Endangered (and Endangering) Species: Exploring the Animacy Hierarchy in Malik Sajad's *Munnu*

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Endangered (and Endangering) Species: Exploring the Animacy Hierarchy in Malik Sajad’s Munnu

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ABSTRACT
The contrast between Kashmiris as hanguls (endangered Kashmiri deer) and the Indian occupiers as “human” provides us with a good entry point to investigate and interrogate the visual representation of the “animacy hierarchy” (Mel Chen)—the conceptual arrangement of human, animal and other forms of nonhuman-ness in orders of value and priority—in Malik Sajad’s graphic memoir Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir (2015). The anthropomorphic representation of Kashmiris as hanguls enables Sajad to simultaneously query the relative valuation of human life vis-à-vis that of the animal, and the mutual degradation and endangered status of both human and animal in a zone of emergency. However, a closer look reveals that another animal—the stray dog—appears either directly or indirectly in Munnu’s bestiary. This article unpacks the polyvalent symbolic and material valences of stray dogs as important narrative cogs in the triangulated animacy hierarchy (human-hangul-canine) in Munnu. While strays often function either as symbolic representations or as visual analogues to organized army brutality in the text, I argue that they also gesture towards other modalities of interspecies affiliation in the realm of quotidian life in zones of emergency.

In a footnote from Civilization and its Discontents, Freud says that “…the fateful process of civilization would thus have set in with man’s adoption of an erect posture” (Freud 2010, 78). I begin with this statement because it rehearses one of the fundamental dimensions of the Freudian speculative narrative about the distinction between “human” and “animal.” The shift from being a quadruped to a biped emerges as the threshold that separates the “human” from states of animality. For Freud, the quadruped-biped distinction is not a matter of linear evolution, but a marker of the tenuous line that separates humans from animals.

The ambivalent shuttle between quadruped and biped is central to the narrative dynamics of Malik Sajad’s debut graphic memoir Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir (Sajad 2015). In the first two pages of the chapter “Footnotes” (199–200), Munnu’s narrator recounts the legendary and actual histories that led to the status of Kashmir as
occupied territory. The narrator begins by recounting the pre-Islamic heritage (Hindu and Buddhist) of Kashmir. The use of the style of the traditional Kashmiri woodcut, with its elaborate distinctions between frame and image, merges with the traditional narrative technique of comics encapsulated by the coordination of panels and gutters in these two pages. Initially, figures of quadruped *hanguls* (a species of endangered Kashmiri deer) populate the frame. Inside the frame, we notice three panels. In the dominating inset image, a dragon emerges from a lake making the *hangul* on the banks run helter-skelter. The doubling of frames and background on the *mise-en-page* is contrasted with two inset panels of equal size. These two panels recount how the “great sage,” Kashyap Rishi drained the lake, leading to the death of the dragon, followed by an image of the four-legged *hangul* evolving into bipeds. While the *hanguls* inside the frame are quadrupeds, the *hanguls* in the last panel evolve into two-legged beings in a representation of speciation.

Interestingly, to depict the move from prehistorical/legendary time to the slow unfolding of historical time on the next page, the lattice-like frames are now populated by bipedal *hanguls*. The slow move from prehistory to historical time seems to merge with the transformation of “animal” to “human/oid.” Significantly, the lattice-like frameworks disappear in the next two pages as we are pitched into the domain of recorded history (200–201). These two pages narrate how Kashmir emerged as a syncretic cultural crossroads, and traces the necropolitical history of Kashmir as Mughal, Afghan and Sikh invaders stand triumphantly over the corpses of *hanguls*. The current Indian occupation, the narrative suggests, can be placed in this long necropolitical history which has rendered the Kashmiris “endangered species” (309).

However, *Munnu* is not solely a political chronicle of Kashmir through the ages. *Munnu* depicts the now 30-year old Sajad’s life from childhood to his maturation as an artist in Indian-occupied Kashmir (*Munnu* is Sajad’s pet name). *Munnu* is an example of a *künstlerroman*, while simultaneously functioning as a graphic witness of contingencies of everyday life in occupied territory (Sajad, 2010). The contingencies of everyday life in occupied territory are represented via visual representations of bipeds and quadrupeds in *Munnu*. Representations of humans (Indian soldiers and civilians) and anthropomorphized humanoid *hanguls* walking with upright gaits are contrasted with *hanguls* (who represent Kashmiris) subjected to conditions of moving or remaining immobile on all-fours by the occupying forces and conditions of necropolitical occupation. While the “human” Indian occupiers inhabit the position of sovereign power and authority in conditions of necropolitical occupation, the *hanguls* are treated as an alter-species and are persistently abased and animalized. In an article published in the online journal *Dissent*, Gajarawala (2016) writes that by representing Kashmiris as “small-horned endangered creatures” *Munnu* reverses the attributions of “terrorism,” animality and feral otherness often attached to colonized populations by the colonizers. Moreover, the attribution of “human” status to the Indians is an ironic visual/narrative device as it underscores their “bestial” brutality against an occupied population portrayed as an alter-species.

