

## AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF LYDIA MILLET'S "ZOOGOING"

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### LYDIA MILLET'İN ÖYKÜSÜ "ZOOGOING"İN EKO-ELEŞTİREL ANALİZİ

Gamze AR<sup>1</sup>

#### ABSTRACT

Throughout history the world faces many destructions and misdeeds of humankind with the anthropocentric perspective that tries to dominate nature. This approach poses a great threat to the world in that the extensive misuse of natural sources affects each part of life. The deforestation, nuclear threat and torturing of animals are the essential problems of modern world, and the cycle of the mother earth becomes disordered ecological disaster at the end. As regarding to these issues, there arose new theories of analyzing the environmental subjects as the central point, and it is called as Ecocriticism. Ecocriticism is a well-known movement which deals with ecocritical outlook to the literary texts in the opposition of anthropocentrism. This paper seeks to reveal how the story "Zoogoing" written by Lydia Millet brings ecocritical literacy towards the rights of animals, especially predators. It analyzes the story from the anthropocentric and eco-centric aspects. This story provides to understand the eco-conscious process within animals and human's reactions. Thus, it is an interpretive ecocritical analysis of animals inside zoo and their instinctual behaviors towards the humankind. At that point, human behaviors and its perception towards animals construct a crucial analysis in Ecocriticism.

**Keywords:** *Ecocriticism; Environment; Animal Studies; Lydia Millet; "Zoogoing."*

#### ÖZ

Tarih boyunca dünya doğayı hakimiyeti altına almaya çalışan insan merkezli düşünce ile pek çok yıkıma ve insanların kötü davranışlarına maruz kalmıştır. Bu yaklaşım, hayatın her bölümünü etkileyen doğal kaynakların yaygın bir şekilde kötü kullanımı yönüyle dünya için büyük tehdit yaratmaktadır. Orman tahribatı, nükleer tehdit ve hayvanlara işkence modern dünyanın başlıca problemleri arasında yer alır ve dünya ananın döngüsü ekolojik felaketlere neden olmaya başlamaktadır. Bütün bunlar göz önüne alındığında, çevresel konuları merkez alan yeni teorileri analiz eden yaklaşım ortaya çıkar ve buna Ecocriticism\* (Çevresel-Eleştiri) denir. İnsan merkezli bakış açısının aksine edebi eserlerdeki çevresel durumlar ile ilgilenen çok bilinen bir akımdır. Bu çalışma, Lydia Millet'in yazdığı öykü olan "Zoogoing"

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adlı eserin nasıl hayvan haklarına özellikle yırtıcılara karşı çevresel bakış açısı getirdiğini gösterir. Çalışma, öyküyü insan merkezli ve çevresel bakış açısı ile eleştirmektedir. İnsan ve hayvan davranışlarına karşı oluşan çevresel bilinç sürecini anlamamızı sağlayan öykü, hayvanat bahçesindeki hayvanlara ve insanlığa karşı yorumcu çevresel kritik oluşturmaktadır. Bu noktada, insan davranışları ve onların hayvanlara karşı olan algılarını Çevresel Eleştiri noktasında inşa etmeye çalışır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Eko-eleştiri; Çevre; Hayvan Çalışmaları; Lydia Millet; "Zoogoing"*

## Introduction

History and literature have made a great impact on each other throughout the years. Notwithstanding the different disciplines they belong to, literature has contained the overtones of history, and history has been discovered through literature, which became the main concern for the idea of New Historicism. This engagement is of great importance to understand the cultural context of the texts. American Literary historian Stephan Greenblatt, as one of the founders of New Historicism, described it as a tendency "to delve as deeply as possible into the creative matrices of particular historical cultures and at the same time to understand how certain products of culture could seem to possess a certain independence" (Greenblatt & Gallagher, 2000, 16). A text is seen as a component and epitome of culture. Culture, history, and text are in motion, and the creation of a text and social matters have interacted with each other, and thus any works of art could be historicized. The historical moment of literary works and turning them to "a historically informed base" has wide coverage in New Historicism (Hamilton, 2003, 151). Hereby, New Historicism for Louis A. Montrose has livened literary texts up "by the historicity a/texts, I mean to suggest the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing - not only the texts that critics study but also the texts in which we study them"<sup>2</sup>.

