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Animal Subjectivity and Ethics of Care: Human-Nonhuman Relations in Doris Lessing's *On Cats*

Barış AĞIR

Osmaniye Korkut Ata University, Turkey

Abstract: This study aims to analyse Doris Lessing's *On Cats* through the lenses of animal subjectivity and ethics of care theory in the context of animal behaviours and human-nonhuman relations. Ethics of care in animal studies, which emphasises observing and communicating with non-human animals and caring for them, provides a theoretical foundation for understanding *On Cats*. In this respect, this study attempts to interpret the narrative from the perspective of ethics of care in order to dig out Lessing's views on animals. The study mainly focuses on the subjectivity of nonhuman animals, which is indicated by their sentience and behaviours. According to Lessing, non-human animals have sensations that distinguish themselves from human beings. There is no doubt that they should be considered independent living beings though they seem to be relying on human beings for a living in this human-dominated society. Animals have feelings and emotions, and human beings should try to understand them by linking their behaviours with a human's own experiences.

Keywords:

Doris Lessing,
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Hayvan Öznelliği ve Özen Etiği: Doris Lessing'in *Kedilere Dair* Anlatısında İnsan-İnsan Olmayan İlişkileri

Öz: Bu çalışma, Doris Lessing'in *Kedilere Dair* anlatısını hayvan öznelliği ve özen etiği kuramı perspektifinden, hayvan davranışları ve insan-insandışı ilişkileri bağlamında incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Hayvan çalışmalarında, insandışı hayvanları gözlemlemeyi, onlarla iletişim kurmayı ve onları korumayı vurgulayan özen etiği, *Kedilere Dair* anlatısını anlamlandırabilmek için kuramsal bir temel sağlamaktadır. Bu anlamda, bu çalışma Lessing'in hayvanlar hakkındaki görüşlerini ortaya çıkarmak için anlatıyı özen etiği perspektifinden yorumlamaya çalışmaktadır. Çalışma temel olarak hayvanların duygu ve davranışları aracılığıyla gösterdikleri öznelliklerine odaklanmaktadır. Lessing'e göre, insan olmayan hayvanların kendilerini insanlardan ayıran duyumları vardır. İnsan egemen bir toplumda yaşayabilmek için insana güveniyor gibi görünseler de, hayvanların bağımsız canlılar olarak kabul edilmeleri gerektiğine şüphe yoktur. Hayvanların hisleri ve duyguları vardır ve insanlar onların davranışlarını kendi deneyimleriyle ilişkilendirerek hayvanları anlamaya çalışmalıdır.

Keywords:

Doris Lessing,
Kedilere Dair,
Hayvan,
Öznellik,
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CONTACT: Barış Ağır, Assist. Prof. Dr, Osmaniye Korkut Ata University
Department of English Language and Literature, Osmaniye, Turkey
barisagir@osmaniye.edu.tr

Introduction

On Cats is a collection of animal stories that describes the feelings of animals and the subtle relationship between different species in nature. *On Cats* is an omnibus edition containing three narratives: *Particularly Cats*, *Rufus the Survivor*, and *The Old Age of El Magnifico*. This edition tells a series of stories about three cats: two domestic she-cats and one wild cat called Rufus. In *On Cats*, how cats look, listen, and long for are directly and thoroughly presented to the readers. From birth, the narrator has been with wild and domestic cats, observing their thoughts, behaviours, and reactions precisely according to the signals sent out by their own species. Furthermore, the narrator tries to communicate with the cats through specific acts, eye contact, and other body languages. Gradually, she understands the inner world of animals and treats them just like she treats human beings.

With the increasing complexity of the relation between human beings and non-human animals, more and more theorists refocus on how to deal with the latter. In this regard, ethics of animal care, which "suggests that we should at least show sympathy to animals" (Engster 526), provides a theoretical foundation for understanding *On Cats*. Thus, this study aims to discuss the mentioned moral theory for interpreting Lessing's work.

Ethics of care is originally based on Carol Gilligan's book *In a Different Voice* (1982) in which she proposes a "conception of morality" that is "concerned with the activity of care" as opposed to the "conception of morality as fairness," which is concerned with "rights and rules" (19). In this sense, care ethicists wish to develop this theory on the basis of the claim that priority should be given to context, relationships, and responsibilities instead of abstract rights and principles in ethics. In general, ethics of care rejects "abstract, rule-based principles in favor of situational, contextual ethics, allowing for a narrative understanding of the particulars of a situation or an issue" (Donovan and Adams 2). Under the influence of Gilligan's inspiring work, Nel Noddings develops "relational perspective" (xxii) to ethics in which caring includes two stages: "caring-about" and "caring-for" (18). The first stage is about the caring ideas or intentions while the second refers to providing caring services to others.

