



Exploring The Representation Of Zoo In Literature In English

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<i>Article History</i>	<i>Abstract</i>
Received: 28 January 2024 Revised: 20 February 2024 Accepted: 02 March 2024	<p>Zoos as an institution have a significant international and educational reach, with hundreds of institutions worldwide and hundreds of millions of visitors each year. But even with such reach, zoos continue to be overlooked by the field of literature. Over the years, zoos have been represented in many literary landscapes, and the same can be analyzed for understanding how zoos as an institution. Furthermore, the zoo's representation in literature opens the venue for discourses on ethical considerations and moral dilemmas surrounding zoos, and questioning the impact of human intervention on the natural world. Authors of such work navigate themes of conservation, animal rights, and the blurred lines between entertainment and exploitation, prompting readers to reconsider their perceptions of zoological spaces.</p> <p>This research paper delves into the multifaceted representations of zoos in literature, examining how authors have engaged with the concept of the zoo as a cultural and societal institution. By employing a thematic approach, the paper investigates how zoos have been depicted as microcosms of society, mirrors reflecting human behavior and societal attitudes towards nature. The exploration encompasses works, such as Yann Martel's <i>Life of Pi</i> and Edward Albee's <i>The Zoo Story</i> which delve into the dichotomy between captivity and freedom. The study spans various literary works aiming to provide a comprehensive analysis of the evolving portrayal of zoos in literature.</p>
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INTRODUCTION

The representation of zoos in literature spans centuries, reflecting the ever-evolving human perception of these unique spaces. Zoos, as microcosms of the natural world, have been depicted in various ways throughout literary history, offering insight into societal attitudes, ethical considerations, and the dynamic relationship between humans and the animal kingdom. This paper traces the trajectory of zoo representation in literature, examining key works from different periods and genres.

The roots of zoo representation can be traced back to ancient civilizations, where rulers and aristocrats often maintained private collections of exotic animals. These early menageries were symbols of wealth, power, and conquest. In works such as ancient Greek and Roman literature, the mention of these menageries served to

underscore the magnificence and grandeur of rulers. Examples can be found in texts like the Histories of Herodotus, where the Persian king Xerxes is described as having a vast collection of exotic animals.

During the medieval period, the representation of animals in literature took on symbolic and allegorical dimensions. Bestiaries, popular literary works of the time, provided moral and religious lessons by attributing symbolic meanings to various animals. While not explicitly depicting zoos, these texts laid the groundwork for the symbolic association between animals and human virtues or vices, setting the stage for future literary explorations.

The Renaissance era marked a resurgence of interest in the natural world, fueled by the Age of Exploration. Literature from this period reflects the fascination with exotic flora and fauna encountered in distant lands. William Shakespeare, in plays like *The Tempest*, explores the theme of the untamed natural world, drawing parallels between the mysterious landscapes of newly discovered territories and the unpredictability of human behavior.

The 19th century witnessed the establishment of public zoological gardens in major European cities, notably in London and Paris. These institutions became showcases of imperial power and colonial conquests, exhibiting animals brought from the far reaches of the British Empire. Charles Dickens, in works like *Bleak House*, and Rudyard Kipling, in *The Jungle Book*, integrated zoological elements to comment on societal issues, reflecting the Victorian fascination with exoticism, empire, and societal hierarchies.

As literature entered the modernist era, authors began to question the ethics of captivity and challenge traditional narratives surrounding zoos. Franz Kafka's *A Report to an Academy* presents a thought-provoking allegory of captivity, blurring the lines between human and animal. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* uses the metaphor of a farm to critique political systems, drawing parallels with the controlled environments of zoos.

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the representation of zoos in literature increasingly focused on ethical concerns, animal rights, and environmental conservation. Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* explores the complexities of coexistence and captivity, challenging readers to reconsider their views on zoological spaces. Contemporary authors, such as Barbara Kingsolver in *Flight Behavior*, engage with zoological themes to address climate change and human impact on the natural world.

1.2 CONTEMPORARY WORKS

The representation of the zoo as a symbol in contemporary literature is both diverse and profound. Through nuanced explorations in works such as *Life of Pi*, *The Night Circus*, *The Orphan Master's Son*, *Station Eleven*, and *"We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves"*, authors navigate the complexities of captivity, societal structures, and the delicate interplay between humanity and the natural world. These contemporary literary works demonstrate the enduring power of the zoo as a versatile symbol, inviting readers to contemplate the intricacies of the human experience within the confines of metaphorical cages and the broader landscapes of imagination.

