing me to see afresh things I’d long forgotten to look at, or even to notice. (147)

Thus his each lesson with Wish turns out to be a new discovery for both of them , because what he will teach is determined by the numerous questions put forward by Wish, which leads ‘J. J.’ often into different paths necessitates the help of written texts :

The limits of my own vocabulary were constantly tested and found wanting . Often I would surprise myself, remembering things that I no longer knew that I knew ; equally often I would improvise, or be sent scurrying for help from dictionaries and encyclopaedias. (149)

‘J. J.’ is convinced after giving a few initial lessons to Wish and observing her closely for some time that Wish has a human mind, a mind that is different from the other gorillas and which is capable of grasping much more than any ordinary ape.

It is in Chapter fourteen of Book Two that ‘J. J.’ gets the chance to be alone with Wish and share certain secrets with her- the fact that Wish’s mother is dead and also the fact of he being a divorced man, no longer living with his wife. ‘ J. J.’ finds Wish quite interested in his family, his parents, wife and daughter. He can also sense a strong growing affection for him that is reflected in the way Wish is very much reluctant to leave him when it is time for him to say goodbye after the afternoon’s lesson. This impression is strengthened in ‘J. J.’’s mind by the fact that whereas initially Wish had not ventured out alone beyond the trees, she does come out into the road on one occasion, waiting for ‘J. J.’’s arrival. It is a special occasion for ‘J. J.’ because he realizes that Wish has set aside her deep-rooted anxieties and fears and has come out into the open only to welcome him when he arrives :

. . . I knew that for the love of me she had exposed herself to open savannah for the first time, overcoming her terror of whatever leopards or hyenas inhabited her deepest race-memory. (187)

The love relationship that blossoms between ‘ J. J.’ and Wish is thus similar to that between human beings. It is characterized by all the normal emotions that can be found in the relationship between two human beings. Thus, this emotional attachment for ‘J. J.’ on the part of Wish reaches a climax when he realizes that Wish is attracted towards him. Though at first his reaction is that of shock, on reflection the knowledge that he too likes her and even loves her, comes as a revelation indeed. As he tries to figure out the nature of the complex feelings and emotions assailing his mind, one dominant feeling surfaces above all the others- the fact that he missed her simply because he loved her. He can understand now that his pupil also loved him and returned his feelings.

At this stage, his knowledge that Wish has been given a bigger brain than the average gorilla by the removal of her adrenal glands at the embryonic stage, makes him realize the secret behind Wish’s greater capability to greater comprehension. This is the reason why she has become a far smarter gorilla than the others of her species.

Thus, in Book three of the novel, Goldsworthy relates how ‘J. J.’ and Wish come to share a physical relationship just like human beings. Therefore the human and the animal world is seen to converge. The love that develops between the two, though it seems unnatural to the outside world, is in fact a true bond based on mutual love and trust as in any relationship between human beings. Goldsworthy describes beautifully Wish’s sense of gratitude and thankfulness which she expresses through her gestures and ‘J. J.’s reaction :

I watched, stunned – deafened – as those four limbs moved repeatedly and silently in the moonlit room. I had seen nothing like it before- an expression of love and gratitude, bizarre and thrilling. The stirrings of guilt were stilled, temporarily. Her four hands, waving like those of some dark Hindu goddess, seemed at that moment the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. (212)

All the doubts in the mind of ‘J. J.’ are resolved and he has the feeling that he has not committed any crime and that his relationship with Wish is really a very beautiful one. But, when Stella and Clive come to know of this, they disapprove of his action. Soon ‘J. J.’ is detained on the charge of bestiality and Wish is sent to the zoo. ‘J. J.’s effort to rescue her fails and a few days later Wish is found dead, a noose round her neck, which the public interpret as an accident. The lack of human love and care to which she had been accustomed, and the loneliness of a life in the zoo, all combine to bring on her death.

Goldsworthy’s narration of this unusual story of the love between a human and an animal is marked by a humane and sensitive touch. We can feel that the love and subsequent bonding that develops between the two is entirely credible and strong enough like any human relationship. This strange love story has a fitting end in the very poignant description of ‘J. J.’ watching a column of smoke rising from the hospital furnace where Wish’s body is burnt and it taking the shape of her signature sign :

A breeze stirred somewhere ; I heard the shiver of the treetops, the sweepings of approaching debris across the carpark, then saw the wind catch and embroider and then divide the rising column of smoke, two fingers which briefly tangled, as if crossing index and

middle, before joining again in a single smooth column rising upwards into the blue. (299)

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