Sara Ruddick is another pioneer of ethics of care. Her main contribution to feminist philosophy is *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (1995) which revolutionises the way philosophy talks about mothering. She describes it as a set of practices or "collective human activities distinguished by the aims that identify them and by the consequent demands made on practitioners committed to those aims" (13–14). She believes there is a relation between ethics of care and motherhood which inspires other care ethicists to study the former by observing the practice of mothering. Virginia Held is

another representative theorist whose work on ethics of care sparks significant research into the social meaning of this theory. In *The Ethics of Care*, Held relates care ethics to the problems of politics, society and the entire world. She notes: "The small societies of family and friendship embedded in larger societies are formed by caring relations. . . . A globalization of caring relations would help enable people of different states and cultures to live in peace, to respect each other's rights, to care together for their environments, and to improve the lives of their children" (168). In other words, she implies that ethics of care can help create a community that promotes sound social relations.

Ethics of care is widely applied in various fields such as nursing, education, international relations, politics and ecological study. Some scholars apply this theory to the study of the relationship between humans and non-human animals. Rita C. Manning points out that the differences in human beings' obligations to human companions and animals are based on "carefully listening to the creatures that are with you in a concrete situation" (115). Furthermore, Deane Curtin, an environmental ethicist who combines the study of environmental issues with ethics of care, contradicts Noddings's standpoint in "Toward an Ecological Ethic of Care". She argues, "it seems quite possible that a feminist political consciousness may lead one to care for women in a Dalit village in India . . . but it would be dangerous to suggest that such caring for requires reciprocity" (68). Curtin proposes that in some contexts "a distinctive mark of caring for is that it is expressed 'selflessly'" (68). She contributes to the expansion of the circle of caring for, involving not only oppressed women but also the devastated environment and the abused nonhuman animals.

Josephine Donovan and Carol. J. Adams apply ethics of care to the study of animals in their representative work *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics*. They believe that animals are entitled to be considered "as individuals who have feelings, who can communicate those feelings and to whom, therefore, humans have moral obligations" (2-3). According to them, this theory recognises "the diversity of animals—each animal has its own particular history so that attention must be paid to these particularities in any ethical determination concerning them" (53). Josephine Donovan emphasises that human beings should notice what animals are telling them. She further refines and strengthens the ethics of care by emphasising its dialogical nature which denotes "listening to animals, paying emotional attention", and "taking seriously what they are telling us" ("Feminism" 305). Thus, ethics of care is closely related to the analysis of animal behaviours to maintain the view that non-human animals are sentient and conscious.

Subjectivity in the Animal World: Sentience and Dependence

Animals are active participants in an inter-subjective context rather than being objects "excluded from an exclusively human cultural world" (Nimmo 183). Animal subjectivity is "constitutively present in interaction, performed in behavior, and open to view as embodied consciousness" (Nimmo 184). As the quotation implies, the subjectivity of

animals is shown in their behaviours; they learn new things, master their inner connection and guide their acts. In *On Cats*, the subjectivity of cats is shown in their interaction with human beings. For instance, cats implicitly express such feelings as pain, exhilaration, contempt, and jealousy. Though these senses are individual experiences that are not easy to estimate, those who have experiences can feel the emotions of animals through careful and close observation. As a girl who has lived in the wilderness with animals since a young age, the narrator observes cats and integrated with their world. It was in this large landscape that she learned to observe animals and gauged what they were thinking and feeling. Her family lived on a hill where "hawks, eagles, and birds of prey often lay spiraling on air currents over the bush . . . at eye level, sometimes below it," (Lessing 3) and where the narrator could get close to and gaze at these animals around her. It was during this period that the narrator saw chickens being caught by hawks, eagles and wild cats from sunrise until sunset while she was also seeing the shooting of hawks and drowning of cats. When she became an adult, she got her first cat. It "was a half-grown black-and-white female of undistinguished origin, guaranteed to be clean and amenable" (25) Though she-cat is nice enough, the narrator does not love the cat as she (the cat) is "neurotic, overanxious, fussy" (26). To make things worse, the black-and-white cat soon gets pregnant before she is fully grown. Before delivery, she starts to feel pain which could be inferred from her eccentric behaviours. As the narrator states, "the black-and-white was offered baskets, cupboards, the bottom of wardrobes. She did not seem to like any of them, but followed us around for two days before the birth, rubbing up against our legs and miaowing" (29). When she goes into labour, she miaows for attention, purrs anxiously, watches her attendants in case they leave her (29). It proves that the black-and-white cat could feel aches and pains, as to how ethics of care theorists maintain, "animals have feelings, [and] can communicate those feelings" (Donovan and Adams 3). When the first kitten—the biggest and strongest one—appears, its head gets stuck: "A contraction expelled the kitten, and at once the half-demented cat turned around and bit the kitten at the back of its neck and it died" (Lessing 30).