## Lydia Millet

The American writer Lydia Millet is a significant figure in the field of Ecocriticism because she is always inside the acts of environmental issues. Her literary sources are written in an ironical and dark humoristic style in that the nonhuman world is presented within harsh realities. She holds a master's thesis in the area of environmental policy from Duke University's Nicholas School of the Environment. She also worked for Natural Resources Defense Council for two years before joining the Center for Biological Diversity in 1999 as a staff writer.

Lydia Millet was born in Boston, Massachusetts and raised in Toronto, Canada. She holds a BA in Creative Writing with honors from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a master's degree from Duke University. Millet is the author of multiple novels as well as a story collection called *Love in Infant Monkeys* (2009), which was one of three fiction finalists for the Pulitzer Prize. 2011 saw the publication of a novel called *Ghost Lights*, named a New York Times Notable Book, as well as Millet's first book for middle readers. In 2012 she published *Magnificence*, the third book in the cycle which included *How the Dead Dream* and *Ghost Lights*. In 2012, she also won a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship for her work. She now lives in the desert outside Tucson, Arizona, with her husband, son and daughter; and works as an editor and writer at a nonprofit group devoted to endangered-species protection in Tucson, Arizona. (from the website [www.bookbrowse.com](http://www.bookbrowse.com))

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<sup>2</sup> Montrose, 2013, 20.

Her works of art are listed below:

- 1996 Omnivores: A Novel
- 2000 George Bush, Dark Prince of Love: A Presidential Romance
- 2002 My Happy Life
- 2005 Oh Pure and Radiant Heart
- 2005 Everyone's Pretty: A Novel
- 2008 How the Dead Dream
- 2009 Love in Infant Monkeys
- 2011 Ghost Lights: A Novel
- 2012 Magnificence: A Novel
- 2014 Mermaids in Paradise: A Novel
- 2016 Sweet Lamb of Heaven: A Novel
- 2018 Fight No More: Stories
- 2020 A Children's Bible: A Novel

Her awards and honors explicitly show how she is a great writer in the field of nonhuman world and children literature. These are mentioned-below in a listed way:

- 2003 PEN Center USA Award for Fiction for My Happy Life
- 2005 Arthur C. Clark Award shortlist for Oh Pure and Radiant Heart
- 2010 Pulitzer Prize finalist for Love in Infant Monkeys
- 2012 National Book Critics Circle Award finalist for Magnificence
- 2012 Los Angeles Times Book Prize finalist for Magnificence
- 2012 John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship
- 2019 American Academy of Arts and Letters Literature Award for Fight No More
- 2020 National Book Award for Fiction shortlist for A Children's Bible
- 2020 New York Times 10 Best Books of 2020 A Children's Bible

### **The Analysis of "Zoogoing" by Lydia Millet in the Perspective of Ecocriticism**

Lydia Millet's "Zoogoing" is taken from her novel *How the Dead Dream* that synthesizes the two styles of Millet's fiction — the harrowing and the madcap — with a new elegance. (from *The San Francisco Chronicle*) *How the Dead Dream*, the first book in a trilogy, introduces T., a young developer with a reverence for money and the institutions of capital. Always restrained and solitary, he has just fallen in love for the first time when his orderly, upwardly mobile life is thrown into chaos by the appearance of his unbalanced mother, who comes to live with him after his father's sudden desertion. In the wake of a series of devastating losses, T. begins to nurture a curious obsession with vanishing species, and is soon breaking into zoos at night to be with animals that are the last of their kind.

