



The Non-Human As Political Critic: A Dhvani And Rasa Analysis Of South Asian Animal Fables From Antiquity To Today

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Abstract

This research paper rigorously traces the continuous evolution of non-human political allegory in South Asian literature—from its inception as a prescriptive *niti* (manual for royal conduct) in antiquity to its contemporary function as a tool of institutional critique under neoliberalism. Rejecting ecological interpretations, the study focuses exclusively on the allegory's critical use against systems of governance, bureaucracy, and entrenched class hierarchy. Through close readings of *The Panchatantra*, R.K. Narayan's *A Tiger for Malgudi*, Ruskin Bond's *The Adventures of Toto*, and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, the analysis applies classical Indian poetics—Dhvani (suggestive meaning) and Rasa (aesthetic experience)—as indigenous theoretical lenses to understand the allegorical evolution of animal figures. This trajectory details the animal subject's shift from instructing rulers to symbolizing psychological subjugation and violent resistance, with institutional and class critique as its constant and central focus.

Keywords: Political Fable, Dhvani, Rasa, Institutional Critique, Panchatantra, R.K. Narayan, Ruskin Bond, Aravind Adiga, Neoliberalism, Satire

Introduction

The non-human political fable remains a prolific and highly strategic genre within South Asian literary history, allowing authors across ages to critique governance, bureaucratic dysfunction, and class hierarchy with subtlety and layered meaning (Zayed 5). Originating as didactic *niti* manuals exemplified by the *Panchatantra*, animal fables initially instructed rulers in political wisdom and ethics, deploying non-human figures as archetypes for human institutional roles (Jacobs xii; Alphonso-Karakala 377). Over time, and under shifting political and cultural contexts, this allegorical mode evolved, transforming into a diagnostic and ultimately condemnatory instrument exposing systemic corruption and socio-political malaise under neoliberalism (El-Sobky 2633).

While much contemporary scholarship on animal fables leans ecocritically, this research deliberately foregrounds a non-ecological perspective, analyzing animal allegories exclusively as tools for political and institutional critique, unearthing a deep and continuous history of literary dissent through native aesthetic frameworks. Integral to this approach are the classical Indian poetics concepts of Dhvani—suggestion or implied meaning—and Rasa—the emotive aesthetic experience—that jointly frame how allegorical critique

is encoded, received, and sustained across varied textual and historical contexts (Ānandavardhana 15; Bharata Muni 221).

This paper poses three interconnected questions: How does non-human allegory shift in political function from antiquity to today? In what ways do Dhvani and Rasa shape these shifts and facilitate veiled institutional critique? How can the trajectory from prescriptive didacticism to condemnatory neoliberal satire help us understand contemporary Indian literature's political poetics?

The study proceeds in four analytical phases structured around pivotal texts:

(1) didactic allegory in the *Panchatantra*, (2) ethical satire and self-realization in Narayan's *A Tiger for Malgudi*, (3) bureaucratic absurdity in Bond's *The Adventures of Toto* and (4) violent systemic critique in Adiga's *The White Tiger*. This arrangement underscores thematic and rhetorical shifts in the genre's partisan engagement with power.

Dhvani and Rasa: Indigenous Theory and Allegorical Function

Incorporating the classical Indian theories of Dhvani and Rasa enriches this analysis by revealing how political allegory uses the mechanics of suggestion and emotional resonance to veil direct critique and evoke affective responses that vary across texts and historical moments. According to Ānandavardhana's Dhvanyāloka, Dhvani or suggestive meaning transcends the literal text, fostering a layered understanding where the reader perceives covert critique or hidden emotional truths central to political fables (Ānandavardhana 22).

Complementing Dhvani, Bharata Muni's Nāṭyaśāstra elucidates Rasa theory, categorizing human emotional experiences into nine principal rasa, including Hasya (humor), Adbhuta (wonder), and Bibhatsa (disgust). These emotional flavours mediate how allegories engage audiences—whether through gentle censure, astonishment at absurdity, or visceral revulsion at injustice (Bharata Muni 215). Within this framework, animal characters modulate multiple aesthetic effects, enabling critiques to persist safely amidst fluctuating regimes where direct confrontation would be hazardous.

