

## Hegemonising Intellectual Imperialism: Speciesism in Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*.

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**Abstract:** 'Speciesism' as a theory of animal rights, is the practice of treating members of one species as superior to another and entails them the moral right to treat the inferior as they deem fit. Such a philosophy was vehemently objected by Dr. Richard Ryder and Peter Singer. This paper presents how speciesism operates in Jack London's novel *The Call of the Wild*. It shows the inherent superiority of human beings over all other sentient beings and this is born of the instinctual imperialistic tendency present in every human. I have tried to show how the principle of domination extends its boundaries from the human to the animal world. Interestingly, this dominating motif is observant not only in the human-animal or human-human relationship, but also the animal-animal nexus. Lastly, the paper, after presenting the arguments of speciesists and anti-speciesists tends to question the justification of such a theory and how *The Call of the Wild* is ultimately a voice against 'Speciesism'.

**Keywords:** brutality, dominance, imperialism, power, speciesism.

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### I. Introduction:

"That hard and selfish men and hard and selfish policies will control our imperialist relations; that the kind and well-meaning will be overruled. There is no intention of mildness, humanity and justice in the force that are now gaining ascendancy in American life." (Annals of America, vol 1 256) – this proposition of Mr. Denby, the one-time minister of the US to China and a member of McKinley's Commission to study the Philippines is the keynote of imperialism. This is the imperialist creed, the attitude of the ascendant class towards every other weaker class. "I do not look to the promotion of China's interests or Spain's or any other country's, but simply of our own". Imperialism therefore became the keyword of human supremacy and inhuman exploitation.

As obvious offshoot of such a philosophy is 'speciesism', another mode of imperialism of man over the animal world. It is the speciesist assumption that the human species is inherently superior to other species and, therefore, have rights or privileges that are denied to other sentient animals. Ever since the dawn of civilization, 'man' is the supreme master; the *Homo sapiens* is superior to the *Homo neanderthal*, to every other organisms. It is this sense of superiority that contributed to the emergence of power structure and divisions in society. Human species saw the emergence of a master class and a slave class, a superior species and an inferior sub-species. This ideal of superiority is hegemonised and propagated, giving rise to imperialism – one class dominating the other.

As power gets hegemonised, so does the sense of superiority extend its roots and take within its grasp members of other species as well. The binaries in human nature – us/other, superior/inferior, white (privileged)/black, masculine/feminine, and all such racist and sexist tendencies get extended to the animal world as well and the sense of superiority is further magnified. It is in this connection that the English philosopher Dr Richard Ryder coined the term 'speciesism' in the 1970s and subsequently popularized by the Australian philosopher Peter Singer. Ryder used 'speciesism' to mean "the oppressive tendencies, the practice of treating members of one species as morally more important than members of other species; also the belief that this practice is justified" (Encyclopedia Britannica Online, web).

Ryder vehemently attacks such tendencies and views that such justification is irrelevant :

The word speciesism came to me while I was lying in a bath in Oxford some 35 years ago. It was like racism or sexism – a prejudice based upon morally irrelevant physical differences. Since Darwin we have known we are human animals related to all the other animals through evolution; how, then, can we justify our total oppression of all the other species? (Richard Ryder." All beings that feel pain deserve human rights"[richardryder.co.uk; *The Guardian*, Saturday Aug 6, 2005, Web; Sept 14 2012])

The anti-speciesist Ryder can find a similar voice in Jack London, whose novel *The Call of the Wild* can be viewed as exemplifying speciesism. It cannot be denied that London's narrative is a sharp attack upon the sense of moral superiority of human beings that lead them to brutally exploit animals to fulfil their narrow selfish interests. While Ryder used the term 'speciesism' as a "deliberate 'wake up call' to challenge the morality of current practices where non-human animals are being exploited in research, in farming, domestically and in the wild..." ("speciesism", web), Jack London's text is a narrative rendition of that monstrous brutality.

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The present paper attempts to analyse Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* in the light of 'Speciesism', the imperialistic mission extending boundaries into the animal world.