In *The Night Circus*, the magical and enchanting circus itself serves as a metaphorical zoo. The circus, open only at night and featuring fantastical tents and illusions, becomes a stage for the mysterious and the extraordinary. Within this ethereal zoo of wonders, the characters navigate a world of illusion, challenging the boundaries between reality and fantasy. The novel uses the circus as a symbol to explore the human desire for enchantment and escapism, transcending the limitations of the everyday world.

Another novel called *The Orphan Master's Son* by Adam Johnson which is set in North Korea, employs the zoo as a potent symbol within the context of a totalitarian regime. The protagonist, Jun Do, works in a prison disguised as a labor camp, and his experiences in this controlled environment parallel the captivity of animals in a zoo. The novel explores the dehumanizing effects of political oppression, with the zoo symbolizing the restricted and surveilled lives of the characters. The power dynamics and the struggle for agency in this confined setting resonate with broader themes of control and autonomy.

In *Station Eleven*, by Emily Mandel the remnants of civilization after a global pandemic are explored through the lens of a traveling symphony and theater group. The novel features a poignant scene where the troupe encounters a dilapidated airport filled with abandoned planes, creating an eerie zoo of technological relics. This serves as a metaphor for the collapse of modern society and the reclamation of nature over human creations. The obsolete machines become specimens in this post-apocalyptic zoo, symbolizing the transience of human achievements.

Karen Joy Fowler's novel titled *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* uses the zoo symbolically by exploring the impact of the separation of a young girl, Fern, from her chimpanzee sister, Rosemary. The family dynamics are intertwined with the metaphorical zoo, questioning societal norms regarding the treatment of animals and humans. The novel prompts reflection on the ethical considerations of confinement, challenging readers to reconsider the boundaries between humans and other species.

1.3 LIFE OF PI

Life of Pi by Yann Martel is a rich and allegorical novel that explores the theme of survival, faith, and the intricate relationship between humans and animals. The representation of the zoo in this novel is multifaceted, reflecting both the physical and metaphorical dimensions of captivity, the challenges of coexistence, and the philosophical underpinnings of humanity's connection to the natural world.

The novel begins with the protagonist, Piscine Molitor Patel, known as Pi, growing up in Pondicherry, India, where his father owns a zoo. The zoo, a place of wonder and fascination, becomes a crucial backdrop for Pi's early understanding of the animal kingdom. The diverse range of animals in the zoo serves as a microcosm of the broader world, emphasizing biodiversity and interconnectedness.

As Pi finds himself stranded on a lifeboat in the Pacific Ocean with a Bengal tiger named Richard Parker, the representation of the zoo takes a dramatic turn. The lifeboat becomes a confined space, a makeshift zoo where Pi is both the captive and the caretaker. This physical captivity mirrors the challenges faced by animals in traditional zoos, where confinement is a constant struggle against the innate instincts for freedom.

Martel skillfully uses the tiger, Richard Parker, as a symbol of the untamed and primal nature of all living beings, including humans. The lifeboat becomes a floating zoo, blurring the lines between captor and captive, as Pi must navigate the delicate balance of coexistence with a wild animal. The representation of the zoo in this context raises profound questions about the nature of captivity, the human desire for control, and the complexities of shared spaces between species.

Metaphorically, the entire survival journey becomes a spiritual and existential zoo for Pi. The lifeboat becomes a confined world where Pi grapples not only with the physical challenges of survival but also with the psychological and emotional aspects of his own humanity. In this metaphorical zoo, Pi must confront the darker corners of his own nature and make peace with the harsh realities of the animal kingdom.

The novel's exploration of the zoo extends beyond the physical constraints of the lifeboat. Through Pi's narrative, Martel challenges the readers to question their own perceptions of animals and the ethical implications of confining them for human amusement. The novel prompts reflection on the purpose of zoos, blurring the lines between the roles of captor and caretaker.

In conclusion, Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* intricately weaves the representation of the zoo into the fabric of its narrative, using it as a lens to explore the complexities of human-animal relationships. The novel invites readers to ponder the nature of captivity, the challenges of coexistence, and the philosophical dimensions of our connection to the natural world. Through Pi's journey, the zoo becomes a metaphorical space where the boundaries between the wild and the domestic, the captor and the captive, are fluid and constantly evolving.

