

An Ecofeminist Reading of Beth Yahp's *The Crocodile Fury*

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Abstract

An increasing acknowledgment of the fact that within patriarchy, the categories of “woman” and “animal” serve the same symbolic function, since they are both placed as the submissive “other” to masculine power, has led to a re-examination of a range of texts that highlight and connect gender concerns with the sorry plight of the non-human. As the ecofeminist Lori Gruen emphasises in her article, “Dismantling Oppression: An Analysis of the Connection between Women and Animals,” this connection between women and animals is “not to be understood as a ‘natural’ connection – one that suggests that women and animals are essentially similar – but rather a constructed connection that has been created by the patriarchy as a means of oppression” (Gruen 61). In this chapter, I examine Beth Yahp’s *The Crocodile Fury*. In this narrative, the “non-human” and the “woman” are entangled in interesting ways that shed light on the use and misuse of both. Furthermore, therianthropism, namely, humans represented as animals, is a strong theme, which the allegorical nature of the narrative helps open up. I argue that the text manages to combine postcolonial concerns with postmodernist stylistics in order to make a case for the non-human Other.

Keywords

Beth Yap, ecofeminism, women, nature, therianthropism, postcolonial allegory

The term “ecofeminism” originated in 1974 when the French Feminist Francoise D’Eaubonne coined it in order to draw attention to the several ways in which women and nature were interconnected. Subsequently, ecofeminist purview extended not only to the links between women and Nature, but also to subjugated races. Another area of interest has been the problematic link that has long been

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identified been women and animals. The emerging discourse of ecofeminism has hence attempted to bridge the gaps that have been created by both feminists and animal liberationists, whose univocal focus, solely on women's and animal rights issues, respectively, has failed to identify the often common and expansive nature of oppression that connects the two. However, of late, an increasing acknowledgment of the fact that within patriarchy, the categories of "woman" and "animal" serve the same symbolic function since they are both placed as the submissive "other" to masculine power has led to a re-examination of a range of texts that highlight and connect gender concerns with the sorry plight of the non-human. As Lori Gruen emphasises, this connection between women and animals is "not to be understood as a 'natural' connection – one that suggests that women and animals are essentially similar – but rather a constructed connection that has been created by the patriarchy as a means of oppression" (Gruen 61). In this article I examine a novel that exuberantly enacts this symbolic connection in multitudinous ways, prompting an examination of the links it forges between women, animals and subdominant humans.

The Crocodile Fury, a novel by the Malaysian-Australian author, Beth Yahp, was first published in Australia in 1992. The novel has won the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards, Sheaffer Pen Prize for First Fiction in 1993 and the New South Wales State Literary Award. It has been translated into several languages. The *Australian Book Review* describes it as "a novel of wonders... rich with magic, secrets, dragons, curses, ghosts and most importantly stories." The text has thus far been analysed mostly through the postcolonial lens as an allegorical description of anticolonial movements. For example, Grace Chin has two detailed articles, one on the power of the "marginalized other" (1999) and the second on "Reading the Postcolonial Allegory" in *The Crocodile Fury*, where she looks at censored subjects, ambivalent spaces and transformative bodies (2009). Again, Miriam Lo writes on the dialectics of hybridity in the text (1999). Shanthini Pillai discusses in detail the echoes of occidental myths and metaphors in the novel (2007). But critics and reviewers have not commented at all on the ecological connections that the novel invokes in a deliberate and sustained manner. This is perhaps due to the allegorical nature of the narrative and the postmodernist stylistics it adopts both of which are rarely used for discussing ecological issues. But *The Crocodile Fury* manages to combine these in order to make a case for the non-human Other.

One of the remarkable aspects of the novel is, in fact, not just its lack of racial specificity, as pointed out by Grace Chin ("Reading the Postcolonial Allegory" 96) but indeed its anti-speciesism. (Speciesism is a term popularised by Singer placing it on par with other "isms" such as racism and sexism [Singer 1975]). In *The Crocodile Fury*, Ghosts, women, animals, both reptilian and aquatic, and the animalistic – humans who resemble animals, or invoke various natural elements in their beings - frequent its pages. They slide into each other, never

retaining specific identities, challenging the neat masculine/feminine or more critically, the human/non-human binaries that have dominated human/Western/colonial thought and which have left an enduring impact on all those that fell on the *other* side of this polar divide. The text evokes two kinds of nature metaphors. Firstly, zoomorphic metaphors that compare humans to animals and secondly, anthomorphic metaphors, which compare humans to larger elements like forests and oceans (Goldwyn 220).