Not only the black-and-white cat but the grey cat also communicates pain and suffering through its body language. Apart from the suffering arising from the loss of a mother's warmth, the grey cat unconsciously exposes her inner suffering when giving babies. Not long after her arrival, the cat gets pregnant. Since she is just a kitten, she has absolutely no idea what it means to have kittens in her belly. As the narrator notes: "She miaowed, sounding surprised, sitting on the kitchen floor, and when I ordered her upstairs to the cupboard she went. She did not stay there… She simply did not have any of the expected reactions" (Lessing 59). All this implies that the grey cat is like a teenage mother who is too naive to know what pregnancy means until the birth of her babies. When her belly contracts again, she turns around to look at the narrator, she is annoyed, furious (61). The eye movement, facial expressions and body language all work together to show her suffering. After the second pregnancy of the grey cat, the narrator states,

> my relations with the ladies of the street have mostly been about cats – cats lost or visiting, or kittens to be visited by children, or kittens about to be theirs. And there is not one who hasn't insisted that it is cruel to let a cat have kittens – with vehemence, with hysteria, or at the very least with the sullen last-ditch antagonism of my mother's: "It's all very well for you!" (78)

So, the narrator brings the cat to the vet for neutering. On the way back, the cat screams and struggles in the basket for she knows "the basket, the motions of the car, meant pain and terror" (80). As Donovan puts it, "the awareness that the other has feelings, or is a subject of feelings, means that one can no longer see that creature as an object" ("Feminist" 89). The narrator sees that the cat "made water from fear, and cried" (Lessing 80) but she still lets it get neutered which is inexcusable. She cannot bear to look at the cat when it looks at her with its dark enormous shocked eyes. By observing the behaviours of the grey cat and communicating with her, the narrator is inflicted by moral guilt and feels sorry for it. According to Mathews et al., "pain is a subjective emotion which can be experienced even in the absence of apparent external noxious stimulation, and which can be enhanced or abolished by a wide range of behavioral experiences including fear and memory" (15). In *On Cats*, during some periods, the black cat miaows sadly and runs in terror. When the narrator drives away to the shop or goes on the moors, she climbs on a wall, or into a tree, with her back protected, and she does not come down until the protagonist returns (Lessing 131). 17 years ago, the narrator was loaded with the responsibility to take care of the cat El Magnifico for its mother died after delivering it. When it had cancer and the shoulders had to be cut off, it "wailed and mourned" (227). The injection, the shaving of fur and the operation turned out to be a very hard and prolonged process for El Magnifico. After the successful operation, the doctors and nurses tell her that the cat must be kept "in a room with the door tight shut, and not let him out for a week, because of the stitches in that dreadful wound, and because of infection" (229). However, before the narrator shut the door on the cat, "he tore himself out of the arms that held him, and flung himself down all seven flights of stairs, rolling, falling, jumping, getting down them any way he could...He was afraid of being shut up" (230).

Animals themselves are independent ones whose personalities have internal continuity. In this regard, human beings should not consider non-human animals as impassive objects. Their sentience is also reflected in animal courtship. As Krista West states, "males and females use behaviors such as dancing, vocalizing, and gesturing to make themselves more attractive to potential mates" (26). The grey cat tries to show off her prettiness, dainty and etiquette to succeed at the mating process while the black cat screams. The grey cat is "as arrogantly aware of herself as a pretty girl who has no attributes but her prettiness: body and face always posed according to some inner monitor—a pose which is as good as a mask: the aggressive breasts, the sullen hostile eyes always on the watch for admiration" (Lessing 50). Moreover, she learns that any person, at the first sight of her, is likely to go into ecstasies. If she hears a compliment, she stops gestures and returns to common ones. Consciously or not, the grey cat shows off her beauty and elegance. Unlike the grey cat, the black cat is obstinate and modest. She does

not show off her prettiness, her black fur or her charming green eyes. Instead, she screams for mating:

> Black cat announces the onset of her need for a mate through a frenzied purring, rolling and demand to be petted. She makes love to our feet, to the carpet, to a hand. Black cat yowls around the garden. Black cat complains at the top of her voice that it is not enough, not enough - and then, sex no longer being her concern, she is a mother, full time and a hundred per cent, with never an impulse towards anything else. (99-100)

From the analysis of the behaviours of animals, it can be inferred that, in the human world, nonhuman animals' activities are interwoven with those of human beings. Even for wild animals, there is some rare area that is untouched by human beings. For most animals, their well-being depends on human beings. Under Lessing's description, these cats depend on human beings by winning their favour in various ways. An animal's subjectivity, in general, is showcased in this process. But the relationship between animals and human beings is never peer-to-peer. According to Graham Scott,

> before we have any chance of understanding a behavior fully we must observe that behavior, in its natural context, and in its entirety. The careful description of a behavior pattern or a sequence of behaviors allows us to identify all of the relevant components and to link their performance to the wider context of the physical and biological environment of the animal. From such a knowledge base we are able to develop our own ideas about that behavior, to speculate upon its function, and upon the factors that control it. (4-5)