1.4 THE ZOO STORY

Edward Albee is an American playwright. In his play, *The Zoo Story*, he shows the extent to which American society is shattered. No maxims with the essence of human relations like "Sharing is caring" or "a family that

eats together, stays together” can fill the multiple gaps and cracks within and among the members of this psychologically fractured society. The members of this society have lost the hope to live. They are like disconnected wanderers in search of nothing. Their sense of pessimism is so strong that they consider silence or suicide as the only possible way to free themselves. They want to escape from all the worldly relations and responsibilities, desires and defeats, values and vanities. Every moment seems burdensome to them. They feel this burden and get suppressed beneath it. The unfavorable and pressing situation forces them to end their lives, untimely, unnaturally. And that makes it a play for the Theatre of Absurd.

On reading the play, we realize that *The Zoo Story* is not a story from any zoo where the animals are caged and separated from each other by fencing or bars or walls. But in point of fact it is about humans who are psychologically caged, isolated and disconnected. *The Zoo Story* has only two major characters – Peter and Jerry who are stuck in a web of pessimism.

Albee’s title is succinct. The article ‘the’ in the title suggests that it is going to be some particular story – a story that has some reference to context. The collective noun ‘zoo’ creates in our minds an image of the speechless, helpless animals who are “separated by bars”. The word ‘story’ instills interest and excitement in the readers. Thus, Albee prepares us for “the zoo story” and Jerry prepares Peter for “the zoo story”. But as a matter of fact, Albee and Jerry both do not tell us a story related to the zoo. Rather, the playwright Albee and the character Jerry portray how human and animal life overshadow each other’s loneliness. Jerry calls his apartment a kind of “laughably small” pigeon-hole where the “rooms are separated with beaverboard”. He calls a gay guy in his neighborhood as a “colored queen” who wears a kimono and seeks attention from others. Jerry says, “he goes to the john a lot. He never bothers me”. Albee doesn’t capitalize J for john to show the colored queen’s lustful relations with any random guy. Jerry also talks about a couple of Puerto Ricans who live in his neighborhood but he is unaware of the number of kids that the couple has. Then he talks about how his mother left him and his father for her adulterous relationship with some Mr. Barleycorn. Immediately after this, Jerry tells Peter about his queer personality. He talks about one more woman in the apartment who always howls and cries. And lastly he tells Peter about the landlady and her black dog. The landlady has a sexual interest in him and the dog always snarls at him.

It seems that the play begins in media res. Jerry at the beginning tells Peter that he has lost his directions. He talks about the geographical directions but later we see that it is the same about his life. Albee doesn’t highlight Peter’s loneliness but leaves us to pore over the reasons why he has come, all alone, to this public park on a Sunday afternoon. And it's not just this Sunday, he says he comes to this park and sits on this bench every Sunday. Jerry’s long speeches do not spare any chance for Peter to share his reasons for loneliness. Jerry’s prolonged speeches keep the readers engaged and Peter entwined. Jerry uses humor to suppress his pain. He takes undue liberty and cracks some indecent jokes but the undercurrent of his painful isolation is visibly static. After being self-stabbed and finding Peter staggered, Jerry humorously claims the ownership of the bench that they both were claiming. His last supplicatory words; Oh –my – God” are also uttered in the form of a scornful mimicry of Peter’s yells and cries of the same words. Jerry’s life ends with a question mark on the nation of America that later dreams, with the Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King Jr, for “the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”. *The Zoo Story* is not about animals in any zoo but about the human society that has lost faith and warmth and that finds solace either in isolation or untimely death.

1.5 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the contemporary literary landscape resonates with the symbolism of the zoo as a powerful and versatile motif, offering authors a nuanced lens through which to explore profound themes. The selected works, including *Life of Pi*, *The Night Circus*, *The Orphan Master's Son*, *Station Eleven*, and *The Zoo Story* " collectively showcase the diverse ways in which the zoo symbol serves as a rich metaphor for captivity, societal structures, human nature, and the intricate relationship between humanity and the natural world. Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* exemplifies how the zoo transcends its physical boundaries to become a metaphorical space, reflecting the complexities of survival, faith, and the unpredictable dynamics of the human condition.

These works collectively emphasize the enduring relevance and adaptability of the zoo symbol in literature, offering readers a spectrum of perspectives on captivity, freedom, and the intricate connections that define the human experience. The contemporary literary employment of the zoo as a symbol encourages introspection and challenges preconceived notions, inviting readers to reconsider the boundaries between humanity and the

natural world in a world marked by ever-changing dynamics and complexities. As literature continues to evolve, the symbolic resonance of the zoo as a motif persists, making it a testament to its enduring capacity to illuminate and interrogate the multifaceted dimensions of the human condition.

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