BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Mending the Broken Bond: Exploring Human-Elephant Conflict in K.V. Dominic’s Poems

ABSTRACT
Mountains are the immovable totem of the landscape which stand out from the surrounding environment as they are the elevated portion of the earth’s crust. In mountain regions, wildlife is one of the essential factors to be considered for developing a holistic environment. As a result of the rapid dwindling of resources for wildlife, the ecological balance is affected. It deteriorates the relationship and instigates conflict between human beings and animals. Mountains are home to various species. Among various animals, elephants are the significant animals seen in the mountain region. K.V. Dominic’s poems depict humans’ cruelty and brutal treatment towards elephants. The investigation of human-elephant conflict is indispensable to protect the elephant species. This paper analyses the mode of relation between humans and elephants in the mountain region and identifies the factors that affect their relationship. Dominic’s poems reveal the negative impact of technology upon elephants and the humans’ superiority towards elephants. This paper analyses the factors that provokes the human-elephant conflict and suggests solutions to develop a kith and kin relationship between humans and elephants.

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Background of the Study

Mountains play various roles in literature. They are symbolic or figurative or may serve as a dramatic backdrop. As mentioned in several poems like “The Mountain” by Emily Dickinson; “This is About Mountains” by Hilda Conkling, and “Ode to Mt. Blanc” by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, mountains are majestic and hold a rich tradition. In “Lesson of the Mountain”, Temsula Ao captures the secret, impressive grandeur of the mountain. They are attributed to be the source of the human race. According to Sangam Literature, the mountainous region and their adjoining lands are known as kurinji tinai, named after the flower Strobilanthes kunthiana. Nirmal Selvamony in “An Alternative Social Order”, names kurinji tinai as Montane social order. As mentioned by Nirmal Selvamony, elephant is one of the faunae in this social order. Nirmal Selvamony’s three modes of relation, such as integrative, hierarchic, and anarchic, between humans and non-humans, as described in “An Introduction to Neo-Tinai Poetics”, are identified in Dominic’s poems to explore the bond between humans and elephants.

Elephants, in particular, are consistently represented across a wide range of literary works. P. Coomaraswamy in “Kurinjippattu” describes the existence of elephants in kurinji tinai: “Like unto the elephant’s trunk raised to despoil the tall bamboos of their seed, the millet-stalks in our fields, their grey heads bent with the weight of heavy ears, are swarming with parrots, eager for the corn. Go ye and drive them away, and return when the day has ended” (Coomaraswamy 2000, 91). These lines showcase the author’s keen observation of the natural world and the intricacies of ecological relationships. Through evocative imagery and metaphors, the poet reveals the harmonious coexistence of humans, elephants, parrots, and crops within the kurinji tinai.
Elephant’s first appearance in the printed book is seen in *Elephantographia Curiosa* by D. Georg Christoph Petri von Hartenfels, published in 1715. Moreover, it underscores the substantial role elephants have played in the human experience throughout history. This text provides a comprehensive account of the anatomical distinctions observed between Asian and African elephants, shedding light on their biological variations. It highlights the significance of elephants in human life. Following the advent of children’s literature, elephants assumed notable roles as prominent characters, as exemplified in *The Jungle Book*. However, in modern literary discussions, there have been noteworthy changes in how elephants are depicted, with a greater focus on their suffering. This shift in representation draws attention on the challenges elephants face, reflecting the increasing concern for their well-being and the urgent necessity towards their conservation.

K. V. Dominic, a contemporary Indian poet, expresses the miseries of elephants in “Wails of Mosquitoes and Elephants”, “Elephant Mania”, and “I can Hear the Groan of Mother Earth”. Dominic is also a short story writer, an editor and a critic. Most of his poems concern nature as he condemns every action that harms the environment. He voices out for the human-elephant conflict and explicitly represents the plight of elephants in his poems. As mentioned by J. Scott Bryson in *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*, “In the work of these contemporary poets we get a perspective on the human-nonhuman relationship that distinguishes them from their nature poetry ancestors and marks them as ecopoets” (Bryson 2002, 5), Dominic’s approach towards nature is different from the nature poets of the romantic period. Instead of presenting an appreciation of the natural world, Dominic attempts to render the environmental
problems in the contemporary world. He also censures the injustice done against the animal world.