In *On Cats*, two cats fight for the narrator's favour. Under this context, the narrator becomes the object while the cats take on the roles of subjects. These active behaviours further showcase animals' subjectivity. It seems that these "shrewd" (Lessing 13) cats know how to please humans to win a place and to tease the other gender for mating. In the eyes of the narrator, both domestic and stray cats attempt to win human favour and at animal mating. During one summer, a blonde girl brings a small elegant black half-kitten. Knowing she is going to live here, the steady, obstinate, and modest little beast insists on her own rights. In the case of the grey cat, after she was neutered, she refuses to sleep on the girl's bed, refuses to eat until coaxed, is unhappy and unsure of herself, and is determined about one thing: that the black cat was not going to take her place (82). The two cats adopt a hostile attitude toward each other and fight great duels with whatever tactics they have. In one scene, they sit on either side of the kitchen and stare at each other: "If black cat did something over the edge of what the grey cat thought was tolerable, grey cat gave a faint growl, and made subtle threatening movements with her muscles." (83) Tired of cold wars, these two antagonists establish rules of precedence. To get the favour of the hostess, the black cat attempts to copy the grey cat but cannot learn its fitness. When the grey cat lays stretched out for admiration, the black cat flops down beside her in the same position. When the grey cat yawns, the black cat yawns as well (105). These beasts always want to defeat the other and please their hostess because they will get a warm bed, delicious food and kind treatment.

These animals have their own feelings and depressions. The ethic-of-care theorists contend that "animals are not equal to humans; domestic animals, in particular, are for the most part dependent on humans for survival—a situation requiring an ethic that recognizes this inequality" (Donovan and Adams 6). One weekend, the narrator forgets to buy a fresh rabbit—the only thing the grey cat would eat. The cat expresses her anger by looking at the hostess, sitting near an imaginary saucer. Beyond imagination, the grey cat later turns into a hunter. She steals cooked sausages from a woman's kitchen, catches little birds from mother birds, and brings home dead mice as if to bring food to humans.

In addition to domestic cats, stray cats also attempt to win the favour of humans to get a warm place or simply a basin of water. During a hot summer, when the narrator walks on the pavement, "a shabby orange-colored cat would emerge from under a car or from a front garden, and he stood looking intently up at me, not to be ignored" (179). She wonders what it wants: "But this cat did not miaow, he only looked, a thoughtful, hard stare from yellow-grey eyes. Then he began following me along the pavement in a tentative way, looking up at me" (180). The narrator gives him food and water. But the cat keeps staying outside her door. So, she adopts it as the hot weather progresses. After being accepted as a member of the family, Rufus—the orange cat—begins to purr as loudly as he could in the chicken. His purring rumbles through the house as if he wants to the hostess know he is grateful. Injected antibiotics and the vitamins, Rufus is rescued from death and continues to express his gratefulness by purring and looking up with those greyish-yellow eyes.

To sum up, Lessing incorporates herself into the world of animals in a bid to decode animals' inner world for human beings. Under Lessing's description, animals possess sentience and individuality. With more and more people having cats, dogs, pigs, sheep or other animals as pets and farm animals and more and more people coming close to wild animals, interactions are essential to maintain relationships between human beings and animals. From the above discussion, it can be inferred that the meaning of animal behaviours "is not hidden somewhere inside the animal but is coconstructed relationally in interspecies interaction" (Nimmo 184). Animal subjectivity, thus, is embodied in sentience, keen observation and interaction with human beings.

Sympathetic Understanding: Protecting Cats

In recent years, the human-animal relationship has been flourishing, making for a harmonious co-existence. According to Ender-Slegers, "interactions with animals are supposed to teach responsibility, encourage a caring attitude and behaviour, and provide companion, social support, security, comfort, amusement or an outlet for affection" (qtd. in Bokkers 32). Living on the farm, the protagonist develops a close relationship with farm animals and defends them from wild ones. After adulthood, she cares for domestic, stray, and wild cats. Others like the protagonist protect animals from pain, potential dangers, and spiritual harm, willing to sacrifice their own interests and even lives in the process.