## II. Specieism in the Call of the Wild

Admitting himself an avowed "pessimist" (Julius Emmanuel 191), London presents things as he sees it. He takes experiences from real life and presents it in the garb of fiction. He selects as the background for his novel *The Call of the Wild*, the wild craze of the Klondike Gold Rush in 1898 that hypnotized people from Skagway to Yukon (Alaska), from the United States to extreme Canada :  
...lots of people wanted gold, so they rushed to the Klondike to get it. (Dyer Daniel 59)

This gold rush needed animals as a means of transport and it is here that speciesism operates in the novel. Though Richard Ryder expounded that speciesism operates in the human-animal relationship where the animal species is brutally exploited and tortured by its superior species, Man, my paper shall endeavour to extend the *modus operandi* and show speciesism in the animal-animal nexus as well, that is how the sense of superiority operates in case of animals too.

Power is hierarchal. It is directly related to dominance. The superior authority always exercises power over its immediate inferior. The strong dominate the weak. There is a struggle everywhere – a struggle for identity, for recognition, for dominance. As Jonathan Auerbach aptly puts it in "Buck and Jack's "Call"":

This struggle to be valued, to be found worthy by others, demands the dominance of one man over another; hence the origin of a master/slave dialectic whereby the conquered slave ("having subordinated his human desire for recognition to the biological desire to preserve his life"), by working, becomes master over nature, and in doing so frees himself from nature as well as from himself, from his nature as a slave. (*American Literature*, Vol.1 59)

The biological urge to survive coupled with the human desire for recognition, mainly lead to speciesist tendencies in human beings. In *The Call of the Wild*, the dog Buck is stolen from the sunny California where he lived a life of ease and taken to Dyea (Alaska). The very novel begins with an implication of the Klondike Gold Rush and the need of dogs for the purpose. Latently London also implies how animals become victims of the mad rush. London begins his first chapter "Into the Primitive" –

Buck did not read the newspapers, or he would have known that trouble was brewing, not alone for himself, but for every tidewater dog, strong of muscle and with warm, long hair, from Puget Sound to San Diego. Because men, groping in the Arctic darkness, had found a yellow metal, and because steamship and transportation companies were booming the find, thousands of men were rushing into the Northland. These men wanted dogs, and the dogs they wanted were heavy dogs, with strong muscles by which to toil, and furry coats to protect them from the frost.(3) Buck is stolen from his life of ease in the 'sun-kissed Santa Clara Valley' (3) and sold to a stranger by the Judge's gardener's helper Manuel. Here begins the brutal exploitation of Buck :

...Manuel doubled a piece of stout rope around Buck's neck under the collar...Then the rope tightened mercilessly, while Buck struggled in a fury, his tongue lolling out of his mouth and his great chest panting futilely. Never in all his life had he been so vilely treated... (5)

Manuel had a fancy for Chinese lottery and he sells Buck not to take part in the Gold Rush but to play a 'system' which 'requires money, while the wages of a gardener's helper do not lap over the needs of a wife and numerous progeny.'(5) This man maltreats Buck for his own interest, but the innocent Buck did not initially realize that his faith in men is being betrayed : Buck had accepted the rope with quiet dignity. To be sure, it was an unwonted performance: but he had learned to trust in men he knew, and to give them credit for a wisdom that outreached his own. (5)

## III. Singer and PEC

As Buck passes on from the authority of one man to another, torture upon him gets multiplied and as speciesism operates, they all consider their action 'morally justified'.(Encyclopedia Britannica Online, web). Peter Singer advances his argument against speciesism on the basis of what he calls 'the principle of equal consideration of interests' (PEC). This is the claim that one should give equal weight in one's moral decision making to the like interest of those affected by one's actions. PEC promotes the idea of human equality and therefore applies to racism and sexism. One should not privilege the interests of whites over the like interests of blacks, males over females etc.