**Human-wildlife Conflict**

Among all wildlife creatures, elephants are considered as majestic animals. In “Animals and Birds in the *Pancatantra*”, Gauri Mahulikar says, “Elephant, though a wild animal, is depicted as a noble animal. It is said that a mighty elephant, in full youth and rut doesn’t get angry with the insignificant creatures” (Mahulikar 2015, 155). Elephants are often worshipped as the symbol of the Hindu God, Lord Ganesha. Unfortunately, elephants do not live peaceful life, often falling victim to conflicts with humans. The causes of such conflicts encompass a range of factors, including poaching, culling, electrocution, habitat loss, encroachments, and retaliatory actions taken against them.

Kaiwen Su, Ren Jie, Jie Yang, Yilei Hou, and Yali Wen in “Human-Elephant Conflicts and Villagers’ Attitudes and Knowledge in the Xishuangbanna Nature Reserve, China”, mentions that, “when the needs and behaviours of wildlife have a negative impact on human goals and interests, or the goals and interests of human have a negative impact on the needs and behaviours of wildlife, human-wildlife conflicts will develop, a common example is wildlife damage” (Su et al. 2020, 1). However, the human activities that affect wildlife are more severe than the reverse. If the disturbance persists, it is not easy to recover the balance in the ecosystem. Arbind Kumar Choudhary, in “Pigmented Poetic Passage of K. V. Dominic”, rightly says, “The animal world rarely commits crime with human world or natural world unlike the human beings ever found engaged in crimes, killlings, tortures and annihilations for their own sake of selfishness” (Choudhary 2019, 95). These observations bring
attention to the inherent imbalances and harm caused by human actions, emphasising the requirement for enhanced comprehension, empathy, and conservation endeavours to alleviate the negative consequences of human-elephant conflicts.

**Impact of Technology on Elephants**

Technology is one of the major factors that affect the complex interaction network of elephant species. K.V. Dominic’s poem “Wails of Mosquitoes and Elephants”, in *Cataracts of Compassion* comprises two stanzas that distinctively portray the distress of mosquitoes and elephants, respectively. In the second stanza, the poet employs the persona of an elephant as a narrator, articulating the profound desolation of its habitat. Through the poignant line “Pastures and thickets are burnt” (Dominic 2018, 65), Dominic exposes the issue of deforestation, vividly illustrating the alarming depletion of animal habitats.

In mountainous terrain, the necessity for road construction leads to the felling of trees, thereby obstructing vital elephant corridors. Tragically, this impairs the movement of elephants and exposes them to a heightened risk of collisions with vehicles, leading to an increase in their mortality rate. The consequences of such roadways in mountain ranges are encapsulated in the lines, “Our habitats are destroyed / Roads are made through them / Vehicles hit us and kill” (Dominic 2018, 65).

Furthermore, natural disasters such as forest fires also exacerbate the situation by engulfing numerous trees on hilltops, further depleting essential food and water sources for elephants. Consequently, the disruption of their ecological balance jeopardises the elephants’ sustenance, effectively shattering their livelihoods. Expressing their distress, the elephants lament,
“How can we survive / without food and water?” (Dominic 2018, 65).

Roadways in mountain regions have an adverse impact on elephants and other wild animals, by enabling both habitat destruction and wildlife mortality. They create a sense of fear among the elephants. Forest elephants are imprisoned by highways and live in terror. An article “Roads Bring Death and Fear to Forest Elephants” in *Science Daily* (2008) states that the study, which used GPS collars to track 28 forest elephants, reveals that roads outside the parks and protected areas catch the attention of poachers and have become substantial barriers to elephant travel. Dr. Stephen Blake, the study’s lead author, describes them as ‘frightened mice’ traversing the woods rather than a calm menacing giant of their woodland realm.

Construction of roads in hills destroys the sanctity of its region and increases the pollution level. It increases the possibility of human intervention, which results in grabbing natural resources. According to Andrea Thompson’s article “Air Pollution Cuts Rainfall Over Mountains” (2021), air pollution from vehicles, factories, and burning of plant debris can reduce precipitation in some semi-arid highland areas and jeopardise important water sources for mountain species. The rapid progress of scientific advancements plays a pivotal role in facilitating the construction of roads in mountain ranges, which, unfortunately, poses a significant threat to elephants by detrimentally affecting and spoiling their natural habitat.