Donovan exhorts, "what we need is a refocus on our moral vision - a shift in the cultural ethical episteme – so that people will begin to see and attend to the suffering of animals, which is happening all about them" ("Sympathy" 175). In this sense, sympathetic understanding is the theoretical basis of ethics of care in which "the moral aspect of caring includes taking responsibility, satisfying the needs of particular others" (Arıkan 270). Philip Mercer posits that "sympathy" occurs only "between creatures who can feel and it requires keeping a certain distance to imaginatively construct the other's situation accurately and thereby to understand it intellectually as well as emotionally" (9). In Lessing's narrative, an old she-cat goes wild. However, the cat is not wild enough to move far, and is in extreme hunger, such that "her muscles tensed all the time for flight" (160). The family considers the old cat too nervous to be normal and one evening, they follow her at a distance, to figure out her troubles, eventually landing in a dangerous place. Though they keep calling, the tabby does not appear. The rainy season sets in with a great storm. One night, the family hears a cat crying outside the house. Amidst the whipping boughs and the furiously shaking grass, they find the cat crouching in the rain. Unhesitatingly, the family goes after the cat, "with the thunder rolling overhead, lightning illuminating sheets of rain" (162). Coming to the edge of the bush, they consider their perilous circumstances, but continue pushing through waist-high grass and bushes for the sake of the kittens of the old tabby's stringent cry. Encountering life-threatening risks and undergoing various difficulties, the family ensures that these cats "were taken up to the house, where she was given a corner, food, and protection" (166). One may argue that since they own the cats, these people are obliged to save them. Admittedly, humans and animals are unequal and ethics of care assumes an inherent inequality between the caregiver and the cared-for. Nevertheless, this tabby had gone wild and her kittens were wild cats. Further, not all humans have full moral considerability. Perhaps, "we ought to proceed not by banishing feelings from our moral considerations on the grounds that they are unreliable, but by paying more attention both to our feelings and to the mechanisms by which they are and can be socially manipulated" (Luke 127).

As discussed above, the family knows well the feeling of helplessness and can comprehend the plight of the old tabby and try every means to protect the cats from being stoned to death. However unreliable feelings may be, they provoke sympathy—understanding what others might feel in the same situation. It is then possible for humans to make ethical decisions about animals. Further, the protagonist has been kind to other cats, birds, etc. In the warm summer of 1984, a shabby orange cat always strolls down the street. He ignores food offerings but drinks up water. As the weather gets hotter, she puts more water on her balcony for cats. Later, she adopts this old scruffy cat whose dirty fur is rough over knobbly bones. She brushes him, cleans his fur, and takes him to the vet: "His kidneys were bad. He had an ulcer in one ear. Some of his teeth had gone. He had arthritis or rheumatism. His heart could be better. . . . He would soon have died if we had not rescued him" (185). The protagonist gives the cat a name and a place where there are shrubs, trees, birds and cats instead of speeding cars, and shouting children.

Besides the protagonist, many others protect cats from hunger, thirst, and diseases. When the protagonist moves to the country, which is unsuitable for adopting cats due to the space constraint in the flats, she finds "a large black cat lived on the staircase of the flats, belonging, apparently, to nobody" (36). Fortunately, three fruit-and-vegetable barrow-pushers look queer—"they were tiny people, five foot high and, always making jokes and always about the weather" (37). What is stranger is their always being wrapped up in a scarf, jacket, jersey, and coat. Yet, they are as kind as everyone. Deeply worried about the cat's plight, the little thin brother says, "he could take it home for company" (37). For a few weeks, the cat has luck and is welcome at the pub because of a prostitute who "took him in with her, and sat on a high stool in a corner by the bar, with the cat on a stool beside her" (38-39). When the cold weather and early nights arrive, people take the cat in for the night. Then, the cat disappears, without anyone noticing.

To sum up, human beings are prone to attachment toward pet animals. According to Anna Chur-Hansen et al., "where positive relations are found between health and companion animalship, there might be a moderate attachment to the pet" (290). Irrespective of pre-existing hostilities, humans, and animals may share a harmonious co-existence. From the aforesaid stories, it can be inferred that Lessing hopes human beings and animals can live as companions and express their feelings, as they are both sentient. However, one wonders in what way humans and animals can build a close bond since they cannot communicate with each other as do humans which will be discussed in the next section.

Caring through Dialogue: Communication and Coexistence

Animals are different from humans but are nevertheless entitled to equal moral respect. Care theory argues that humans have a moral responsibility to care for all living beings with whom they can communicate, regardless of how different they are from us. However, the degree to which active caring is possible varies according to circumstances. For example, the responsibilities for domestic animals vary greatly from humans' duties to wild animals. In the narrative, the protagonist has three cats, all of which are dainty, capricious, and hard to please, but she manages to keep them. When she lives in Earls Court in London, a friend sends her a black-and-white female cat of undistinguished origin, which turns out to be "neurotic, overanxious, fussy" (26), causing much inconvenience. The cat behaves like a dog: waiting for people to come home and insisting on being in the same room: "She never, not once, ate anything but lightly cooked calves' liver, and lightly boiled whiting. . . . And she would not eat liver cooked in anything but butter" (26). In the battle with the cat, the protagonist once wants to starve it. However, whenever she puts cat food, table scraps, or milk, the cat strolls away. Finally, she discovers that this cat loves boiled liver. It is in such processes that she learns the characters, preferences, and dislikes.