However, a closer look reveals that “humans” and *hanguls* are not the only species depicted in *Munnu*. The ambivalent figure of the stray dog appears at key moments and circulates as a polyvalent sign and presence throughout *Munnu*. The triangulated
visual interrelation between humanoid hanguls, “human” occupiers and stray dogs establishes what Chen calls an “animacy hierarchy”: the conceptual arrangement of “human…disabled…animal…plant life, and forms of nonliving material in orders of value and priority” (Chen 2012, 13). Through their ambivalent presence, stray dogs in Munnu both reinforce animacy hierarchies in conditions of occupation, and simultaneously disrupt them to reveal alternative forms of survival and interspecies cohabitation. Through such polyvalent circulations as signs and as corporeal presences, stray dogs in Munnu enable us to reconsider what the minutiae of interspecies survival entail in necropolitical locales. However, before approaching Munnu’s depiction of stray dogs, a consideration of its liminal status—an inquiry that lies at the crossroads connecting postcolonial theory with animal theory—is necessary.

Stray Dogs and Glory: Canine Considerations in Postcolonial Theory, Animal Studies and in Kashmir

A few interpretive problems arise when we consider stray dogs—a figure that has the potential of expanding horizons of inquiry in both postcolonial theory and animal studies. Postcolonial theorists have generally been wary of grappling with the question of animality (Huggan and Tiffin 2010). When postcolonial critics discuss animals, they often efface the corporeality of the animal and the material conditions of their existence; instead, interpretation is routed through a symbolic/allegorical register. However, recent developments in postcolonial criticism argue that we need to unmoor animals from reductive symbolic representations, and instead consider the material and corporeal aspects of such figurations (Ahuja 2016). A different problem arises when we consider the representation of stray dogs in animal studies. In most cases where dogs are considered in animal studies, a sub-discipline which still has a primarily Eurocentric orientation, the figure that usually comes into the equation is the domesticated companion animal. Haraway’s When Species Meet (Haraway 2007) and The Companion Species Manifesto (Haraway 2003), even when talking about “companion species” (a different concept from “companion animal”), considers largely domesticated dogs. Stray dogs are largely absent from her consideration, although she briefly talks about her “despair” when faced with the dog populations in Puerto Rico (Haraway 2003, 91). Fortuny says pertinently: “Although Haraway exposes her struggle with the problem of the foreign street dog, she nevertheless does not engage … when place is a feral space rather than a human home, an animal shelter, or the wild” (Fortuny 2014, 288–9).

Etymologically, the word “stray” (Anglo-Norman: estrayer, strey) refers to domestic animals gone astray—hence, as Khan writes, stray dogs lie “on the spectrum between farm animals and wild animals” (Khan 2014, 252). At the same time, stray dogs are often considered an endangering species in South Asia. Biopolitical strategies that advocate the cleansing of South Asian cities of the “menace” of stray dogs regularly appear in public discourse, which are often offset by the mundane relations human inhabitants develop with strays. Narayanan writes that rural and urban spaces in South Asia can be thought of as “trans-species” environments (Narayanan 2016, 3). In these environments, human populations relate in complex, ambivalent ways to the
presence of stray dogs. While a multiplicity of modes of interspecies co-habitation exist, many people shy away from strays which are constructed in the popular imagination as feral, vicious animals. Moreover, strays are also associated with filth and impurity because of their proximity to garbage dumps as sources of food. Religious, class and caste prohibitions, based on constructs of purity and pollution, exist with relation to dogs. Slum dwellers in Indian cities, for instance, are constructed as less than human because of their proximity with canines (13). The stray dog exists in a wide continuum of possible relationships in-between nature and culture.

In the specific case of Kashmir, the discourse on stray dogs needs to be situated within Islamic viewpoints on dogs, biopolitical discourses of hazard and the ambivalent position of dogs as “tools” of the Indian occupying forces. A stereotype exists that Islam evinces an intense dislike for animals, especially “fallen” animals like dogs. The use of “kutta” (dog) as a swear word in North India, for instance, can be traced back to Islamic (and Hindu) attitudes towards dogs. Dogs, and especially their spit, are considered haram in Islam. Dogs can also oscillate ambivalently in the spectrum between faithfulness and unfaithfulness. Khan, drawing from her ethnographic work in chars in Bangladesh, writes that “feelings of ambivalence, of both appreciating dogs’ loyalty to humans and judging them for turning against their own kind, qualified the loyalty of dogs.” (Khan 2014, 252)

However, as scholars like Tlili (2012) and Mikhail (2016) have argued, Islamic attitudes towards dogs are more ambiguous than an attribution of intense dislike for the animal. In her ecotheological reading of tâdhîlî (subjugation of animals), Tlili suggests that the emphasis in the Qu’ran falls more on the shared commonalities between the human and the animal, rather than the stereotypical attribution of domination and subjugation to human-animal relations (2012, 91). Contiguously, the feeding of stray dogs is also a persisting motif in the literature of Sufism—as Fortuny writes, street dogs embody “virtues such as humility, fidelity, and gratitude, or are the recipients of kindness, often in the form of food, due to the presence of these virtues in humans” (292).