The Crocodile Fury is set in postcolonial Malaya and recounts the lives of three generations of women. All the characters carry only generic names and lack distinctive markers of identity. There is mention of a rich man and his lover. The narrator is a convent girl, who is a charity student, always accompanied by her inseparable companion, the local bully, an orphan, also a charity case. The narrator's mother had been adopted from the local brothel-keeper by the grandmother to serve as an apprentice for her ghost-chasing efforts. The mother, however, had turned Christian after a beatific vision of the Madonna, thus eschewing the oriental world of ghosts, and had then been inducted by the nuns to manage the convent's laundry. Then there is the narrator's grandmother, who, as a child had been a servant to the rich man but later in life became a renowned ghost-chaser. Finally, a lizard boy is tied up in the laundry. He is the son of the convent's caretaker, whose scaly, dry, skin and reptilian features have scared people into constraining him.

The rich man's (imperial) racial identity is mentioned in passing descriptions of him that draw our attention to the fact that "[i]n sunlight the rich man looked as if he was dipped in gold" (Yahp 4). In early colonial times, he lived in a mansion atop a hill near a jungle that is alternately labelled "Mat Salleh" hill or "Mad Sailor" hill or even the "bandit" hill. Mat Salleh also refers to a Caucasian male in colloquial usage in Malaysia. His mansion was later renovated and converted into the convent's library. It is also the haunted mansion that gave sufficient scope for grandmother to begin exercising her otherworldly talent. The grandmother, who discovers her "extra eye" during her teenage years that can see beyond the physical realm, becomes a revered, professional "ghostchaser" amongst the locals. Much of the narrative appears to be a jumbled attempt by the grandmother to impart her trade secrets to her granddaughter and to revenge her past wrongs, even as she serves as the archetypal keeper and passer of ancient lore.

The very fact that the characters have universal (representational) labels rather than specific names and are more symbols than rounded characters makes the narrative strongly allegorical. The narrative adopts a bio-centric perspective and its pages are filled with a wide range of sentient creatures: women, animals and liminal animalistic characters, who seamlessly morph into one another, creating a world where species-based classifications appear superfluous. This textual world forms a clear contrast to an androcentric perspective that privileges man over woman and nature, and the human over the animal other. Furthermore,

eschewing the patriarchal ideals that prize linearity and rationality, the narrative pushes for a rich, vibrant, sensuous conveying of experience and an unrepentant, cyclical repetition of ideas that gradually accrues details to the unfolding tale. These ways of narration negate hierarchies and the primacy of reason and logic, promoting more oblique and convoluted means of narration. As Chin notes:

In a way, the narrative is deliberately made into a huge jigsaw puzzle whereby fragmented pieces of the stories must be fitted together. But unlike an actual puzzle, the novel will not yield a unified whole. There are still many unresolved voids left gaping in the novel; these loose ends are left open to questions and thus frustrate the readers' attempts at exegesis. (Chin, "Angry Ghosts")

The gaps and voids and the thwarting of "the readers' attempts at exegesis" is deliberate and sustained throughout the narrative. It drills home the message that there are no neat, logical his/stories where all the ends can be tied up and where a clear lesson or two can be learned. There are also several deliberate false starts in the book alerting the readers to the artificiality of linear chronicling. "I've spent most of my life in a convent. That's the place to begin" declares the narrator firmly (Yahp 1), only to reiterate this statement periodically. "That's the place to begin. The convent on the hill when I spend most of my days and some of my nights..." (Yahp 2) and a little further on, "That's the place to begin. The hill with the convent and the jungle called Mat Salleh Hill. It is a hill of many old sayings..." (Yahp 7). Towards the end of the book, we have the parallel closing movement when the narrator on page 307, a good twenty pages before the novel ends, remarks "That's the place to finish. The convent on the hill next to the jungle..." (Yahp 307). But a few pages later, she admits: "Grandmother never wants anything finished. She never wants to get to the end" (Yahp 317).

Also, there are no binaries in this a-logical world. The natural world and the human world persistently overlap in therianthropic descriptions. For example, along with her constant companion, the bully, the narrator imagines that "we are underwater creatures, morsels curled in a shell.... The bully's face is earth into which I dig my fingers. Her skin is treebark, her elbows scabby, her neck unwashed" (Yahp 60). The bully comes to be constructed in this passage as part mollusc and part human that underscores the seamless connections between all creatures in the natural world. For grandmother too, the worlds of the living and dead routinely intermingle. She tells her grand-daughter that "[m]en of these parts who cannot attract live women are famous for trying to catch spirit wives. They brave the seas at midnight, hang around jungle edges or at rivers where jungle spirits come to bathe" (Yahp 76), emphasising the anthomorphic interconnections mentioned above. When the narrator and the bully question the grandmother about the "mad sailor," checking whether the sailor was a "he" or "she," or in fact if s/he were "dead or alive," the narrator notes that her grandmother "burst out cackling" and replied "both" (Yahp 102). Thus, racial

and gendered classifications seem unnecessary, even redundant. In fact, even the distinction between death and life is rendered superfluous. However, there is an important difference between the grandmother and the rest of the characters in the story. Grandmother, like her employer, the rich man, stands squarely apart from the natural world.