For example, Narayan's deployment of Hasya Rasa in *A Tiger for Malgudi* softens its satire into gentle moral reflection, while Bond's use of Adbhuta Rasa in "*The Adventures of Toto*" elicits comedic wonder that unmasks bureaucratic folly without inciting revolt. Adiga's *The White Tiger* embraces Bibhatsa Rasa to provoke aversion and force brutal institutional condemnation. This theory is not ornamental but foundational, shaping the form and power of allegory at each phase and linking them within a cohesive indigenous aesthetic tradition.

Didactic Allegory in the Panchatantra

The Panchatantra—composed circa 200 BCE—is the foundational text of South Asian political allegory, serving historically as a niti-shastra, or manual of political wisdom directed at instructing princes and rulers in governance, strategy, and ethics (Jacobs xii). Within this collection, animal fables operate as archetypes, whose actions and interactions encode complex lessons about power, loyalty, and treachery. The animals are not ecological characters but symbols of social and institutional roles: the lion as the king, the jackal as the crafty minister, the crow or owl as the wise adviser, and so forth (Alphonso-Karakala 378).

One critical fable, "The Lion and the Bull" (Jacobs 54), dramatizes alliance, distrust, and betrayal as a bull and lion initially forge a friendship that is eventually sabotaged by treacherous jackals. The Dhvani of this tale lies in the implied warning about the fragility of political alliances and the permeation of deceit within power structures beyond the overt narrative of friendship and enmity (Ānandavardhana 16). This implicit critique achieves protective subtlety, allowing counsel to be delivered without direct confrontation—a necessity in highly hierarchical and potentially dangerous court settings.

Moreover, the rasa evoked here is a mélange of Bhayanaka (fear) and Shringara (love/attachment)—fear of betrayal combined with hope for just governance (Bharata Muni 218). The story's emotional impact cultivates heightened political awareness while maintaining engagement through narrative tension.

Another telling example is “The Jackal and the Warbler” (Jacobs 46–48), which offers a more pointed institutional critique. A warbler attempts to warn a lion of approaching enemies, but jackals mislead the lion into distrusting the message. Here, the Dhvani hinges on the shadow-play of misinformation within bureaucratic and ministerial ranks (Ānandavardhana 28). The layered meaning indicts not only deceit but the failure of institutions to listen to truth, a recurrent theme throughout political fables.

This fable particularly evokes Karuna Rasa (compassion/pity) mixed with Raudra (anger), as the audience experiences sorrow for honest messengers thwarted by treachery, alongside righteous indignation directed at corrupt brokers of power (Bharata Muni 222). Through aesthetic suggestion, the Panchatantra carves a nuanced approach to governance that recognizes both human fallibility and the necessity for ethical wisdom.

A third fable, “The Crows and the Owls” (Jacobs 57–60), employs Dhvani to explore the themes of espionage, disguise, and strategic deception. The owls use the guise of exile to infiltrate the crow kingdom, overthrowing it through duplicity. The allegory critiques political corruption and courtly subterfuge with a clear non-ecological focus; the animals’ ecological traits—nocturnal vs. diurnal species—are purely incidental (Ānandavardhana 31).

This narrative first evokes Adbhuta Rasa (wonder) as the audience marvels at the audacity of political cunning, finally settling into Bhayanaka Rasa with the terror of overthrow and loss (Bharata Muni 219). Here, the poetic and emotional depths of the fable enhance its didactic and political effect, demonstrating how literary aesthetics are inseparable from the text’s social function.

Throughout The Panchatantra, Dhvani enables veiled political advice, and Rasa shapes how these subtleties resonate emotionally. Animal figures act as non-threatening vessels for human truths, allowing rulers and courtiers to engage with critiques of governance that might otherwise be dangerous to articulate openly. This synthesis of theory and practice explains the enduring popularity and influence of the Panchatantra across South Asian and global literary traditions (Zayed 7).