**Death Toll of Elephants**

Earlier, the primary threat to wild elephants was poaching, which posed a significant danger to their existence. In “Kerala loses 275 elephants in a year’s time” (2018), Shiller Ste-
phen states that the death rate of elephants in Kerala is high. He mentions, “The statistics from August 12, 2017 to the 10th of this month (August 2018) registered the death of 238 wild elephants and 37 tamed ones” (“Kerala loses”). Of the 238 elephants which died, poisoning massacred the lives of 25 wild elephants, while internal and external injuries killed the lives of 151 others. In “Elephant Lore in Ancient Sanskrit Literature”, Gauri Mahulikar says, “When the peaceful atmosphere of the jungle gets disturbed by urban trespassers, the wild animals react fiercely. Sometimes man destroys the quietude of the forests by forceful poaching for ivory and hunting and then the animals turn violent” (Mahulikar 2015, 170).

At present, electrocution is one of the prime factors in the death of wild elephants. On 12th August 2021, a seven-year-old male elephant was electrocuted to death in Nilgiris. The animal is said to have electrocuted on a power fence. Electric fences are a jarring reminder that most people do not believe in having a peaceful coexistence. S. Pathmanathan in “The Concerns of a Sensitive Poet: K. V. Dominic’s Cataracts of Compassion”, specifies the callous act of human beings. He says, “Elephants are endangered and face extinction. In a small island like Sri Lanka, 68 elephants have been killed this by poachers, by trains and by electrocution” (Pathmanathan 2019, 231). Technological advancements and their implementation in Montane social order have widespread consequences, not only impacting the elephant habitat and diminishing their population but also disrupting their communication patterns.

**Impact of Technology on Communication**

Communication stands as an intrinsic aspect for the existence of all living organisms. While the intricacies and captivating nature of animal communication are undeniable, a
comprehensive investigation into the factors influencing this phenomenon becomes significant in revitalising the Montane social order. Zoosemiotics is a field of study that deals with the nuances and complexities of animal communication. This analysis plays a pivotal role in the reconfiguration and enhancement of the animal communication in mountain ecosystem.

Almost all animals in mountain ranges, including elephants face the problem of communication. Communication signals used by human beings adversely affect elephants. High-intensity noise produced by traffic, industrial, and constructional activities disturb the comfort of animals. Increased human activity surrounding mountain ranges increases the effects of anthropogenic noise on animals. Reduced behaviour as well as negative effects on species composition and interspecies interactions could result from this long-term effect.

In “Wails of Mosquitoes and Elephants”, Dominic expresses the disturbance of vehicle noise for the elephants. The noise disturbance for elephants is represented as, “Their [vehicles] horns pierce our ears” (Dominic 2018, 65). The hearing range of elephants is around 17 Hz to 10.5 kHz. If the frequency of the vehicle horn exceeds the limit, the horn sound may damage the elephants’ ears and lead to several other problems. Abdulla, A. Shabarina, Khairil, M. Saputri, D. Syafrianti and N. Ala in “The Effect of Anthropogenic Noise on Sumatran Elephant’s Anti-predator Behaviour in the Elephant Conservation Center” state, “the noise, from axes, motorbikes and chainsaws, has effect on the anti-predatory behavior of Sumatran elephants” (Abdulla et al. 2020, 3). They state that it is imperative to take into account how noise affects a species’ ability to survive. They specify as follows:
In Indonesia, the impact of noise on the survival of a species has not been a major focus in conservation strategies, because the effects arising from noise are long-term effects, differ from other threats such as poaching, conflicts between animals and humans, and habitat degradation can directly reduce the number of animal populations drastically in a shorter period. However, the effects of noise cannot be ignored because it will be impacted to the success of conservation. (Abdulla et al. 2020, 5)

The progression of technology has resulted in the deprivation of the once contented life and natural habitat of elephants. The construction of roadways and the incessant blaring of vehicle horns exemplify the dominance of a materialistic society. Ultimately, the anarchic relationship between humans and elephants, characterised by an increasing emphasis on science and materialistic ideologies, is depicted in “Wails of Mosquitoes and Elephants”.

Role of Economy

Economy is one of the prime factors affecting elephants’ lives. Dominic’s love for the animal world is seen through the poem “I can Hear the Groan of Mother Earth” in the collection Contemporary Concerns and Beyond (2016). It is a poem of six stanzas expressing the earth’s grief. This poem picturises Dominic’s grief upon seeing the unstoppable rolling tears from the eyes of Mother Earth. Dominic acts as a spokesperson in voicing out for the elephant habitat. He mentions that he can hear the scream of elephants when they are driven away from their homes. The act of burning trees for wealth signifies humans’ heedless pursuit of material gain. It highlights the urgent need for a more sustainable approach to land use and conserva-
tion, one that considers the needs of both humans and wildlife, including the preservation of elephants’ natural habitats.