Grandmother recounts how, once, the rich man came back with a lover, a “creature” of indeterminate identity. Before grandmother’s extra eye opened, enabling her to see spirits and ghosts, and around the time her employer, the rich man, brought home a secret lover, grandmother began having strange dreams. She saw in the dreams the rich man, “braced on the prow” of a boat, “peering” down into the sea watching “strange shapes rising from the waters, teasing, slipping back” (Yahp 135). In her dream, the rich man clambered over the prow and swam in the dark waters. Suddenly,

His hand reached for a shape caught in a watery spiral downwards, a fish shape, smooth and fleeting. The rich man caught the shape mid-spiral, discerned arms and torso, a gown that tangled, a slippery skin.... In the rich man’s arms the shape bucked and struggled.... In his arms the shape was turning, was a shape now suddenly long and scaly, now bloating, now ridged with spikes. Still the rich man gripped. (Yahp 135)

It is not strange that grandmother should have this vivid dream of the rich man’s private life, for, as a little girl, she too had been the rich man’s pet. On his return home from his travels, he always looked for her and petted and played with her, except once. She remembers that instance vividly:

This time the rich man was at the end of the train, and he neither walked quickly, nor looked for my grandmother with red ribbons in her hair, stretching her body, waving both arms. The rich man walked alongside a closed litter draped with scarves of bright cottons and silks. Now and then the draperies shifted to hint at a reclining figure. Now dark strands of hair curled like seaweed through the crack. (Yahp 109)

This is the entry of the lover into the rich man’s life and house. The lover is kept locked in the rich man’s quarters and he too rarely emerges from it. That the lover is unhappy and is pining away is evident from the fact that despite the cook preparing “a variety of different dishes every day” (Yahp 110) the food was returned barely touched. Finally though, when she is coaxed out of her bed, the lover’s smile captivated everyone. “When she touched her cold hand to theirs, rich man or serving woman... was filled with an overwhelming kindness, an immeasurable pleasure” (Yahp 149). The biocentric vision that bonds all living beings emphasises the natural affinity, even the sense of enchantment that exists between humans and other beings. However, grandmother is clearly shown to

stand outside this bond. While others are charmed by the lover, the elusive sea-creature, the narrator informs us “[o]nly my grandmother stood watching from the hidden corners of the rich man’s mansion” (Yahp 140).

Just as the rich man wants to possess and dominate his lover – manifestly a mermaid or a sea-spirit – thwarting her attempts at escape and trying to cajole her out of her nostalgia for the sea by treating her like a household pet, similarly, grandmother too, wants to dominate, control and destroy the spirits that she spies with her extra eye. Hence, from the ecocritical perspective, the tale lends itself to be read as an allegory about the natural world being enslaved by the human world. Grandmother, the storehouse of past knowledge, is also the keeper of memory, one who bonds the narrator to the weight of the past so much so that she feels that young though she is and only a schoolgirl,

Every day I seem to get heavier. My walk to the convent is no longer as light as air, as crooked as a crab baby’s; no longer a skip here and there.... Nowadays my convent walk is a pull against metal, a straight line, like tugging at the anchor of a ship. My chin is no longer lifted for whistling. My feet press further into the ground. (Yahp 241)