This does not, of course, imply that feral associations with stray dogs don’t persist in Islamicate societies. The conflicted Islamic attitudes toward dogs may be predicated on what Tlili calls the disjuncture between popular and nuanced readings of the Qu’ran. Despite “sufficient evidence in the Qu’ran that nonhuman animals are considered moral, rational and even accountable beings,” such readings, Tlili says, have “limited impact” on most quotidian conceptions of the status of animals” (39). Furthermore, Mikhail argues that the so-called Islamic disgust for dogs may be of more recent, modern vintage, stemming from biopolitical associations with disease that spread in rapidly urbanizing areas in the nineteenth century. This conflict between the ambiguities of biopolitical regulation of canine populations in colonial/post-colonial locales and of older cultural/religious attunements towards street animals sustain a multi-faceted attitude to stray dogs in South Asian spaces like Srinagar.

Apropos biopolitical regulatory mechanisms, in an April 09, 2015 report in NDTV, an independent member of the state assembly, Engineer Rashid, introduced a bill
titled “Jammu and Kashmir Curbing the Menace of Stray Dogs Bill, 2015.” This bill is a good example of the construction of the stray dog as biopolitical hazard. Introducing the bill, Rashid said: “Get rid of stray dogs, it’s not AFSPA.” The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) is an exceptional legislation that empowers the Indian security forces to arrest anyone without a warrant, to search any place that supposedly harbors suspicious elements, and to fire or to use force even to the point of causing death against any person or assembly of persons who are deemed to have broken the law in supposedly “disturbed” regions like Kashmir. The armed forces are also provided legal immunity for any act of extra-juridical killing in these “disturbed” areas. Rashid’s comparison and contrast of necropolitical instrument that is AFSPA with a bill for culling stray animals brings the human-animal dichotomy in formations and expressions of the bio/necropolitical to the forefront. Necropolitical legislations like AFSPA animalize the human, render her into a form of bare life that can be tortured, detained or killed with impunity. In contrast, Rashid’s statement that his bill is a “non-political” demand unlike the removal of AFSPA, attempts to disavow the biopolitical underpinning of his proposed legislation: the endangering “species” must be removed if “human” society must be defended. Further, in necropolitical locales like Kashmir, the lines between human and animal, the biopolitical and the zoopolitical often becomes blurry. This necessitates a simultaneous analysis of the bleed and confusion between biopolitical and zoopolitical categories in necropolitical conditions.

Stray dogs are also viewed as an endangering species by Kashmiri populations because they are perceived as allies and tools of the occupying forces. A report in The Hindu by Vijaita Singh (2017) narrates the story of how an adopted stray dog in the CRPF’s Sumbal camp helped the army foil an attack by “terrorists.” The obverse of such celebrations of animal heroism and conviviality in the mainland Indian Press is found in a statement by the Kashmiri cleric Mirwaiz Yasir. In a report published on August 03, 2012 in Kashmirwatch, Yasir is reported saying that: “Indian soldiers deployed in disputed state of Jammu & Kashmir have turned into stray dogs and they are biting anyone anywhere. He said that they need to be tied…” What is significant again is the bleed between the biopolitical and the zoopolitical: the feral otherness of the colonial occupier is equated and rendered coextensive with a familiar example of feral animality. Like the stray dogs, Indian soldiers “bite,” and the only way to restrain them is to keep them “tied” like dogs.

But, as Mahvunga reminds us, endangering species can also be endangered (Mahvunga 2011, 154). In contrast to Rashid’s pronouncements, a report by Masoodi in National Geographic details a plan for the poisoning of over 100,000 dogs in Srinagar with strychnine. This measure was opposed by animal activists. Javaid Iqbal Shah, a Srinagar-based animal activist, says in the report that: “…using strychnine was particularly cruel, causing terrible suffering to the dogs, crippling their nervous systems and choking them.” Accentuating the pathos, Shah is reported saying, “I have seen children cry when they pass by these dying dogs…” This example illustrates that stray dogs oscillate in Srinagar between categorizations as feral packs and community pets. This oscillation is evident whenever the child/adolescent Munnu is shown to be terrified and constantly running away from feral packs. Stray dogs are
symbolism, intertextuality and quotidian species survival in Munnu

When we consider visual representations of occupied areas like Srinagar or Batamaloo—the specific spaces represented in Munnu—the ubiquitous markers of military occupation in the two graphic novels on Kashmir [Nasser Ahmed and Saurabh Singh’s Kashmir Pending (Ahmad 2007) and Munnu] are the checkpoints dotted with barbed wire and empty streets. In this “world divided into two,” as Fanon says in the comparable context of colonial Algeria, the “dividing line, the border, is represented by the barracks and the police station” (Fanon 2005, 3). The depiction of Kashmiris as alter-species and the visual insignia of colonial occupation in Munnu operates within this Fanonian frame of colonial bio/necropolitical surveillance. Empty streets devoid of civilian presences also appear frequently in both texts. When we compare Kashmir Pending with Munnu, however, a difference is noticeable. The panels in Kashmir Pending are populated only by human figures. When empty streets are shown, no other forms of life seem to be present. Munnu, however, displays its place consciousness by representing a city like Srinagar as a trans-species environment. Consider, for instance, the three images below (Figures 1–3).