Apart from direct conflicts, the protagonist also learns about animals by observing their behaviours. The vigilant cat loves to sit on the top step of the stairway, "able to survey half a dozen yards, the street, a shed . . . able to fly indoors if they came too close" (27). The protagonist also observes other animals. Coming into the kitchen, she finds a mouse. Instead of scurrying away, the protagonist says: "It would look at me, bright-eyed, and wait for me to go. If I stayed and kept quiet, it ignored me, and went on looking for food. If I made a loud noise or threw something at it, it slipped into the wall, but without panic" (28). To discover the truth, she puts the black-and-white cat in the kitchen and locks them all in for the night. Out of the protagonist's imagination, "the cat stretched out on the floor, feeding the kittens . . . while the mouse did not even run away, but waited for me to leave" (33). The protagonist speculates about the relationship between animals and herself, musing, "the cat enjoyed, or tolerated, the company of mice; and disarmed a rather silly dog from downstairs who, on the point of chasing her, capitulated because she, apparently not knowing that dogs were enemies, wound herself abound his legs, purring" (33). Unlike other cats, the black-and-white cat might have formed special characteristics, having its own ideas over food, staying in peace with mice, and having fun with dogs.

Through a series of incidents, the protagonist learns the habits, characters, and the meaning of its behaviours. Then, she cares about the cat by communicating with her in a dialogical way. One afternoon, the black-and-white cat "sat on the table, trembling. From time to time, she let out—not a miaow, but a wail, an interrogative plaint" (34). This crisis astonishes the cat's weak nerves; the protagonist lifts it and pets it. When the real evening comes, the hostess coaxes the cat downstairs to enjoy the clear, fresh evening, finally calming it down. The protagonist speculates about the differences between humans and animals: "But then, how inflexible is nature, how unpliable: If cats have been the friends of man for so many centuries, could nature not have adapted itself, just a little, away from the formula: five or six kittens to a litter, four times a year?" (28). Though there are pre-existing differences between humans and animals, Lessing still believes that they can and should live together in harmony. In 1962, the protagonist begins to live in a cat country. The winter of 1962 sees nature's dominance over humans:

> the pipes had burst and frozen, and people were waterless. The system stayed frozen. The authorities opened a main on the street corner, and for several weeks, the women of the street made journeys to fetch water in jugs and cans along pavements heaped with feet of icy slush, in their house slippers. The slippers were for warmth. The slush and ice were not cleared off the pavement. They drew water from the tap, which broke down several times… (43).

People who are lonely in cold winter need animals to warm their hearts. As luck would have it, a friend of the protagonist sends her a grey she-cat, whose behaviours she observes. From the fastidious pose of the kitten, she learns that the kitten mewed for dirt boxes with torn newspaper, rather than wood shavings. Besides, this kitten is fussy over her food: "Even as a kitten she could express annoyance, or pleasure, or a determination to sulk, by what she ate, half-ate, or chose to refuse. Her food habits are an eloquent

language" (47). She is patient and tender enough to communicate with this kitten. The protagonist feels that "kittens who are left with their mother seven or eight weeks eat easily, and they have confidence" (48). So, she infers that this kitten may leave its mother too young because it always instinctively creeps "under the fold of a newspaper, or into a box or a basket – anything that shelters, anything that covers" (48). The protagonist lavishes as much love on this kitten as a mother would.

Communications between humans and animals are context-based, due to the subjectivity of living beings. Thus, human beings should learn to communicate with animals by watching their behaviours and referring to experienced people. Soon after the black cat's arrival, it gets sick. As the protagonist is inexperienced with cat diseases, she is in doubt about the black cat's symptoms. After the cat develops a cough, she takes it to a cat hospital, only to be told the cat is badly dehydrated and is going to die. The vet gives the cat an injection for the fever and says it must take liquid if possible: "Clearly, keeping black cat alive would be a full-time job. And I was busy." (88) People advise her to abandon the cat, but the protagonist believes it is not just a cat and "she must not be allowed to die" (88). Doing all that she can to save the black cat, the protagonist first mixes a useful solution of glucose, blood, and water. Every half hour, she forces the cat's teeth open, holds her jaws up, and pours the liquid. Two days later, the cat becomes normal. With the fever gone, the cat is very cold. So, the protagonist wraps it in an old towel, puts it near the radiator, and regularly gives it liquid. Even with the skills of vets and the tenderness and carefulness of the protagonist, the black cat still does not improve: "Her fur was already like a dead cat's, with dust and fluff in it; her eyes were gummy; the fur around her mouth was solid with glucose I tried to pour into her" (92-93). Having been ill, the protagonist knows very well what it is like to be sick in bed without showers. Moreover, though cats are not humans and humans are not cats, she could not believe that the weak cat could endure its filthy and horrible smell, and she determines to clean her and make her comfortable. Like treating infants, she "took a light towel wrung out in hot water, and rubbed her with it, gently, all over, to get rid of the dirt and fluff and stickiness" (93). After cleaning it, the protagonist makes the cat's hands "warm by heating them in hot water" (94). Efforts are rewarded, and the black cat comes back to life, gratifying the protagonist. The protagonist love cats for what they are, instead of for the fun they can bring their owners. She can take care of sick cats at the cost of sacrificing her own work and freedom. Thanks to the experience of raising cats, the protagonist learns the inner world of animals—what they do when in need of help, food, and liking. Further, she learns how to care for them and treat them as what they are. She gets spiritually closer to animals than most people and from then, she takes good care of more animals.