The narrator is methodically taught by her grandmother to work towards avenging her unfinished business, which predictably involves adopting a hostile attitude toward the natural world. However, it is the narrator’s friend, the bully, who appears to adopt grandmother’s attitude wholesale. With her broken camera that she uses to photograph every random incident, the bully also stands for memory and for an obsession with recording the past. Since, the rich man’s lover or the sea-maiden is one of grandmother’s main antagonists on whom she funnels all her antipathy toward the non-human “other,” it is a foregone conclusion that the bully, grandmother’s ardent follower, would be most enthusiastic about tracking the sea-spirit and destroying her. It is not surprising that their vengeful attitude is allied to materialism. Thus, the destruction of the sea-maiden is tied to the recovery of a treasure trove. The narrator, on the contrary, is shown to possess an affinity for the natural world. She identifies the place where the sea-spirit is buried. In fact, both the narrator and the bully come upon the burial spot together. But the bully, focused on the treasure, does not even realise this. The narrator states: “The bully and I have walked and walked [in the jungle] and now we have found it. The lover’s gown slips out of the earth as streaked as a precious metal. The bully and I have found it as grandmother told us, but the bully doesn’t know” (Yahp 126). In a highly significant and symbolic break away from the past, the acutely disappointed bully “kneels at the graveside and weeps... the bully is in one of grandmother’s tempers... she tugs at her frayed strap so hard it snaps and her camera smashes to the ground.... ‘We have lost our spirit,’ the bully says. ‘How will we find treasure?’” (Yahp 126). Conversely, on finding the grave of the sea-spirit, the narrator is instantaneously freed of this unfair antipathy. Standing

over the sea-spirit's grave, she feels a stirring inside her which will not stop and her response is the opposite of the bully's:

I am laughing. I am holding my sides with laughter, brushing the tears that spout from my eyes. In my hands the lover's gown is caught water, it slips and spills between my fingers so I have to keep snatching it back. I press my face to its shimmering folds, breathe the lover's salty smell... One deft turn and my arms are into its armholes, my shoulders shrugging to a perfect fit. (Yahp 126-27)

Not only does the narrator shed the antipathy that was nurtured in her by her grandmother's tales and admonitions since she was a baby, but most notably, the moment she sheds her antipathy is the moment she merges with the sea-spirit. This is a neat allegory that underscores the fact that it is humans' attitude that distances them from the natural world to which they are primordially linked.

'Something to do,' I say, my hair lifting on the sudden wind. My hair uncoils from grandmother's braid, it slithers untangled and free. The bully can't help staring. Suddenly I am the most beautiful woman she has ever seen. My gown glimmers so bright she can hardly bear to look. She stands with her mouth drooped open as I hold out my hand. 'Give it to me,' I say, and the bully doesn't want to, but she knows what I meant... obediently her hands drop her knife into my palm... the knife and the gown cleave together with a faint sound of the waves slapping, a memory of the toss and pull of the sea. (Yahp 128)

The narrator turning into the sea-spirit reinforces the sustained message of the novel's sub-text: that humans are elemental beings linked to their natural world. That the narrator turns away from her grandmother's entrenched and immutable world of binaries and from grandmother's antipathy to the natural world is not surprising once we figure out that she is the daughter of the lizard boy, who also, in an epiphanic moment, which manifests as fury, turns into the crocodile. This is the moment on which the novel's title is based, underlining its significance. Indeed, in direct contrast to grandmother's attitude, which is one of remembering the past to avenge its wrongs, the lizard boy's approach to life is one of forgetting. The lizard boy is introduced early in the narrative. His physical appearance is interesting:

The boy's nickname was the Lizard Boy because his skin was cracked and scaly, his body thin and sinewy, his stomach bulging whenever he ate. His eyes were round and lizard-like, hardly ever blinking. Everyone could tell wherever he'd been by the trail of silver skinflakes he left. They watched fascinated and repulsed by the flicking of his tongue. (Yahp 83; capitals in original)

The lizard boy is the son of the caretaker of the convent. His alterity is inscribed into the narrative such that though he is clearly "other" to the human norm, he

is also accepted into the community and has a role to play. The biotic community with all living creatures seamlessly running one-into-another is made patent here. Equally noteworthy is the fact that as Chin observes, his “subjective alterity” (Chin 95) appears to be an unstable state and leads to slippages in corporeality. The lizard boy therefore mutates into a crocodile later in the narrative invoking both pity and fear. But his unstable, ambivalent corporeality and his reptilian physicality do not prohibit an inexhaustible thirst for knowledge for “[h]e carried a book scrunched into his back pocket.... The Lizard Boy wasn’t choosy. One day he’d be reading a history book, next a five-cent novel... he read anything and everything (Yahp 84). Thus, the lizard boy appears to challenge the Cartesian concept of the mind/body duality wherein the ideal is the keen, enquiring mind housed in a fit body. Instead, he possesses a human, enquiring intellect in an ostensibly repulsive, reptilian body. Even here, however, there is evidence of ambivalence because when we first encounter the lizard boy he appears sub-normal but later he appears to have evolved into a cerebral being.