In the large panel in Figure 1, Munnu and his brother Adil walk past the ruins of big houses in Srinagar’s Balgarden locality (87). The panel is an overhead, panoramic shot of the cityscape. We notice rows of houses, Kashmiris and Indian soldiers walking the streets, and stone carvers sculpting gravestones on the bottom-left corner. The interesting detail is that of a stray dog with two puppies by its side staring at the balcony of one of the houses. In the first panel on the next page (Figure 2), as Munnu and Adil walk through a “neighborhood of ruins,” we notice an Indian settler (the narrator informs us that “homeless” Indians had found shelter in these abandoned houses) throwing out garbage from a balcony while the barely perceptible figure of the dogs awaits their food (88). The dogs here inhabit areas designated by Kashmiri locals as ruins, although these are inhabited by homeless Indian settlers. In the meantime, Indian soldiers pull out a hangul from a vehicle for not possessing the correct identity card. This panel depicting the quotidian aspects of animal existence in a trans-species locale is directly contrasted with the image in the next panel where the schoolboys witness the hangul without the proper ID sprawled on his back with his four limbs flailing in the air as if he were a vulnerable animal. Indian soldiers looming over him and shout in an intimidating manner. Quotidian aspects of animal survival are directly contrasted with the capture and animalization of human life by necropower.

These quotidian aspects of species survival in necropolitical locales is accentuated in Figure 3, where the dogs are shown as mobile figures (61). In the first panel, we notice a petrified Munnu being chased by strays. However, the crucial detail are the dogs and puppies that walk almost unhindered through the barbed wire in-between
Figure 1. Walking Through the City.
Figure 2. Animals and Animalization.
Figure 3. The Mobility of Stray Dogs.
the foreground and the background. This representation of dogs navigating the liminal, in-between spaces of the no-man’s zones demarcated by barbed wire is a visual contrast to an earlier panel which shows Kashmiri hanguls struggling to crawl across a cramped barbed-wire installation on all-fours during the guerrilla training they receive (4). This doubled aspect of mobility and the quotidian habitation of an alter-species is amplified in a panel later in the text where an ambulance weaves its way through barbed wire installations through “calm and empty streets” on the day of the curfew (319). However, we notice that the streets are not exactly empty. Two stray dogs, one sitting and the other one gazing at the receding ambulance, are also present in the scene. One of them seems to be a direct witness of how a hangul is thrown to the street from the ambulance almost on all-fours in the third panel on this page (319). Unlike the empty streets of Kashmir Pending, therefore, Munnu creates a sense of place by depicting the mobile figures of stray dogs as quotidian, relatively inconspicuous inhabitants of the city and witnesses to situations of necropolitical terror.

The mobility of stray dogs, especially across no-man’s zones, has a well-known literary precedent in the South Asian context—Saadat Hasan Manto’s short story “The Dog of Tetwal” (Manto 2007). The mobile figure of the stray dog in the story regularly crosses the border between India and Pakistan. The dog is cossetted by soldiers on both sides. However, things take an ominous turn when the Indians and Pakistanis engage in a game of ownership over the dog by placing signs around its neck proclaiming that it is Indian/Pakistani. Eventually, both sides begin shooting at it as it runs back and forth across the border. Finally, its bullet-ridden corpse lies unclaimed in the no-man’s zones between India and Pakistan.

The “Dog of Tetwal” features in two comic book productions that deal with Kashmir—Parrey and Helal’s brief segment titled “Tamasha-e-Tetwal” in the anthology This Side, That Side and Munnu. In Parrey and Hilal’s work, a reporter travels to Tetwal to speak to an old man. The old man’s musings emerge as a critique of Manto’s story, especially interpretations of his usage of the figure of the dog. Taking a swipe at legions of interpretations of the story (“too much noise”) that read it as the figuration of a dispute between the behemoths of India and Pakistan, the old man critiques the erasure of Kashmir (Parrey and Waseem 2013, 119). The dog is “Kashmiri,” but the criterion of grievability endowed to it is because of its status as (not) Indian and (not) Pakistani. Hence, the satirical edge to the title of this section—in the tamasha (noise) around the story, the condition of Kashmir is elided.