The story is a great manifestation of ecocritical outlook in the context of animal studies in that Millet focuses on the egocentric human behaviors' devastated effect upon animals. She presents how the nonhuman world will face extinction although many people in the story behave in a senseless and indifferent way towards the environment. The story also emphasizes the significance of wild animals and their extinction. The balance of earth is imperiled, and Aldo Leopold states two important norms in the world as regard to the significance of balance: one of them is land physiology, other is wilderness. He states the significance of these two elements as' significances follows:

We have two available norms. One is found where land physiology remains largely normal despite centuries of human occupation. I know of only one such place: northeastern Europe. It is not likely that we shall fail to study it. The other and most perfect norm is wilderness. Paleontology offers abundant evidence that wilderness maintained itself for immensely long periods; that its component species were rarely lost, neither did they get out of hand; that weather and water-built soil as fast or faster than it was carried away. Wilderness, then, assumes unexpected importance as a laboratory, for the study of land-health. (Leopold, 196)

The land ethic is as crucial as wilderness in order to protect the cycle of nature and life, and so, as Leopold explicitly stated in his magnificent source *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*, wilderness plays an important role in life because of persisting the health of land itself. However, in the story Millet emphasizes the danger of land ethic because selfish human behaviors destroy the land health. Millet presents the lives of wild animals with the use of satirical and ironical atmosphere. Her story expresses the zoo in the age of Anthropocene via its harsh and real practices. Besides the intrinsic values of human and nonhuman worlds, Millet indicates how the balance of human and animal is drawn within the borders. At that point, zoo makes the animals materialize and they turn into the entertaining objects in life. However, the main character T. tries to understand the animals in zoo and he gets connection with them. This perception carries the story from the human-centered perspective into the biocentric one.

In "Zoogoing," the first impression of the main character T. shows how the nature and environment are changed with the interruption of human beings, and this artificiality causes the selfishness of people towards nonhuman world: "in a series of arid gardens connected by pathways there was a hummingbird enclosure and an aviary, a beaver pond and a pool for otters; there were Mexican parrots squawking, bighorn sheep on artificial cliffs, an ocelot curled up in a rocky crevice and a sleek bobcat pacing restlessly." (Millet, 31) These descriptions indicate the artificial construction of humankind and Millet emphasizes the significance of holism because the universe is a holistic entity and this artificiality destructs the Gaia theory that is mentioned by Heise. Her following reference to Gaia in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* expresses the holistic aspect of earth in terms of strengthening unifying elements of universe as follows: "a complex entity involving the Earth's biosphere, atmosphere, oceans, and soil; the totality constituting a feedback or cybernetic system which seeks an optimal physical and chemical environment for life on this planet" (Gaia qtd in Heise, 24) As seen with the statement, the Earth is in a complex structure, but Millet criticizes the interruption of people in nature, and T. here reveals the ecocritical concerns with his deep interest towards the lives of wild animals. The story presents how people seem as if they are care takers and unconcerned in the same time.

The holistic point of view refers to the motto of "think globally, act locally," (Heise, 20) and it provides us to see the world from every aspect, and Heise's citation from Ursula K. Le Guin explicitly reveals the significance of interconnectedness of everything around the world: "Ursula K. Le Guin describes the encounter of a group of humans with an ecosystem that cannot be understood as encompassing anything less than an entire planet." (Heise, 17) The whole planet should be considered with a holistic aspect because everything is interconnected. For example, the extinction of wild

animals causes the environmental disorder and the animals in the zoo. Millet criticizes this issue in the following statement:

A few minutes later he stood bracing himself with his hands on a low wall over a moat. Across the moat slept a black bear on a sunny ledge. This was a zoo of animals native to the region, and though bears did not live in the hot flatlands, a handful of them still roamed the piney mountains that rose above the desert floor. He had read that every so often a bear was found dead atop a power pole, where it had climbed suddenly in terror, escaping from a car or a noise, and been electrocuted. (Millet, 31-32)

Bears are seen as being captivated under the egocentric worldview, and they are pushed to the low areas in contrast to their natural habitat located in upper sides. These bears are trying to adapt into the changing world order in addition to the acts of people. At that point, Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am* explicitly reveals the self-identifications of animals and close look to their minds:

Since so long ago, can we say that the animal has been looking at us? What animal? The other. I often ask myself, just to see, who I am—and who I am (following) at the moment when, caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal, for example, the eyes of a cat, I have trouble, yes, a bad time overcoming my embarrassment. (Derrida, 3-4)

Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am* is significantly great source in the field of animal studies because of understanding the animals from their eyes and minds. The book reveals the diverse roles played acted by animals in Derrida's work and it is a deep philosophical investigation. It is also the critique of relegation of animal life that takes place as a result of the many controversies which are about the human's origins with the evolution theories. Thus, Derrida's source is a masterfully oriented book in animal studies. In this expression the animal is questioning about its selfness and otherness, and it is quite important to understand the animals as others or not. In the story the careless behaviors of people turn the world into a devastated area and they otherize the animals with their egocentric points of view. In the following expression Millet expresses how selfish human beings behave arrogantly and without they do not thinking the emotional and physical statements of animals.

Then the stillness was disturbed by yelling boys, hitting each other in the face. The father, in shorts, stood at T.'s elbow, looking down into his camera and adjusting a ring on the lens. A projectile—someone had lobbed a balled-up piece of litter. It hit the bear a glancing blow on the ear and he stirred, disoriented, turned around once and then settled down again. (Millet, 32)

The human-oriented point of view is dominantly seen in "Zoogoing," and this quotation indicates how people are in desire of their self-interests like taking photos. The disturbance to a bear can be considered as a tragedy of life because people have anthropocentric beliefs and they do not care about animals' presences. Heise supports how selfishness comes with the exploitative beliefs and the earth's sources are materialized by greedy humans. As Garrett Hardin stated, "many of the Earth's resources are subject to the same exploitation and lack of long-term foresight that in earlier centuries afflicted village commons open to use by all inhabitants led him to postulate the imminent tragedy of the "global commons." (Heise, 25) This exploitative perspective is reflected within a family in the story:

"Too soon, I wasn't set up yet. Missed the shot," said the man, shaking his head. "Go again." The wife looked around for something else to throw and T. felt heat filling his face. A tension bowed in him: he felt a rush of fury. "Are you kidding?" he asked, turning to the wife. She wore large mirrored sunglasses. "You're throwing garbage at the bear? For a picture?" "What's the big deal?" said the family man. "Don't do it," said T. His shoulders were fluid and nervy, his face shining. He was enraged. Or excited. But all here, he thought: and I will

kill them. Even though he knew it was a posture, he felt the anger and relished it. (Millet, 32)