Singer states that anyone who accepts the PEC must agree that it applies to animals as well as humans. Animals should not be treated as belonging to another species; rather they should be given equal status. In an interview with *Salon* in 2006, Singer makes his point clear : We have expanded the circle beyond our own race and we reject as wrongful the idea that something like race or religion or gender can be a basis for claiming another being's interests count less than our own. So the argument is that this is also an arbitrary stopping place; it's also a form of discrimination, which I call "speciesism" that has parallels with racism. I am not saying it's identical, but in both cases you have this group that has power over the outsiders, and develops an ideology that

says, Those outside our circle don't matter, and therefore we can make use of them for our own convenience. (Jasmin Malik Chua, "Quote of the Day: Peter Singer on Speciesism"[treehugger.com; *Science/Natural Sciences*, September 22, 2007, Web; September 10, 2012] )

It is therefore the imperialistic politics that teaches man that he is superior and therefore has rights over other sentient beings. When man is unable to gain the upper hand over other humans, he does it to inferior animals. Speciesism propagates the principle of domination –

"Well Buck, my boy", he went on in a genial voice, "we've had our little ruction, and the best thing we can do is to let it go at that. You've learned your place and I know mine. Be a good dog and all'll go well and the goose hang high. Be a bad dog, and I'll whale the stuffin' outa you. Understand?"(9)

The man in the red sweater therefore, who is subservient to superior master, (the government agency, as we come to know later in the novel) in charge of the overland mails, carrying letters and mails to the Klondike; in turn, asserts his superiority over the animals he is in charge of.

He was beaten (he knew that); but he was not broken. He saw once for all, that stood no chance against a man with a club. He had learned the lesson, and in all his afterlife he never forgot it....As the days went by, other dogs came, in crates and the ends of ropes, some docilely, and some raging and roaring as he had come and, one and all, he watched them pass under the dominion of the man in the red sweater.(10)

Next, as Buck passes from the charge of one master to another, he comes across new breeds of dogs. As the new masters Francois and Perrault take hold, Buck along with Curly, comes across two other dogs, 'a big, snow-white fellow from Spitzbergen' and 'a gloomy morose fellow' called Dave, who desired to be left alone and showed Curly plainly that 'there would be trouble if he was not left alone'.(11)

As already stated, speciesism operates in the animal-animal relationship as well as animal-human relationship and as the novel proceeds further, we make this observation in the relationship between Buck, Spitz, Dave and an old husky dog, Sol-leks, which means The Angry One.

London's introduction of the dogs is quite humorous, but the role they play is quite significant and conspicuous. Through the description of their nature, Jack London gives the inkling of the tussle in the animal world and also makes us aware that the struggle for supremacy and the human desire to cling to one's position and maintain his place, is observed in animals also. As new dogs are added to the team, the old ones exhibit and manifest their importance. The attitude of the old dogs towards the new ones is worth mentioning in the second chapter entitled "The Law of Club and Fang" –

By afternoon, Perrault, who was in a hurry to be on the trail with his dispatches, returned with two more dogs....Buck received them in *comradely fashion*, Dave *ignored* them, while Spitz proceeded to *thrash first one and then the other*.(15 emphasis mine)

As time passes, the dogs become aware of the task ordained to them. As courier for the Canadian Government bearing important dispatches, Perrault was to secure the best dogs for the task and both Buck and his team do justice to his labour. Gradually the dogs are animated with eagerness to do work. It transforms them and even Buck is surprised at the change.

The toil of the traces seemed the supreme expression of their being, and all that they lived for and the only expression in which they took delight. (17)

#### **IV. Survival of the fittest**

But this delight did not last long. The hostile weather condition coupled with days of unending toil and the little food to eat made things unbearable. And Buck was the first to suffer –

He never had enough and suffered from perpetual hunger pangs. Yet the other dogs, because they weighed less and were born to the life, received only a pound of the fish and managed to keep in good condition. (19)

To add to Buck's misery, the other dogs robbed him of his daily ration and Buck found it a hard struggle to compete with his teammates with his own share of food. Defenders of speciesism, like Cohen or Gray may applaud this struggle as 'right conduct' (Cohen) for survival, but we should not overlook the politics that actually lead one to worst extremes.