The “Dog of Tetwal” also functions intertextually in Munnu. There are two references to Manto’s story in Munnu. The story is directly referenced once—a book by Manto lies open on Munnu’s bedside as he falls asleep (241). The story he is reading is “The Dog of Tithwal.” More obliquely, it comes back in the panels on the exigen-cies of being a journalist in Kashmir. In one panel, we notice two dogs with placards that read “Identity Cards” (a meta-textual reference again to Sajad’s career as a comics journalist), directly referencing the signs that read “India” and “Pakistan” on the dog’s neck in Manto’s story (163). If we contrast the symbolism inherent in the dogs depicted in the cartoon with the depiction of actual stray dogs in the panels discussed earlier, a crucial contrast emerges. An identity-card, as Das writes in Life and Words, becomes an insignia of the state’s authority—one could say that the “signature of the
state” that is the identity card endows (or denies) a Kashmiri with a certain form of personhood in occupied space (Das 2006, 162–83). In that sense, an identity card functions metaphorically like protective clothes placed over the body of the human animal. Not possessing an identity card can strip this protective casing away and reduce a person to bare life; possessing too many cards, can also lead to a capture of life by agencies of necropower. Therefore, I wager that that the symbolic representation of the dogs with the identity cards in the oblique reference to Manto is undercut by the mobility of actual stray dogs in the other panels. Symbolism and materiality, thus, undercut each other through this intertextual contrast with Manto’s story. Stray dogs can of course be forcibly sequestered and eliminated by biopolitical agencies. But, this biopolitical aspect of canine regulation is not depicted in Munnu; instead, in Sajad’s text the mobility of stray dogs stands for encounters with quotidian, miniscule modalities of survival and interspecies relationality in states of terror. Simultaneously, through the contrast with the mobility of the stray dogs, the restrictions on the mobility of Kashmiris as they move through occupied space is emphasized.

However, this aspect of quotidian survival of stray dogs also has a dimension that is not solely about the minutiae of life and living, but of witnessing death and ruination. I will take a detour here through some contiguous themes in Basharat Peer’s memoir Curfewed Night. In a chapter titled “City of No Joy,” Peer says that “Srinagar is a city of absences” (Peer 2010, 124). One of the prominent absences here are the abandoned houses of the Kashmiri Pandits and the temples frequented by them. Peer notices the brass-latticed roof of the ancient Raghunath temple during one of his walking sojourns. However, the entrance to the temple is much more difficult to locate. Eventually, a girl gestures towards a “broken wall.” Peer writes:

I climbed over the broken wall and jumped onto a garbage dump inside the temple courtyard. Stray dogs camping inside the temple barked at me… Reeds and wild bushes had invaded the courtyard… (the prayer room) was filled with cobwebs, pigeon droppings, and a gloomy silence. Naked bricks stared at me … (2010, 126)

Peer evocatively paints a picture of this ruined space of death through references to luxurious forms of life such as “reeds and wild bushes,” aural absences, and organic and infrastructural detritus. However, the ruins are inhabited by stray dogs. Their otherness and absent-presence is emphasized with their association with the abjected form of “garbage.” The absent-presence of dogs is further accentuated when Peer comes across a bystander who says: “When I was a child, it used to be crowded with people. The Pandits sang bhajans all evening. Then they left. Now only djinns live here” (126). What is significant about this utterance is that a ruined space, which has already been depicted as populated by actual living presences, the dogs, is rendered ghostly or empty (the abode of djinns) by a disavowal of these same presences. Dogs seem to live in the realm of death.

Stray dogs, thus, do not simply navigate liminal spaces like no-man’s zones; in a more fundamental sense, this association with the spectral shows that they navigate the space between life and death. They are witnesses to death, loss and decrepitude, although their acts of witnessing seem to preclude the criterion of grievability. Butler writes that: “Without grievability, there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life. Instead, “there is a life that will never have been lived,”
sustained by no regard, no testimony, and ungrieved when lost” (Butler 2010, 15). The stray dogs here represent “something living that is other than life,” while their “mute” testimony remains illegible. As a result, they teeter ambiguously between life and death, presence and absence. Furthermore, stray dogs register a more fundamental ambivalence about the zone between life and death that Fortuny says has cross-cultural implications. The tension, she says, “plays out in our stories of the dog as both working companion or servant and potential master in death, suggesting that the narration of man’s oldest intimate relation with an animal resonates with primal uncertainty from the outset” (274).

Indeed, this “primal uncertainty” that stray dogs evoke also appear in Sajad’s text. A series of panels show Munnu entering an abandoned temple in Srinagar to smoke weed with his American girlfriend, Paisley (274). Munnu approaches the ruined, abandoned temple festooned with obscene graffiti. Suddenly, a pack of stray dogs jump out from the darkness and begin to chase him, once again emphasizing dogs as inhabitants of ruined human worlds. The association of stray dogs with death is emphasized six pages later (280). Munnu and Paisley are smoking weed in an abandoned house overlooking a canal. Munnu’s voice wafts through the window painting a nostalgic picture of inter-community harmony earlier: “Back then we hardly cared who was Pandit and who was Muslim. We’d steal each other’s lunches and swim together in the canal there. It wasn’t a sewage channel then” (280). These statements are pitted against an image of two dogs pulling a carcass out of the canal, while another one looks on. In the background are the ruins of a building that once used to be Munnu’s school. If the dogs running after Munnu from the dark environs of the abandoned temple show how they survive as if they are specters in former human worlds, this panel shows how stray dogs are associated with death, filth, pollution and ruination. The “primal uncertainty” associated with the degraded state of stray dogs surfaces again.