Satirical and Spiritual Reimagining: R.K. Narayan’s A Tiger for Malgudi

R.K. Narayan’s *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983) marks a profound transformation in the political allegory tradition by shifting the focus from macro-statecraft to the micro-politics of the individual’s encounter with social institutions (Narayan 89). The protagonist, Raja the tiger, moves through various human-controlled spaces, the circus and domestic life, where his initially wild and royal nature is subdued, interrogated, and eventually spiritually reframed. Unlike the Panchatantra’s prescriptive didacticism, Narayan explores moral complexities and individual ethical development within institutional constraints.

A close reading of Raja’s captivity in the circus reveals Dhvani’s critical role in conveying institutional oppression beneath the surface narrative. Though described with seemingly gentle prose, the underlying suggestion critiques the commodification of nature and the coercive imposition of control (Ānandavardhana 24). The vivid details of Raja’s confinement, his roaring silenced by chains, the spectacle created for human amusement serve as a subtle indictment of systems that subjugate freedom for institutional order.

The rasa evoked here is Hasya (humor), layered with Karuna (compassion). Humorous narrative moments, such as Raja’s awkward interactions with circus workers, soften the critique, inviting readers to reflect lightly yet critically on institutional power dynamics (Bharata Muni 220). Compassion arises from Raja’s struggle for dignity within dehumanizing surroundings, humanizing the political allegory by focusing critique through an individual’s psychological experience.

In the novel’s later phase, Raja’s encounter with the ascetic deepens the allegory’s ethical dimension. The tiger’s spiritual awakening serves as a metaphor for possible self-transcendence within or despite institutional structures, signalling a nuanced political message: personal morality can challenge and perhaps reform oppressive power, yet systemic change remains ambiguous (Chand 623). This interplay between liberation and captivity underscores the gentle irony shaping Narayan’s political fable, which blends Horatian satire with spiritual optimism.

Narayan's allegory, illuminated through Dhvani's suggestive technique and Hasya Rasa's humor, thus occupies a middle ground—a domestication of the political fable's aggressive potential, tempering direct institutional critique into an invitation for individual ethical reflection. This intermediate stage in the evolution of non-human political allegory mediates between the Panchatantra's instructiveness and the harsher systemic denouncement of later authors.

Bureaucratic Absurdity and Social Critique: Ruskin Bond's "The Adventures of Toto"

Ruskin Bond's "The Adventures of Toto" (Bond 130–135) exemplifies the use of animal allegory to expose bureaucratic dysfunction in postcolonial India through a satirical lens. Toto, a mischievous monkey, becomes the unwitting target of administrative absurdity when a railway ticket collector tries to classify and charge the animal for travel.

The story's Dhvani operates by implying a critique of rigid bureaucratic logic and institutional inflexibility. Although Toto's predicament appears comical on the surface—a monkey treated as a "dog" for ticketing purposes, the deeper suggestion indicts how opaque rules frustrate genuine realities, arbitrariness governs officialdom, and the vulnerable fall victim to systemic irrationality (Ānandavardhana 33).

"The Adventures of Toto" primarily evokes Adbhuta Rasa that is wonder and amusement as the narrative invites readers to marvel at the nonsensical administrative processes disrupting common sense (Bharata Muni 216). The farcical incidents produce laughter that doubles as social critique, offering a release valve that highlights dissatisfaction with institutional authority without demanding radical upheaval (Chand 626).

Furthermore, Toto's persistent mischief symbolizes individual resistance to bureaucratic overreach, framing the animal as a figure of harmless rebellion. The story's light-hearted tone obfuscates a more pointed commentary on how colonial and postcolonial bureaucracies perpetuate control and exclusion, making Bond's narrative a transitional moment that combines empathetic humour with indirect institutional critique.

Violent Allegory and Neoliberalism: Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) delivers a radical and uncompromising reimagining of non-human political allegory as a weaponized critique of neoliberal capitalism and systemic corruption in contemporary India (Adiga 118). The novel introduces the metaphor of the "Rooster Coop," a psychological and social prison trapping India's impoverished classes in servitude and invisibility (El-Sobky 2635).

Adiga's Dhvani is searingly direct yet layered, employing the allegory of the "Rooster Coop" not as literal animal imagery but as an embodied structure of capitalist subjugation articulated through Balram Halwai's brutal narrative confession (Ānandavardhana 37). The implication is systemic: institutional hypocrisy, economic exploitation, and political rot combine to create a cage from which escape demands moral corruption and violence.