The lizard boy is also the antithesis of grandmother in that he is not tied to history, rituals or conventions and “[f]or hours each day he practiced forgetting” (Yahp 244). Also, he eschewed the canon in all its forms. He “secretly salvaged [books] from the stacks of damaged or unsuitable readings donated to the convent library, which the nuns set aside to be burnt” (Yahp 244) and read them. Anti-colonial literature, leaflets with titles like “*Exploitation. Self-determination. United resistance. Necessary covert activity*” (Yahp 245; italics in original). “He grew more and more excited, the more he read” (Yahp 245). The lizard boy is poised for future action. He has freed himself from the shackles of the past and is able to disregard the weight of contemporary opinion. Secure in his selfhood, he is willing to be all things to all people. “They think they got a crocodile, fine! They got one. They think they got a human, they got one. All depends what they think” (Yahp 246). As the lizard boy read more and more, barely touching his food, “[i]t seemed his bodily functions were winding down” (Yahp 247). This is when the lizard boy metamorphoses into a crocodile:

His flesh shrank against his bones; his bones, flesh—shrunk, seemed to take on new proportions, limb bones shortening so his arms and legs became stubby, backbone lengthening so that from certain angles he looked as if he was growing a tail. His toe and fingernails grew curved and pointed, his face bones elongated, jutting out over his eyebrows, squeezing his cheeks into hollow pouches that sagged. The Lizard Boy’s skin, stretching in places, in others wrinkling, was in some places steam smoothed, in others ridged leathery and cracked. His eyes acquired the startling fixity of black and radiant jewels. (Yahp 247-48)

These moments of mutation in the narrative are significant phenomena for they lead to life-patterns being rearranged for both the lizard-boy-turned-crocodile

and (his daughter) the narrator-turned-sea-spirit (Yahp 304). The epiphanic moment brings about an instance of perfect clarity for the girl-narrator, when her illusions fade away. But it is also a frightening moment and she confesses that “[o]nly the press of the jungle earth against me, the leaves tickling my ears, hold me steady; hold me still” (Yahp 302). She too emerges from the weight of history and the past to savour the present, at long last one with nature. “Unlike the jungle of my grandmother’s stories, the one that presses against me is neither a jungle of jumps and shudders nor one to slide my sleeping eyes open for fear” (Yahp 302-03) she states, clearly spelling out the differences between imagination and reality. Now at last, in touch with her senses and reality, she realises that “[t]he jungle earth is warm and silent. The jungle beasts are mere jungle beasts, no more, which scurry at my footfall” (Yahp 303). With this realisation comes liberation. The shackles that tie her to the cultural world of her grandmother with its weighted past, fade away leaving her free to revel in her new-found kinship with Nature.

Thus, an informed, ecocritical reading of *The Crocodile Fury* would identify the narrative trajectory as one that begins by presenting the cultural world as weighted down by memory and history in the persons of both grandmother: the local storehouse of folk-knowledge and her burdensome rituals that distance nature; and the rich man: the emblem of a colonial era, which was known for the way it systematically bound up, tamed and Othered nature. This reading would accede that in the end, the natural world rises in rebellion and weakens and destroys the humans who held it in thrall. The rich man and the grandmother are the two humans who manipulated the natural world, constantly attempting to subsume it under their cultural habits and habitats, respectively, thus undermining its autonomy. But, ultimately, they are both destroyed or debilitated by the natural forces that regain their power and autonomy.

Such a neat ending, though satisfactory, is, however, also reductive. This is because *The Crocodile Fury* refuses to be contained within any one reading. Its narrative refuses to fix meaning. Hence, without overstating the case, I would like to conclude this reading of *The Crocodile Fury* by proposing that perhaps it inadvertently fulfils Roland Barthes idea of text as para/doxical, where he takes Doxa or public opinion literally. As Barthes clarifies in *From Work to Text*:

[T]he Text tries to place itself very exactly *behind* the limit of the *doxa* [public opinion]. (Is not general opinion – constitutive of our democratic societies and powerfully aided by mass communications – defined by its limits, the energy with which it excludes, its *censorship*?) Taking the word literally, it may be said that the Text is always *paradoxical*. (Barthes 156-60)

If we unravel this, we see that Barthes observes that the text functions as a paradoxical and subversive force, engaged in a movement which is a deferral; a dilation of meaning; the play of signification. As such, meaning is disseminated

and is irreducibly plural. Thus, *The Crocodile Fury*, rather than allowing for a singular interpretation of its meaning, leads to an explosion of meaning due to the fact that it is submerged in a web of signification and intertextuality.

Ecofeminism then offers one cogent perspective through which this irreducibly plural text can be rendered meaningful. This lens provides clarity and insight making sense of this rich and convoluted narrative that delves into the nature of the relationship between woman and the natural world, and between subdominant humans and animals, among other things.

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