Primal uncertainty also merges with representations of feelings of disgust associated with street dogs in Munnu. As an affect, disgust establishes boundaries between imaginaries of “human” self and nonhuman/inhuman/abjected others. Cultural phenomenologist Sara Ahmed argues that “disgust reactions… are also about objects that seem ‘lower’ than or beneath the subject” (Ahmed 2004, 89). This spatial distinction between “aboveness” and “belowness,” Ahmed continues, “become properties of particular bodies, objects and spaces” (89). In manifestations of disgust, the bodies of others “are constructed as non-human, as beneath and below the bodies of the disgusted… They embody that which is lower than human or civil life.” (97). The four-legged stray dog, which exists “below” our line of vision represents a form of existence that is “lower than human or civil life.” A key sequence in Munnu that illustrates this byplay between “aboveness” and “belowness” are in the panels where the schoolboy Munnu witnesses two dogs fornicating (95–7). In these pages the schoolboy Munnu is walking through the streets of Batamaloo with his slightly older friend, Hilal. Munnu’s gaze is slowly diverted by the scene of two stray dogs fornicating. Visually, the movement through city space is depicted with a conventional panel-gutter division in the first four panels (95). However, the large panel at the end of the page dispenses with gutters and show Munnu and Hilal in three different viewing
positions within the same panel. The absence of gutters here depicts a fluidity of movement through space as our focus is drawn to Munnu’s act of turning his neck and staring transfixed at the fornicating dogs. The same technique is repeated on the next page (96). There are four panels at the top of the page where Munnu runs after the embarrassed and disgusted Hilal, while the dogs recede in the background. The bottom section of the page is divided into two panels—a small one where Munnu cranes his neck backwards at the dogs, and a larger panel that once again dispenses with gutters and reports the conversation of the two boys at three different moments within the same frame. This conversation exposes how the view of the fornicating dogs becomes the catalyst for the dawn of Munnu’s consciousness about the body and sexuality.

Besides the dawn of Munnu’s consciousness about the body, what is crucial about this segment is how the “animal” figures as a cipher of difference that, in turn, forges an image of “human” self for the child. Crucially, this image of self emerges through the conjoint depictions of disgust and shame. This is depicted in the panels where the child tries to correlate Hilal’s account of the act of sexual intercourse with that of urination (97). As Munnu urinates, he looks “below” with shock and wonder at his penis. His shock is depicted visually by the swoosh lines in the smallest panel on the page which has a close-up of Munnu’s face with his wide-open eyes, his pupils facing downwards. The thought bubbles in the subsequent panels show how Munnu moves from consciousness of sexuality and the body to self-consciousness about “human” difference vis-à-vis the “animal” through registers of disgust and shame. As Munnu looks at his dripping urine, he ruminates that “filthy” dogs lick what humans consider abject: vomit. But remembering Hilal’s revelations about sexual intercourse, he queries “But humans?” and responds “Shame!” The animal functions as a symbolic marker of difference—it is inextricably bound with the realm of the corporeal and of the production of bodily fluids and waste. But the fact that “human” adults too are bound by similar corporeal needs shocks Munnu and makes him feel ashamed.

Stray dogs, however, do not simply function as symbolic markers of “animal” difference. At times, they also circulate as symbols of similitude. This is evident in the panels in Figure 4.

In this segment, the adult Munnu desperately negotiates checkpoints and potholed roads to get his sick mother to the city hospital (324). Commenting on the important role of Munnu’s mother in the narrative, Gajarawala writes that through the tender depiction of the mother-son relationship, “…a small world emerges, of care and intimacy in a home against whose doors the police are literally leaning, searching for militants. The insular world of the home becomes both bastion and prison.” While in the majority of Munnu, the space of the home functions as an “insular” world which is both “bastion and prison,” the acts of navigating occupied, checkpoint-ridden streets reveal that public areas in Srinagar are akin to open-air prisons. This is evident in the panels above where Munnu navigates the potholed streets and rituals of subjection at checkpoints to get his mother to the hospital. Two panels here show how stray dogs function as markers of similitude, albeit with differences. The first image is archetypal, the second of abjection. First, we notice a stray dog suckling her puppies while another one stares in the right corner of the panel. In the foreground,
Figure 4. Negotiating the Occupied Cityscape.
Munnu is desperately trying to get his mother to the hospital on his scooter. If depictions of “care and intimacy” earlier emerge primarily through the figure of the mother, here the baton is passed from mother to son. This passing of the baton of care from mother to son is contrasted with another archetypal maternal image of care and intimacy—the female dog suckling her brood of puppies.

However, the shifting symbolism of care and intimacy emerging from the depiction of the mother-child dyads is contrasted with the brutal image in the third panel where Munnu is virtually on all-fours before an Indian soldier. The prostrate Munnu seems about to lick the soldier’s boots. If, as a child, Munnu is disgusted and ashamed by the fact that dogs lick their own vomit, this representation of the prostrate figure of the adult Munnu shows how he is willing to abase himself like a dog to give his beloved mother a chance for medical treatment. Even the identity card that says “Press” offers him no leeway. No insignia of the state or the bureaucracy is sufficient here—to survive and get by in this necropolitical zone, he must abase himself almost perpetually as an animalized species of bare life.