It is the politics of imperialism. The imperial powers are too self-centric, harsh and shrewd to allow the proper and right division of wealth among individuals. The 'hunger fang' is so unbearable and terrible that it leads one to forget his moral considerations and do things which his conscience would not otherwise permit. As Darwin, speaking of the similarity of the species, upholds the view that 'if all organisms are on the same physical continuum, the we should also be on the same moral continuum' ;( "Speciesism" web) the suffering of animals should be viewed from the same moral level –

...He was fit, that was all, and unconsciously he accommodated himself to the new mode of life. All his days, no matter what the odds, he had never run from a fight. But the club of the man in the red sweater had beaten into him a more fundamental and primitive code....He did not steal for joy of it, but because of the clamor of his stomach. He did not rob openly, but stole secretly and cunningly, out of respect for club and fang. In short, the things he did were done because it was easier to do them than not to do them. (19)

The dominant primordial beast was strong in Buck and as he manages his hunger fangs, once again he strives for supremacy. He engaged in a feud with Spitz, but soon the entire team is attacked by four or five huskies from the Indian village that had scented the camp and was 'crazed by the smell of food.' (22) Here starts another battle, another struggle for survival and supremacy among members of the same species. It is speciesism at its starkest.

Whether human beings are bereft of kindness to animals and justly exploit them is a matter of debate. Sometimes, as defenders of speciesism would assert, it is necessary to take the upper hand over the animals for the preservation of themselves. It may sound too self-centric, but it is not altogether irrational. Francois' tendering the hurt and wounded animals raises a serious question and Jack London subtly implies it –

With four hundred miles still between them and Dawson, he could ill afford to have madness break out among his dogs. (24)

Francois and Perrault are government couriers and as the superior authority always exercise a 'pan optican' control over its workers; they have no other alternative than to be sometimes brutal and at times kind towards the poor animals. Much like the animals, humanists would claim that these men are also to be pitied.

As an example tending towards speciesists, we may note the following instance –  
...the dog driver rubbed Buck's feet for half an hour each night after supper, and sacrificed the tops of his own moccasins to make four moccasins for Buck. (25)

The desire to cling to a position at times becomes tragic and painful. According to Singer –  
Animals as well as humans have interests – though of course not all human and animal interests are the same. The interests that a being has depend on the experiences of which it is capable. Because both animals and humans are capable of feeling pain, for example, both have an interest in avoiding it. (Britannica online, web)

In *The Call of the Wild*, Jack London exemplifies this feeling of pain in animals in heightened tones, through Dave. Initially a non-interfering, introvert fellow dog, Dave gradually takes the toil of traces and trail to be part and parcel of his life. And unfortunately when exhaustion comes among the dogs, 'it was Dave who suffered most of all'. (39) Something had gone wrong with him. He became more morose and irritable, and when the camp was pitched at once made his nest, where his driver fed him. Once out of the harness and down, he did not get on his feet again till harness-up time in the morning. Sometimes, in the traces, when jerked by a sudden stoppage of the sled, or by straining to start it, he would cry out with pain. (39-40)

Everyone was at a loss to decipher what has happened to Dave. They understood that 'something was wrong inside, but they could locate no broken bones, could not make it out'. (40)

What surprises us most is that though Dave is suffering intolerably from intense physical pain, he is not ready to sacrifice his position in the trail. The zest for supremacy, the desire to lead is more dominant than the physical pain. As Singer stated, both humans and animals are capable of feeling pain and have an interest in avoiding it. The tragic intensity is heightened when we find that though physically incapable, Dave would not give up his position as London presents in the chapter "Who has Won to Mastership" –

By the time Cassiar Bar was reached, he was so weak that he was falling repeatedly in the traces. The Scotch half-breed called a halt and took him out of the team, making the next dog, Sol-leks, fast to the sled. Sick as he was, *Dave resented being taken out, granting and growling while the traces were unfastened and whimpering broken-heartedly when he saw Sol-leks in the position he had held and served so long. For the pride of trace and trail was his, and, sick unto death, he could not bear that another dog should do his work.* (40, emphasis mine)

So to relieve the dog of his mental anguish, he was harnessed in again so that he could die her easy and content. So he was harnessed in again, and proudly he pulled as of old, though more than once he cried out involuntarily from the bite of his inward hurt. Several times he fell down and was dragged in the traces, and once the sled ran upon him so that he limped thereafter in one of his hind legs.