This family's careless behaviors illustrate the capitalist interests of humanity, and as stated in Carson's epigraph in *Silent Spring* is stated, "man has lost the capacity to foresee and to forestall. He will end by destroying the earth." Albert Schweitzer who is a German humanitarian physician in 1900s clearly expresses how the world is inside the same desires of human. All insist on their values rather than the earth's ones. It shows the selfish and egocentric human beings unlike the main character T. in the story. T. reminds the man who has a sincere and close relationship with the octopus in a documentary film *My Octopus Teacher* (2020) that reveals the balance of nature with a special connection between human and nonhuman worlds. In the story, T. enters into the cages of animals and he realizes how people create the borders with the idea of constructing the safe spheres for themselves. In the modern world they are the symbolizations of safety and reliability in the minds of people. After he passes into the cages' restrictions, he sees the real sides of predatory animals: "in the dark he could imagine not only wolves but almost anything, a secret menagerie. He was filled with the rush of this, with the idea of myriad creatures materializing from the blackness. Their coats glowed, their faces were both benign and predatory. The faces of animals were amazing in that, tongues of velvet and claws of ice. What were they?" (Millet, 35) T.'s fear towards these animals shows how people compose a set of prejudices and physical preventions against animals. However, T.'s expressive language reveals the magnificence of animals that are regarded as the most important entities inside the ecosystem. The close observation of T. approaches him to the animals' world. He feels as if he is under threat somehow after having passed the grating, and so he thinks the idea of tamability that implies human beings' other kind of selfishness because they are always trying to change the nonhuman world instead of themselves. Millet states: "as though all wild animals could one day be tamed—as though this was an aspect of all of them, this one-day-tamable quality, and their wildness was nothing more than coyness or a mannerism. As though other animals should not only submit to people but behave like them, comport themselves with civility." (Millet, 36) The civilization can be exemplified with the idea of suitability for animals in that materialist world turn them into the entertaining objects. Aldo Leopold's following statement explicitly presents the devastating nature of human beings: "man always kills the thing he loves, and so we the pioneers have killed our wilderness. Some say we had to. Be that as it may, I am glad I shall never be young without wild country to be young in. Of what avail are forty freedoms without a blank spot on the map?" (Leopold, 148- 149) Leopold's expression involves the ironical situation about human nature in that their instinctual desire focuses on the destruction with their anthropocentric thoughts. Human beings are also otherizing the animals while seeing their different features. T. states this issue as follows: "and what about the endless differences of the animals, their strange bodies? Many legs, stripes, a fiery orangeness; curved teeth or tentacles, wings or scales or sky-blue eggs..." (Millet, 37) Millet attempts to show the differences can be normal between human and nonhuman worlds, and the most significant notion is to be understand and embrace these diversities. However, humankind tries to control and construct their hegemonic spheres like zoo in the story. They generally see animals as inferior beings and so push them into the marginalized areas. However, ecocriticism considers all the world as a holistic point of view, and it strengthens the idea of ecological balance. T. has special connections to animals, and one of them is with the old Mexican wolf. T. tries to empathize the wolf and he realizes the hypocrisy of mankind while observing the wolf's natural behaviors:

The old wolf's unwillingness to be near him was fully forgiven by the light of day and in fact the joke was on him. Wariness was simply its way of life, having nothing to do with him. It had not been robbed of this quality, though it was caged and it was solitary: it retained its essence. It did not attempt to ingratiate itself. It did not have diplomacy. He thought he recalled feeling, in the flash of



its eyeshine, a similar flash in himself—a fleeting awareness that in the wolf's gaze there was a directness unlike the directness of men. (Millet, 36)

The hegemonic egocentrism with the arrogance of human opposes the environmental awareness that supports the cyclical regulation in nature. T. expresses the naiveness of Mexican wolf in contrast to the human's anthropocentric desires. Ecological disasters can be seen as the results of human deeds as people consider their own self interests. In the story, Millet agonizes "the gray of human habitation," (37) and these colorless situations can be commented within ecocritical outlooks. As Adam Trexler and Adeliene John-Putra mention, "advocates of ecocriticism have hoped to do the same, using literary critique to show the shortcomings of our current environmental ideas, to draw attention to environmental issues, to develop new ways of thinking about the environment, and to energise environmental activism." (Trexler & Putra, 19) Human beings should consider the environmental issues in the context of changing world order, and so it is important to see the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman worlds.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, ecocriticism creates an authentic perspective to see the relations between diverse entities all over the world. The networks of human and nonhuman worlds are commented within the context of ecocriticism, and "Zoogoing" reveals the anthropocentric framework inside animal studies. In the story, characters see themselves as superior than the nonhuman worlds except for the main character T. Ecocentrism considers the world with diverse perspectives in order to understand everything inside and outside nature. Anthropocentric perspective puts the human into the center unlike biocentric one. Lydia Millet's story is an important source for indicating how animals are captivated under the borders that are constructed by egocentric human thoughts and the main character T. tries to get contact with predatory animals in the story. T. looks for the meaning of community and environmental virtue in the field of animal studies. He also observes such destructive human deeds as the construction of zoo.