Like the protagonist, the tree man also cares for natural vegetation. Heeding the request of the neighbours, the protagonist has her big tree trimmed. The tree man she hires must be a nature-lover. He complains bitterly that many people order him to cut trees for the sake of roses, to make a table, or simply because their leaves make a mess in the yard. He asks, "what are we, compared to a tree? . . . What are roses, compared to a

tree? What are cats, compared to a bird?" (111). However, animal lovers often go to extremes to love specific animals they are the closest to. For instance, this tree man actually fights against roses, cats, and even human beings who seem harmful to trees and birds: "For the tree man, trees and birds, a unit, a sacred unit to be given preference, I should imagine, over human beings, if he had the decision. As for cats, he'd get rid of them all" (112). On the contrary, some people love all animals they come across. A lady who lives at the top of a seven-story block of flats in Paris near the Place Contrescarpe, though a tidy lady who is the last to clean bird droppings, "put down newspapers and allowed the bird to become friendly" (113). Apart from her tidiness, she believes in traveling light, having no encumbrances, and being free to move anywhere in a moment. Yet, with the coming of winter, this lady shudders to think what would happen to this bird if she throws it out into wintry Paris. So, she considers herself responsible, buys a cage, and takes it with her wherever she goes. This lady is infested by others' criticism and deeply frustrated by those cold humans, she sulks until the spring comes. From "a lover of humanity" (114) to a lover of windows closed, the lady experiences unwilling change. When "something got into her" (113), she shows her tenderness for birds, while after many people persuade her against it, she coldly throws them out.

One wonders why humans love only some living beings while rejecting others. This phenomenon can be explained from the perspective of the construal-level theory. According to Yaacov Trope and Nira Liberman,

> The Construal-Level Theory (CLT) proposes that we do so by forming abstract mental construals of distal objects. . . . Psychological distance is a subjective experience, that something is close or far away from the self, here, and now. Psychological distance is thus egocentric: Its reference point is the self, here and now, and the different ways in which an object might be removed from that point - in time, space, social distance, and hypothetically - constitute different distance dimensions. . . . They serve to transcend the immediate situation and represent psychologically distant objects. . . . Transcending the self in the here and now entails mental construal, and the farther removed an object is from direct experience, the higher (more abstract) is the level of construal of that object. (440 -441)

As the quotation implies, humans tend to make choices relating to the construals of objects. In *On Cats*, roses boast different values. The protagonist´s neighbours think from a concrete perspective (low level), enjoying the fragrance and prettiness of flowers, while the tree man meditates from an abstract perspective (higher level), finding roses to be mere useless flowers. The same applies to the cat and bird argument. No wonder the tree man is highly in favour of trees and those that are a unit with trees–birds.

The construal-level theory can explain the perplexity of the old ladies and girls at the Parisian lady taking a bird with her wherever she goes. On the one hand, the direct experiences of this French lady make her think from a low level: when on a wintry afternoon, a bird flies in from the treetops and shows no signs of wanting to leave, she believes she has the responsibility to look after the bird. Besides, she feels lonely for her

sailor husband who is always on the sea, since "physical separation from loved ones, such as when a family member moves to a new community, can precipitate loneliness" (Peplau and Perlman 72). Living with this bird helps reduce loneliness. On the other hand, the other old ladies and girls think from a high level: birds are just animals which the French lady should not take everywhere she goes. From the French lady's story, it can be inferred that human beings believe in an impassable gap between animals and themselves and thus shut animals out of their category. In terms of animal care, abstract (high level) thinking is prone to predicaments; theorists turn to ethics of care for help. According to Jacqueline Millner, "care theorists hold that all living creatures have value and are embedded in an interdependent matrix" (14). Living in the same environment with animals since youth, the protagonist knows very well the interdependent relationship between humans and animals and always tries to "reach cat, essence of cat, finding the best of him" (245). The protagonist cares not only for her own cats but for other wandering cats too, treating them equally to her own. A wandering cat called Susie gives birth to her kittens on the roof near the protagonist's room. Though not old, the cat is tired and frightened when delivering the kittens. In her kindness, the protagonist extends help to the she-cat. Once Susie, with her black and white scrape, opens her eyes, the protagonist feels the love shown by this pussy: "[he] climbed unsteadily off the old blanket on to the floor...then on to my leg...up my leg...my arm...my shoulder...clinging on with his tiny prickles of claws, got under my chin and cuddled there, purring" (221). Affected by the feelings of animals, the protagonist cannot help but protect cats from dying. She saves and cares for Butchkin—El Magnifico. Yet, her scientist friend cannot believe in cats' capacities. Though he remarks about his own cat always waiting for him to come home, he officially says that a cat has no sense of time and lives in an eternal sense of now: "The fact is, any observant careful owner knows more about cats than the people who authoritatively study them" (223). The protagonist's reflection indicates that science sometimes loses its power to study the inner world of living beings, while context-based experience can teach people much about animals.