Dominic expresses the grief of animals as, “I can hear the scream of elephants, tigers, . . . when they drive them from their homes / and starve to death by burning forests” (Dominic 2016, 26). These lines indicate that the elephants are starved to death by burning the region for wealth. He indicates the double trouble for elephants in the last two lines of this stanza. Elephants lose their natural habitat as well as their food. Consequently, they are compelled to wander in search of a suitable dwelling, only to face a tragic end due to malnourishment. This portrayal serves as a stark reminder of humanity’s materialistic tendencies, which act as the driving force behind the exploitative practices targeting natural resources in mountainous regions.

In this regard, the economy assumes a prominent role in exerting a profound impact on the utilisation of natural resources, leading to the devastating consequences for elephant livelihoods. In “Wails of Mosquitoes and Elephants”, the poet captures the anarchic mode of this relationship, wherein the pursuit of economic gains becomes the overriding factor, overshadowing the preservation of the environment. As a result, elephants are left bereft of their essential resources, causing severe disruptions to their sustenance and overall well-being.

Role of Culture

Culture is the driving force of a society. Religious celebration is part of a culture that impacts society and the environment in various ways. Certain religious celebrations negatively impact elephants’ lives and are represented in the poem “Elephant Mania”. This is a 21-line poem in which Dominic
acts as a spokesperson for elephants and questions the rituals that involve elephants during festivals. Fireworks and drums are used during festivals in temples. Dominic indicates that the elephants are an ‘exhibit’ in the temple festivals, and the heavy sound of fireworks shatter the tolerance of elephants. He rightly points out such instances as, “An exhibit for temple festivals / Torture it with heavy sounds / of fireworks and drums” (Dominic 2014, 33). The elephants cannot bear the torture and it charges its mahout in a huff which Dominic expresses as, “Unbearable it charges / On manhouts and crowd” (Dominic 2014, 33).

Elephants are not able to bear the sound of fireworks and drums. Noise from fireworks and firecrackers may lead to hearing impairment. Additionally, many animals may develop phobias from frequent exposure to unanticipated loud noise and increases panic attack as a response to loud noise. On 27th May 2020, a pregnant elephant died in the middle of a river in Kerala (Gupta 2020). The elephant is suspected to have suffered fatal injuries after eating fruit laced with fireworks, which burst in her mouth. Thrissur-based Task Force’s leader, V. K. Venkitachalam, also noted that one of the major causes of elephant injuries is firecrackers. In the realm of festive celebrations, the juxtaposition of joyous revelry and the grim reality of elephant suffering and mortality is apparent through these instances.

Hindu and Buddhist traditions have given an elevated position to elephants, where temples and monasteries have been using elephants to do sacred duties for several centuries. Dominic rightly points out, “Are gods crazy of elephants / or devotees elephant-maniacs?” (Dominic 2014, 33). Elephants are speared when they disobey the mahout. They are also tortured in sever-
al camps and temples. Swaminathan Natarajan, correspondent for the BBC, reported the words of Sangita Iyer, a documentary maker of *Gods in Shackles*. He mentions, “So many elephants had ghastly wounds on their hips, massive tumours and blood oozing out of their ankles, because chains had cut into their flesh and many of them were blind” (Swaminathan 2020, para. 2). While festivals are meant to be joyous occasions, their impact on the natural world, particularly on the state of elephants, reveals a disconcerting truth. The exploitation of these majestic creatures within the framework of cultural and religious practices, despite their revered status, exposes the paradoxical nature of human-elephant relationship.

The remarkable attributes of elephants, including their memory and intelligence, stand juxtaposed against their innate ignorance of their own size and power and renders them susceptible to exploitation. Humans capitalise on this vulnerability by subjecting elephants to enslavement. Although elephants are sensitive to heat, they are “goaded along burning tar road” (Dominic 2014, 33). They are also forced to carry massive timber and bear people on its back. Human dominance over elephants is mentioned by Dominic as, “Famous for its [elephant] memory and intelligence / But seldom knows its size and power / Hence cunning man enslaves it” (Dominic 2014, 33). These lines underscore the cunning exploitation by humans, taking advantage of the elephants’ cognitive ability and limited self-awareness.