The dominant rasa here is Bibhatsa (disgust), which fuels the novel's sustained emotional impact. Readers confront visceral depictions of poverty, murder, and social hypocrisy, which invoke revulsion towards unethical systems of power and capitalism itself (Bharata Muni 225). Through Juvenalian and Menippean satire, Adiga's narrative delivers relentless condemnation rather than subtle hinting, marking a culmination of the political fable's trajectory into a dark, anti-institutional stance (Rathore et al. 8723).

Balram's violent ascension as the "White Tiger" embodies a repudiation and inversion of the Panchatantra's didactic ethics; survival in the neoliberal state demands adoption of predatory tactics, rejecting traditional notions of righteousness (Chand 624). The animal's political function is no longer instructional or reflective but revolutionary, symbolizing necessary political savagery in a corrupted socio-economic order.

Comparative Analysis: Shifts in Political Function and Aesthetic Strategy

The detailed analyses above illuminate a complex trajectory in South Asian non-human political allegory, spanning over two millennia. Central to this evolution is the shifting political function of the animal subject from a prescriptive figure instructing rulers in effective governance (Panchatantra), to a mirror reflecting the

ethical struggles of individuals under institutional constraints (Narayan), to a comic victim of dysfunctional bureaucracy (Bond), and finally to a brutal symbol of revolutionary resistance against neoliberal corruption (Adiga).

The classical Indian poetics of Dhvani and Rasa remain instrumental throughout this trajectory, not as static theories but as dynamic mechanisms shaping allegorical strategies. In the *Panchatantra*, Dhvani allows veiled political advice to be safely conveyed, while the rasa blend of Bhayanaka and Shringara emotionally calibrates the reader's engagement with power and betrayal. Narayan's employment of Hasya Rasa and compassionate Dhvani softens critique into ethical reflection. Bond's use of Adbhuta Rasa injects humour and wonder, transforming bureaucratic critique into a light-hearted foolery that cushions dissent. In Adiga's case, Bibhatsa Rasa intensifies the impact, confronting the reader viscerally with systemic rot and advocating violent upheaval.

This spectrum of rasa aligns with progressively intensified political engagements from gentle admonition to radical condemnation illuminating how aesthetic experience codes political meaning beyond explicit narrative content. Dhvani ensures that these critiques maintain a necessary ambiguity, essential for survival under regimes historically hostile to overt political dissent.

The non-human animal, therefore, functions as a persistent but evolving cipher, an institutional barometer measuring human governance's integrity. Its form and affective reception adapt responsively to sociopolitical contexts, protecting political realism across time. This continuity amidst change confirms the political fable's indispensability as a genre for critical discourse in South Asia.

Conclusion

The South Asian political fable's enduring potency lies in its seamless fusion of non-human allegory with indigenous aesthetic theory, sustaining a tradition of institutional critique that evolves with historical exigencies. Beginning as a didactic tool supporting governance through royal instruction, the animal fable transforms over centuries into a diagnostic and finally condemnatory mode exposing socio-political decay and class oppression in the neoliberal present.

Dhvani and Rasa, classical frameworks of suggestion and emotional meditation are not peripheral but central to the fable's success and survival. They enable authors to navigate political dangers by encoding multilayered meanings and eliciting calibrated affective responses, ensuring critique remains potent yet veiled.

Through detailed textual engagements with the *Panchatantra*, Narayan's *A Tiger for Malgudi*, Bond's "*The Adventures of Toto*," and Adiga's *The White Tiger*, this paper maps an original trajectory of shifting political functions and aesthetic strategies. It highlights the non-human figure's movement from institutional advisor to vulnerable subject to fierce insurgent, mirroring South Asia's evolving political landscape.

This reassessment expands literary understanding of political allegory's role in South Asia and underscores the continuing relevance of indigenous poetics in decoding complex cultural productions. The non-human political fable remains an essential lens through which to examine governance, resistance, and institutional critique in one of the world's oldest literary traditions.

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