The protagonist considers animals as sentient as humans and cares for them as if for her own babies. Unlike humans who treat animals as they like, the protagonist cares for other animals by observing them. When El Magnifico is fourteen years old, he develops a lump on his shoulder. The vet finds the shoulder bone cancerous and that the whole haunch has to be cut off. Driven to a famous cat vet and left in the care of a nurse, El Magnifico complains at the top of its voice. Having mastered the cat's character, the protagonist regrets that the whole process "must be hard for him to bear, for he had lived his entire life in this house, where he was born" (227). What a relief it is when friends make calls to inquire about the spiritual status of the cat!

One day, the protagonist looks out of the window and sees El Magnifico: "One day, hearing a howl from him I had never heard before, I looked out and he was balancing on his three legs, and he was lifting his head to howl . . . he lay down for a while, but then got himself up and cried" (231). She thinks this is not a histrionic effort, but a cry of anguish.

When the cat has dispersed the tension, the pain, and the disgrace of his absent leg, the protagonist is frantic with frustration because the cat is living through a nightmare, which he could not understand and she could not explain to him. What she can do is just to comfort and caress him. Besides heart-breaking yowling, El Magnifico would sometimes "have bad dreams" (232). One night, the cat starts from sleep due to a dream with a frightened cry. Then the nightmare fades, and he lies down quietly and looks out into the night beyond the big windows. Later, El Magnifico sometimes wakes up suddenly out of a nightmare. On such occasions, the protagonist comforts him by stroking him repeatedly.

In this captivating, interconnected series of cat stories, we meet the cats the farm and feral cats of the protagonist's South African childhood, the London house cats, the city strays (such as Rufus), the prowling toms, and the kittens. Lessing observes their exploits, rivalries, terrors and affections, ancient gestures, and learned behaviours. The communication that grows between them, is a language of gestures and moods and desires, as eloquent, finally, as the spoken word.

Conclusion

In contemporary society, the relationship between human beings and animals and the welfare of animals generate heated debates and intensive researches. Lessing has a fascination with the behaviours of cats, always caring about their status. Discussions of the relationships between cats and females play a pivotal role in her Cats series. With the rise of ethics of care and animal behaviour theory, Lessing's *On Cats* arouses scholars' interests in her description of the daily life of cats. First, animals have subjectivity though they seem to rely on humans for living in a human-dominated society. In *On Cats*, Lessing vividly describes the repeated restless acts and sad screams of cats. Furthermore, the narrator interprets the language of cats by observing and linking them with her own experiences. In addition, in a society dominated by human beings, animals seem to be subordinate to humans. The two cats in the narration try to imitate the elegant behaviours of each other to win the favour of humans. Moreover, they yowl and roll on the ground to attract tomcats. Lessing's description of cats reminds us of animals' being sentient and they can feel the sensations of pain and comfort. Second, there is the possibility of human beings and animals living in harmony. In Africa, the farm is besieged by lots of wild cats. The protagonist, with her parents, drowns cats in the cat-obsession period. But the family begins to protect animals, as they experience the horrible holocaust. As expected, they begin to care about (the first period of caring) the feelings and emotions of cats and care for (the second period of caring) cats. This signifies the possibility of different species living in harmony. Third, human beings should love close animals (pets) and then wild animals, plants, and nature. Care ethicists maintain that humans should care for not only animals related to them but also remote animals. The protagonist cares for the three cats. She communicates with them and takes care of them when they are sick. Besides, she adopts and feeds stray cats, dogs, and birds. From the above, Lessing's views on animals are quite clear. She believes that animals have sensations and there is the possibility of

humans communicating and living in harmony with animals. To achieve coexistence, we should treat non-human animals equally, as they are independent individuals. Lessing is not only a cat-lover but also a keen observer. She tries to figure out the inner emotions of cats by communicating with them, approaching them by referring to her own experiences. *On Cats* provides a possible solution for how to treat animals: observing the body language of animals and treating them how they would like to be treated. Only when human beings treat other living beings in nature with friendship can they benefit from nature. The study of *On Cats* is significantly suggestive of humans' current social practices and the harmonious coexistence of different species.

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