**Dogs at the Edge of Life: Interspecies Ethics in Munnu**

Dogs are also beings that humans live-with in Munnu. Commenting on this aspect of being and living-with animals, Das in “Being Together with Animals” writes: “We are asked to accept the power of intimacy through which we are called to inhabit the world with the animal other, even if the being of this other is not transparent within our form of life” (Das 2014, 27). Likewise, the being of stray dogs is not immediately transparent within putatively “human” forms of life. But, as my reading of Munnu’s closure will suggest, unexpected interspecies alliances often emerge contingently between human selves and animal others. These affiliations reveal contingent moments of “togetherness,” a state of being Das defines as “not simply how you are in the world but also how you imagine others might live in the world” (Das 2014, 26).

In the last three pages of Munnu stray dogs appear in a different guise as harbingers of an alternative picture of life, being-together and cohabitation. This segment about the haptic connection that is established between dogs and the abjected figure of an unnamed, brutalized and cognitively disabled woman undercuts the teleology of the künstlerroman, and propels Munnu towards an ambiguous closure. While it seems initially that Munnu is gravitating towards the standard narrative closure of a fully realized artistic self, the episode with the brutalized woman and the dogs shows that such desired closures are illusory in situations of continuing necropolitical occupation. I wager that the last panels that depict the woman and the dogs coming into close corporeal contact functions as a narrative “surplus” that simultaneously undercuts the desired closure of the künstlerroman, and gestures towards a different possibility of interspecies survival in a necropolitical locale.6

The segment begins with Munnu walking home in the darkness. The only illumination is provided by a solar-powered torchlight. Commenting on the use of black panels and pages in Kashmir Pending, Nayar argues that the use of darkness here points to the “…materiality of image-making, and by foregrounding the affective
response engendered by not only seeing severely blacked out pages but feeling the heavy pages that are blacked ... (we) respond tactiley to the work as well as visually” (Nayar 2016, 86). Thus, we become aware of “the figurative heaviness of trauma as literalized” (86). The use of black and darkness in Munnu’s last pages veer in a different direction. Initially, it seems like the dim torchlight that illuminates the thick darkness in the first panel portends a closure of the narrative of artistic self-discovery—a movement from inchoate artistic darkness to the light of self-knowledge. This is underscored by the first two narratorial comments that seemingly sum up Munnu’s presentation as künstlerroman:

Munnu never sought any meaning. From his scribbling, but after growing into Sajad he used it to criticize, to express, to expose, to seek revenge against time passing by without fulfilling its promises

Embrace the inevitable process of aging, but ditch the process of growing up. You might manage a happy ending without having to become a hero or a spiteful monster. (346)

Contradictory temporal trajectories emerge here. First, there is the movement from the child “Munnu” (who scribbles and does not seek meaning) to the adult “Sajad” (who criticizes, exposes, expresses and seeks meaning). Since this a memoir about growing up in a state of necropolitical terror, the first comment seems to mark the linear movement of the child scribbler into the adult politicized artist. The next comment, however, undercuts this teleology by embracing the “inevitable process of aging” while ditching “the process of growing up.” Indeed, while childhood is depicted as a period of wonder despite the ubiquitous presence of necropolitical terror in Munnu, the adult Sajad increasingly grows cynical and disenchanted by his personal and political experiences. The desire evinced is to reverse the trajectory—to age without growing up. Maybe therein lies the possibility of a “happy ending.” But, given the continuing necropolitical conditions in Kashmir, this possibility seems illusory.

A different event that inaugurates a scene of interspecies affiliation—one that undercuts the desired closure of the künstlerroman—begins precisely at the point Munnu fantasizes about a happy ending. Munnu’s flashlight falls on a pack of sleeping stray dogs. The next two panels show Munnu being chased by these feral-looking stray dogs. The darkness of these panels is accentuated by using white gutters. The bright white light of Munnu’s torchlight simultaneously illuminate the running figures and functions as a shard that shatters the all-embracing effect of darkness in the panels. From the first panel on the penultimate page, the primary source of illumination is a street lamp (347). The light from the street lamp divides the space within the panels into a theater-like “inside” and a dark space “offstage.” Most of the action takes place in this illuminated “inside” save for the last two panels on the last page where the dark “offstage” space assumes crucial narrative and symbolic weight (348).

While escaping from the dogs, Munnu reaches a lone auto-rickshaw and desperately begs the driver to drop him at Batmaloo. Haggling for prices ensue. But, as Munnu opens the closed door, the driver tries to shoo him away. Through the door that has been left ajar, we notice the silhouettes of two men raping a cognitively disabled woman. The inside “stinks of open guts.” The woman is younger than Munnu,
and the two men push her out “roughly like unwanted filth” (347). In the last panel on the same page, we see a shadowy silhouette of a prostrate woman on all-fours. The four men loom over her while the pack of dogs in the foreground stare at her prostrate figure. This representation of the woman as “filth” and an abjected animalized figure on all-fours once again reemphasizes the bleed between biopolitical and zoopolitical, two-legged beings as opposed to four-legged beings, in necropolitical conditions. Furthermore, the male hanguls may be animalized and terrorized themselves, but are equally capable of inflicting immense pain and injury upon others. The brutal violence of the state seems to find its noxious reflection in the masculinist violence that pervades quotidian life in necropolitical locales.

