



ISSN: 2791-7290

2021; 1(1): 70-73

Kitap İncelemesi/Book Review

MAKALE
BİLGİLERİ/
ARTICLE
INFO

Geliş Tarihi/Submission Date:
24/03/2021

Kabul Tarihi / Admission Date:
07/06/2021

SUSAN CASEY'S *VOICES IN THE OCEAN*, OR A CALL FOR A MORE POLYPHONIC WORLD

ÇOK SESLİ BİR DÜNYAYA ÇAĞRI: SUSAN CASEY'DEN *VOICES IN THE OCEAN*

Hatice BAKANLAR MUTLU*

Susan Casey's *Voices in the Ocean: A Journey into the Wild and Haunting World of Dolphins* was published in 2015. It became a *New York Times* bestseller in its first week and was also chosen as one of Amazon's Best Books of 2016 (About Susan, n.d.). It has received critical acclaim mainly because of the writer's archival research into her subject matter, namely dolphins and her ability to merge the personal with the ecocritical despite some criticism directed at the writer for her supposed tendency to mysticism and coverage of topics which the reader might already be familiar with. However, for a reader who is new to the world of dolphins and wants to learn about them from a book, rather than documentaries, Casey's *Voices* could provide a thought-provoking perspective as well as useful insights.

Casey started to pay attention to dolphins after an unusual encounter with them in the Honolua Bay at a time when she was grieving. She had lost her father, "the central figure, and the rock, the anchor" in her life, and this loss had dragged her into "a dull indifference to pretty much everything" (Casey, 2015: 3). Thinking that after her father's death, there was nothing much to scare her, she did not mind swimming in a place where people avoided swimming due to recent shark attacks. To her surprise, while swimming there alone, she came across a pod of forty or fifty animals and was utterly mesmerized. Casey (2015: 3-4) describes the first encounter as follows: "One of the bigger spinners approached slowly, watching me. For a moment, we hung there in the water and looked at one another, exchanging what I can only describe as a profound, cross species greeting". After that, she embarked on a journey where she could collect dolphins' stories from around the world as if she had wanted to pay tribute to the magical animals that let her in their pod that day and helped her recover.

* Öğr. Gör., Ege Üniversitesi Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu

Makale Künyesi/To cite this article: BAKANLAR MUTLU, H. (2021). Susan Casey's *Voices In The Ocean*, Or A Call For A More Polyphonic World. *LOTUS International Journal of Language and Translation Studies*. 1(1), 70-73.

Casey's dolphin memoir can be seen, at first glance, as an example of grief narrative whereby an author writes about his/her recovery process following an illness or trauma positing the non-human as the source of relief. However, what makes *Voices* an unconventional memoir is neither the writer's healing process nor her personal experience with dolphins. Above all, this is Casey's book, but not Casey's story. In fact, *Voices* stands as a good example of nature writing in the Anthropocene. Voie (2017:2) argues that American nature writing has shifted from traditional narratives of retreat to narratives of confrontation in the age of Anthropocene as writers have recognized the harm caused by human species to the planet and offer a kind of warning. With such an awareness of the anthropogenic harm, Casey set out on a dolphin journey not because she thought dolphins would better her psychology but because she wanted to raise awareness about them.

In this light, *Voices* can be defined as a non-anthropocentric memoir, in which the writer puts dolphins' stories into the forefront at the expense of overshadowing herself. Casey (2015:13) acts more as the teller of already existing dolphins' stories than as their writer when she asks: "It's been said that humans are the only animals who believe the stories they tell about themselves- but what about the dolphins? What is their story?" Apparently, she has committed herself to giving human voice to the voices in the ocean so that human species can understand or at least try to understand what dolphins have to tell us. That is the tricky point in nature writing, though: How can humans talk as the non-human without knowing their language? Obviously, any piece of nature writing which claims to focus on the non-human eventually falls into the trap of human-made language. However, even if we cannot speak as nature, "We can attempt to speak from the standpoint of understanding humans to be part of what Aldo Leopold called 'the biotic community'- attempt, that is, to speak in cognizance of human being as ecologically or environmentally embedded" (Buell, 2005: 8). This is what Casey is doing. Throughout her dolphin journey, she never forgets that her kind is just another species in the nature, not more, not less.

The stories Casey attempts to tell are, however, most of the time poignant. For example, Tilikum, who is "an Icelandic orca, taken from his pod when he was two years old and who has spent thirty years in captivity since then", killed his trainer Dawn Brancheau during a show and Brancheau was the third person killed in Tilikum's tanks (Casey, 2015: 74-76). It is not just the killing of humans which hurts the reader here. While mentioning the death of humans in Tilikum's story, Casey does not intend to monsterise him or victimize humans. To be more specific, Casey (2015: 75) informs that "Orca society is matriarchal and extremely tight-knit". The reader learns that if he were let free in the wild, "Tilikum would have spent

his life with his mother. She would have taught him the dialect unique to her pod, one that had been passed down through generations” (Casey, 2015: 75). When you are faced with the fact that Tilikum was torn apart from his mother and deprived of his language, his agony followed by deadly violence sounds so familiar. At this point, you find yourself asking who has killed whom, and for what.

Tilikum’s story is just one of the dolphin tragedies Casey refers to. With all these stories, Casey (2015:80-82) confronts her readers with how torturous and cruel their kind has been to dolphins, while there are recorded instances whereby dolphins saved some surfers from shark attacks and warned some scuba divers against an earthquake and steered them out to sea so that they could escape the massive tsunami waves. In most human-dolphin encounters Casey addresses, humans have hurt dolphins: the military sonar operations, the BP disaster, hate crimes etc. In *Voices* humans inevitably stand as the villain in the story, and it is the dolphins that the reader identifies with though they are not the members of the same kind. Yet it would be unfair to reduce *Voices* to mere villainization of human though at times Casey seems to be eulogising dolphins vis-à-vis humans. Trying to avoid misanthropy, Casey underlines that there have also been societies that have lovingly embraced dolphins. The Chumash tribe who believe that dolphins are their relatives, the modern-day activists who fight for dolphins at the cost of their lives and the New Age people who venerate dolphins to the extent of organizing workshops to reach their consciousness are some of them.

Towards the end of the book, you realize that Casey herself disappears as she steps into the world of dolphins tainted and traumatized by humans. Casey makes herself responsible for revealing human atrocity against dolphins. “We believe in dominion: nature is ours to do as with as we please”, writes Casey (2015: 262). However, she chooses to close her book with a chapter on the Minoans, ancient Greek people who knew how to live with the ocean without exploiting or trying to conquer it. With this final chapter, she points out that there have been people who did not position themselves superior to the non-human nature. Thus, she inflicts hope to her readers guiding them into an alternative world, where people can perfectly learn to stay in harmony with the non-human. Consequently, Casey’s unexpected personal encounter with dolphins turns into awareness-raising about dolphins. *Voices* is a partly lyrical and partly scientific call that urges us to rethink our attitude to the non-human. That is what makes *Voices in the Ocean* a powerful book: A personal lament for a human loss changes into a hopeful call for an unorthodox and polyphonic world as the reader is being tempted to hear voices other than that of human and make sense of them.

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