But ultimately – His strength left him and the last his mates saw of him he lay gasping in the snow and yearning toward them. But they could hear him mournfully howling till they passed out of sight behind a belt of river timber. (41)

This is Darwin's struggle for survival in the land of the fittest. Though Darwin called for the assignment of a similar moral status to both humans and animals, the suffering of Dave is, as Ryder pointed out, an instance of the exploitation of non-human animals and very much in tune with racism and sexism. It is the principle of elimination and differences operating in all strata of society.

## V. Is Speciesism justified?

'Speciesism' as a theory of moral right empowers human beings with the right to treat animals as they deserve. Speciesism is immoral, observes Peter Singer. In his interview with *Salon*, Singer validates his faith – I don't think we can say that somehow we, as humans, are the sole repository of all moral value, and that all beings beyond our species don't matter. I think they do matter, and we need to expand our moral consideration to take that into account. (Chua Sept 22, 2007, web)



The principle of superiority blinds one to the fact that animals are also capable of feeling pain. The extremity of animals being worked to serve the interests of man is observed in the chapter entitled "The Toil of Traces and Trail" of Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* where we find the pitiful condition of the otherwise

Buck's one hundred and forty pounds had dwindled to one hundred and fifteen. The rest of his mates, though lighter dogs, had relatively lost more weight than he. Pike, the malingerer, who in his lifetime of deceit had often successfully feigned a hurt leg, was now limping in earnest. Sol-leks were limping, and Dub was suffering from a wrenched shoulder blade. (42)

Animals worth nothing in face of dollars and pounds. The old weary animals are to be got rid of and allow new ones to take their place. Men were in the rush for the 'yellow metal' and they can not afford to stake their 'bucks' (money) at the cost of the weary Bucks!

Fresh batches of Hudson Bay dogs were to take the places of those worthless for the trail. The worthless ones were to be got rid of and since dogs count for little against dollars, they were to be sold. (43)

Another phase of inhuman brutality and mercile exploitation begins as Buck and his mates are bought by two men from the States. The two men, Hal and Charles, are, to sharply coin, avowed speciesists. From the moment they take charge of the dogs, begins their predominating over them.

They have perhaps grown up believing in the principle that as they have bought the dogs with their own money, they have moral claim and right over the beasts and they can treat them as they wish. Raymond Benoit observes in his article "Jack London's "The Call of the Wild" " –

...The dogs are overworked and clubbed when they become too weak from lack of food to pull the load that civilization demands. (*American Quarterly* 20.2.1 248)

Donald Graft in his article "Against Strong Speciesism", points out that defender of speciesism may assert speciesism with the following argument –

Members of a species may do whatever is required to ensure the survival of that species, including exploiting other species. (*Society for Applied Philosophy* 14.2 1997 109)

Hal's maltreating and brutally exploiting the dogs – "The lazy brutes, I'll show them", he cried, preparing to lash out at them with a whip' (44) and his succeeding beating the dogs – '... Buck and his friends struggling frantically under the rain of blows' (45) may be defended by speciesists as necessary, but such action is not morally justified.

## **VI. Richard Ryder observes –**

We treat the other animals not as relatives, but as unfeeling things. We would not dream of treating our babies, or mentally handicapped adults, in these ways – yet these humans are sometimes less intelligent and less able to communicate with us than are some exploited non-humans. (Ryder *The Guardian* Saturday Aug 6 2005)

It is quite illogical and irrational that being members of an inferior species, the animals should suffer the miscalculations of man –

In the nature of Arctic travel there was a reason why fourteen dogs should not drag one sled, and that was that one sled could not carry the food for fourteen dogs. But Charles and Hal did not know this. They had worked the trip out with a pencil, so much to a dog, so many dogs, so many days, Q.E.D Mercedes (Hal's sister) looked over their shoulders and nodded comprehensively, it was not so very simple. (47)