A different image of life emerges in the last page. The first panel on the last page shows the woman getting up on her two legs as she murmurs “They’re my brothers… I didn’t have a firepot… cold outside… my brothers” (348). Her clothes are torn, she is covered with dust and her face is covered with saliva. As she limps away “humming some gibberish,” the pack of dogs begin following her. In our last view of the retreating woman, we see her cuddling one of the dogs in her arms, as the rest of the pack stop barking and fall silent. In the concluding four panels, the only three characters who remain on stage are the auto-driver and the rapists. One of them looks at Munnu who has disappeared into the darkness on the right saying: “Come on, she’s just a homeless lunatic, we were just warming her up!” The trio then begin to walk towards the darkness offstage on the left side in pursuit of the departed woman (348).

In these panels, we notice a further complication of the polyvalent uses of “human” and “animal.” The feral, animal other scares Munnu as he runs away fearfully from the pack of barking dogs. But then he is witness to a scene where selves that are not threateningly other like the occupying forces, but rather close and intimate to Kashmiri/hangul images of self, behave like a feral other. The two men who rape the disabled woman animalize her, push her out as unwanted filth. This aspect is visually represented by her being prostrate on all-fours and is accentuated by the statement of one of the rapists that they were simply “warming… up” the “homeless lunatic” (Taylor 2017). Being treated as a mere sexual object that needs “warming up,” human qualities are removed from the woman. The pejorative references to her disabled status is a further removal of her human qualities (Chen 2012, 45). Conversely, her indictment—“They are my brothers…”—poignantly vocalizes how the men tipple over into the realms of nonrelation when they force themselves on her and reduce her to an object. “Brother” has a specific relational connotation in situations of anticolonial rebellion as in Kashmir. To be called brother is both a signifier of comradeship in an imagined national community and simultaneously an inscription into the patriarchal semiotics of what McClintock called the “national family of man” (McClintock 1993, 63). As her “brothers” rape and throw her away as “filth,” they actively make her into a nonrelational object that is ejected outside.

Moreover, if blacked-out panels visually literalize trauma in Kashmir Pending, they function differently in Munnu. The theatrical division of the panels into illuminated and dark sections in the last two pages divide the diegetic space into a
region of “human” cruelty propagated this time by the humanoid *hanguls* (the illuminated section) and a dark, offstage space of another form of interspecies collective life and existence that we are briefly provided a glimpse of, but eventually remains outside our range of vision. If the “human/oid” community expels the unnamed woman as “filth,” we notice the contingent, co-constitutive formation of an unprecedented form of interspecies community here. Light and dark shift their usual symbolic valences.

I read these last few panels as a demonstration of a different formation of interspecies ethics. Dayan provides a definition of ethics that I find useful:

To be ethical…is to locate oneself in relation to a world adamantly not one’s own. Whereas morality is an austere experience of nonelation, ethics demands the discomfort of utter relatedness. (Dayan 2015, xvi)

The self-other, human-animal dichotomy flips again when the supposedly feral other—the pack of barking dogs—fall quiet when the limping, battered woman cradles one of the dogs in her arms. The sonic dimension is also highlighted through the connection drawn between the woman’s “gibberish” and the dogs’ barks. Both seem to be relegated to the realm of nonmeaning, of *phone* (noise) instead of *logos* (speech). But, this sonic contiguity between disabled human and (supposedly) feral animal becomes the medium of connection for an overturning of the animacy hierarchy in *Munnu*. This is accentuated further when the bipedal human establishes a haptic relation with one of the four-legged animals. When we are asked to “accept the power of intimacy through which we are called to inhabit the world with the animal other” through this staging of a scene of togetherness that culminates in the woman and the dogs walking away and disappearing into the darkness, we, along with Munnu, are forced to locate ourselves in relation to a world adamantly not our own (Das 2014, 27). This is the discomfort of utter relatedness as with the disabled woman and the stray dogs, we arrive at the edges of a different figuration of life and survival, one that is fenced out from our range of vision by the steadily increasing volume and weight of darkness in the panels.

**Notes**

1. Sajad started out as a comics journalist before writing his first full-fledged graphic novel. For examples of Sajad’s political cartoons, which were quite popular in Kashmir, see the YouTube video “Kashmir in Black and White” (Sajad 2010).
2. See the four reasons outlined by Huggan and Tiffin (2010, 135–38) for the erasure of animal considerations in postcolonial theory.
3. For considerations of the conjunctures between postcolonial and animal studies, see Ahuja (2016).
4. Also see the stray dogs standing in front of barbed-wire in a panel later (180).
5. For an ethnographic study of the displacement of Kashmiri Pandits and its aftermaths, see Datta (2016).
6. Here, I draw from Honig who writes: “…survival…means something like…overliving: it is a dividend—that surprised extra, the gift that exceeds rightful expectations, the surplus that exceeds causality” Honig (2011, 10).
7. See Taylor (2017) for an exploration of the ambivalent conjunctures between disability and animality.
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