Lydia Millet presents diverse animals' stories in the Anthropocene age. While revealing these experiences, the main character T. approaches the predatory animals in a close way and it points out the eco-centric system perceives everything as a holistic process because the attempt of T. illustrates how everything is interconnected and T. wants to integrate with animals in the story. Unlike T., other human beings in the story are always in need of controlling the nonhuman worlds somehow, and this hegemonic human-oriented consideration can be a result of materialist interests and experiences. Millet's aim is to reveal the interactive relationship between human and nonhuman worlds. She emphasizes the human beings' egocentric deeds and she states people are creating their own empire that is full of destructions. The following quotation shows how human beings cause loneliness while creating the zoo in this context. They are also alone with their selfish and brutal ideas:

Empire only looked good built against a backdrop of oceans and forests. It needed them. If the oceans were dead and the forests replaced by pavement even empire would be robbed of its consequence. Alone, he thought—a word that came to him more and more, in singsong like a jeer. In the zoo the rare animals might have been orphaned or captured or even born in captivity. (Millet, 34)

Loneliness is a great problem of the modern world, and T. suffers from it. The most dilemmatic issue is that human beings cause this loneliness with their destructive acts, and after this egocentric deed, they face the environmental hostility like natural disasters or pollution all over the world. At that point, Heise comments how the capitalist and materialist perspectives create the catastrophic atmosphere, and he tells: "as a form of resistance to capitalism and specifically to the mass

consumerism that escalated in scale and scope after 1945, this paranoid vision of a global corporate conspiracy aiming to control the lives of individuals, communities, and nations, up to and including the triggering of world wars, was not in its original formulations specifically environmentalist.” (Heise, 26) All capitalist deeds make control humanity with their self-interests and they constitute the robotic behaviors without emotions.

Millet emphasizes how human is continuously interrupting the lives of animals, and the modern world’s tools focus on their use value rather than humanitarian ones and they cause extinction in the end. Their natural habitats are also exposed to the interferences of humankind because human-centered perspective is predominant like the construction of zoo. The following statement reveals that these animals are suffering from their vanishments and people’s indifferences at the same time at the same time: “The animals were very busy with dying, not only one at a time but in sweeps and categories. This he found increasingly distressing. He began to comb newspapers for the latest word about animals vanishing; he began subscribing to magazines.” (Millet, 37)

Historical references are full of unthoughtful human deeds such as hunting or using them as an entertaining stuff. In history, Teddy Roosevelt’s trip to Africa is known as The Smithsonian–Roosevelt African Expedition, and it is a shameful event for showing how the American president Roosevelt killed totally 512 predatory animals and brought them into the museum in order to show them up. Millet states this event in the story as follows:

The flocks of passenger pigeons that had once darkened the sky, Teddy Roosevelt on safari shooting hundreds of animals from a train . . . he saw a list from one of Roosevelt’s trips to Africa in 1909. Five hundred and twelve animals shot, including seventeen lions, eleven elephants, twenty rhinos, nine giraffes, forty-seven gazelles, eight hippos, and twenty-nine zebras. George V of England had killed a thousand birds in one day for sport; in a year the Roman emperor Titus had nine thousand captured animals killed in popular displays. (Millet, 37- 38)

The Smithsonian-Roosevelt African Expedition begins, led by former President Theodore Roosevelt and accompanied by his son Kermit, and three naturalists, Edgar Alexander Mearns, Edmund Heller, and J. Alden Loring. The specimens collected for the United States National Museum and National Zoological Park enrich the biological collections by some 11,400 items, including 1,000 skins of large mammals and 4,000 skins of small mammals. Some 5000 plant specimens were also collected. Some of the specimens were used for displays in the newly constructed United States National Museum. (from Smithsonian Institution Archives) It is an important example for revealing the Anthropocentric perspective and egocentric human deeds. Ecocritical considerations attempt to light on these issues and help to push people more considered into these kinds of issues as the nonhuman world is as significant as human one in that the balance of world is provided with an interactive thought system. Therefore, environmental virtue can be regarded as the most important point in order to develop the moral conscious on the nature and nonhuman lives. “Zoogoing” provides us to see how the human and nonhuman are interconnected, and Lydia Millet reveals the animal studies within the relation between the main character T. and predatory animals. While narrating the story, she uses the historical experiences as well as theoretical backgrounds such as ecocriticism and animal studies. Thus, it is a multidimensional source reflecting various aspects of life.



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