The reason for the emergence of hierarchic relation is the attribution of “supremacy to supernature” (Selvamony 127) which creates a gulf between humans and supernature. In “An Introduction to Neo-tinai Poetics”, Nirmal Selvamony, mentions:
By attributing supremacy to supernature, the distance between the humans and supernature was affected, confining the latter to a special space deemed holy. Similarly, the human world was also imagined as a hierarchically ordered one, with the superior ruler, and the inferior ruled. . . . Like supernature and the human, nature was also hierarchized. . . . Even animals were ranged in a hierarchic order – the domestic and the wild. (Selvamony 2019, 127)

The disparity between humans and the supernatural impacts the hierarchical structure within the human and animal realms. This hierarchy extends to animals, with domesticated animals holding superiority over their wild counterparts. These instances can be seen together during temple festivals as elephants face harsh treatment. In “Elephant Mania”, the human supremacy over elephants signifies a hierarchical relationship which stems from cultural factors. A change in human attitude towards elephants is necessary for the preservation of these majestic creatures. Humans and elephants need to live a harmonious life as shown in Kartiki Gonsalves’ movie The Elephant Whisperers, which has won Oscar Award for the best documentary (short subject) in 2023. Kattunayakkan in The Elephant Whisperers says, “This is my home, where I belong, where the wild animals roam free” (Gonsalves 2022, 01:42). In this documentary, humans and elephants have a harmonious relationship with each other, serving as a guiding inspiration and setting an example for fellow humans.

Findings

Dominic’s poems offer a vivid portrayal of the human-elephant conflict within the Montane social order. Through the poems “Wails of Mosquitoes and Elephants”, “I can Hear the
Groan of Mother Earth”, and “Elephant Mania”, he presents two distinct modes of relation between humans and elephants. Regrettably, the kith and kin relationship, which represents an integrative mode of connection, is notably absent in this social order, underscoring the urgency to address the factors affecting the human-elephant relationship. Although one of the poems depicts the superiority of humans over elephants, the prevailing influence of materialism and excessive reliance on technology predominantly impact the livelihood of elephants. The sufferings endured by the elephant species point to various factors such as technology, economy, and cultural influences, leading to an anarchic mode of relation, which alters the integrative mode of interaction between human beings and elephants.

**Implications**

Introducing electric vehicles for public transport in mountainous regions offers a viable solution to control pollution effectively. Moreover, minimising the usage of private vehicles can drastically reduce pollution levels. CNN reports the positive impact of lockdown in air pollution. In Punjab, a state with northern India, citizens on 9th April 2020, reacted in astonishment as they witnessed the Himalayan Mountain range, which was visible from more than 100 miles away. This unprecedented visibility was a direct result of reduced air pollution during the lockdown period. By successfully reducing the usage of private vehicles, air pollution can be minimized, which in turn will have a positive impact on elephants and their habitat.

The horns in vehicle negatively impact the communication of elephants and is a crucial factor in determining a species’ health. The effect of noise on animals, including elephants is an essential factor to be considered in conservation strategies.
In order to rectify the issue, it is essential to implement a horn system in vehicles that does not disturb animals’ ears and communication. Such a measure will contribute to the conservation efforts and promote a more harmonious coexistence between humans and wildlife.

Deforestation and manmade fires have detrimental effects on the habitat of elephants. It is crucial to issue warnings and enforce consequences for those engaged in such activities to deter further harm. Educating people about the consequences of deforestation can help raise awareness and foster a sense of responsibility towards preserving elephants and their habitats. In addition, it is important to ensure that celebrations and rituals do not cause harm to elephants. Encouraging the use of eco-friendly firecrackers as an alternative to traditional fireworks can mitigate the negative impact on elephants.

Ultimately, a fundamental change in human behaviour and attitude towards elephants is necessary to ensure the coexistence of the largest mammals on the planet. By adopting responsible practices and actively working towards their conservation, humans can secure a future where elephants will thrive in their natural habitat.

**Conclusion**

Elephants hold immense ecological and cultural significance, acting as key architects of their habitats by shaping landscapes and promoting biodiversity. However, Dominic’s poems poignantly emphasise that the overreliance on technology, materialistic inclinations, and certain cultural practices have adverse consequences on the livelihood of elephants. His poems advocate a shift away from harsh treatment and instead promote compassion and empathy towards these gentle giants.
By identifying and altering the factors that contribute to human-elephant conflict, an integrative mode of relation between humans and elephants can be witnessed within the Montane social order. This harmonious coexistence can pave the way for a sustainable future, fostering a profound and respectful bond between them. Protecting and preserving these trunked friends is crucial for their survival and the sustenance of the intricate web of life.

Bibliography


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