Raymond Benoit further exemplifies London's stand –

Charles, Hal and Mercedes (civilization) fail to pull down their vanity and learn of the green (in this case, white) world; they are judged and condemned by London to a death caused by the weight of their baggage which cracks the river ice. (*American Quarterly* 248)

As George Bernard Shaw says that 'Nature may have tricks up her sleeves to check us if the chemists exploit her too greedily' (Freedom), so the inhuman beings, the 'nice family party', Charles, Hal and Mercedes, gets drowned ultimately. It is as if a price they paid for exploiting the poor animals. Buck's tutelage is now taken over by a kind and generous master John Thornton and his harsh days in the trail ends.

## **VII. Conclusion –**

Finally, what is speciesism actually and how *The Call of the Wild* is an exemplification of speciesism. It would be worthwhile in this regard to quote Darwin as Donald Graft does in his article –

I look at the term species, as one arbitrarily given for the sake of convenience to a set of individuals closely resembling each other. (*Society for Applied Philosophy* 114)

Darwin hardly had anticipated that this naming for the sake of convenience would ultimately take the form of an '-ism' and thereby assert superiority and dominance. We may agree with Gray that human beings matter more to other human beings more than animals do...' (Graft 108), but the argument of defenders of speciesism that exploitation of one species is just for the survival of another, cannot be wholly agreed. Being the most advanced and superior species, human beings should develop different means for their preservation rather

than merely exploit animals. Jack London in the chapter entitled "For the Love of a Man" in *The Call of the Wild* the presents an alternative reality through John Thornton where Buck differentiates between his previous

This man had saved his life, which was something, but further, he was the ideal master. Other men saw to the welfare of their dogs from a sense of duty and business expediency; he saw to the welfare of him as if they were his own children, because he could not help it. (57)

Buck knew that his master loved him and so when that winter at Dawson, Thornton was in trouble, Buck performed the most difficult task in his life. In a leisurely conversation when the miners' men were bragging about the strength and energy of their favourite dogs, Thornton also bragged about Buck and caused trouble –

At the end of half an hour one man stated that his dog could start a sled with five hundred pounds and walk off with it; a second bragged six hundred for his dog; and a third, seven hundred.

"Pooh! Pooh!" said John Thornton; "Buck can start a thousand pounds."

... ..

"And break it out, and walk off with it for a hundred yards," John Thornton said coolly. (63-64)

But Buck did it for the sake of his master. He pulled the sled and walked with it. His act left the

### VIII. Audience Speechless –

Buck swung to the right, ending the movement in a plunge that took up the slack and with a sudden jerk arrested his one hundred and fifty pounds. The load quivered and from under the runners arose a crisp crackling....The crackling turned into a snapping....Men were holding their breaths intensely unconscious of the fact. (66)

Now how should we look at Buck's accomplishing a task for the love of his master? Thornton did not compel Buck to undergo the ordeal, though it was Thornton's own foolery that created that situation. Should we call it exploitation? In this regard we should note the following observation by Dr Richard Ryder –

It is the heartless exploiter of animals, not the animal protectionists, who is being irrational, showing a sentimental tendency to put his own species on a pedestal. We all thank goodness, feel a natural spark of sympathy for the suffering of others. We need to catch that spark and fan it into a fire of rational and universal compassion. (*The Guardian* Saturday Aug 6 2005) John Thornton heals the pain of Buck not from a sense of duty, but a genuine sense of love and compassion –

Thornton rose to his feet. His eyes were wet. The tears were streaming frankly down his cheeks...

Buck seized Thornton's hand in his teeth. Thornton shook him back and forth. As though animated by a common impulse, the onlookers drew back to a respectful distance; nor were they again indiscreet enough to interrupt. (67)

Here lies the difference. And with Thornton's death (he is killed by the Yeehat tribes towards the end of the novel), Buck responds to the "call of the wild", finally breaking his last connection with the human world, not to be further exploited or adored.

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