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# Blurring the Line: Deconstructing the Human/Non-Human Binary in Dhruba Hazarika's *Luck*

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the hierarchical relationship between human and non-human entities in Dhruba Hazarika's *Luck*, through the theoretical lenses of Claude Lévi-Strauss's notion of binary opposition and Jacques Derrida's deconstructive methodology. It argues that the stories in *Luck* destabilize the rigid binary of human/non-human by revealing their interdependence and fluidity. Drawing from posthuman animal studies, the analysis shows how Hazarika's narratives blur the dividing line between species, allowing characters—both human and animal—to flow into each other's categorical space.

Through close textual readings of all nine stories in the collection, the paper demonstrates how animals are not merely symbolic or peripheral, but central to the thematic structure of the text. Hazarika constructs complex human-animal encounters that question anthropocentric assumptions and foreground a more integrated view of beings within the natural world. In doing so, *Luck* offers a literary space where the notion of human superiority is unsettled, inviting a rethinking of identity, agency, and subjectivity across species lines.

**Keywords:** Binary opposition, deconstruction, posthumanism, animal studies, Dhruba Hazarika, human/non-human, hierarchy, literary analysis.

This paper explores the human/non-human binary in Dhruba Hazarika's short story collection *Luck* through the lens of Derrida's three-phase model of deconstruction—liminality, elimination, and liberation. By integrating posthuman animal studies and close literary analysis, the paper argues that *Luck* dismantles anthropocentric hierarchies and presents a porous boundary between species.

Dhruba Hajarika was born in Shillong, Meghalaya in 1956. He is an Indian novelist writing in English language. Being the founder secretary of 'North East writers' forum in 1997, this Katha award winning writer of fiction has authored two novels that are rooted in the setting and ecology north eastern people of India. His first novel *A Bowstring Winter* was published in 2006 and the second *Sons of Brahma* in 2014 by Penguin. With the same publication his collection of short stories *Luck* was published in 2010 and found space in various newspapers like *Sentinel* and *The Telegraph*. All his works have earned critical applaud. His collection of short stories *Luck*, which is also a part of eight book series with the title *Jewels from the North East* published by Penguin, deals with human-animal encounter and develops such a flavour that the reader can't stop before the story ends. It, simultaneously, develops a passion to read the next story with a new fervour and similar encounter in the backdrop of lush green setting of Assam.

Hazarika, in each of his stories, engages with an innocent yet mystical connection between human and non-human, where non-human includes the environment and the animals. It is to be noticed that while dealing with his stories, Hazarika presents an elaborate and vivid description of nature along

with revealing human's bond with distinct species of animals. These stories are unique, as they not only talk of prolonged living with an animal that develops further, rather it also talks of flickering moment that brings a spark of emotion even in most self-absorbed humans, and the outcome is the melting flow of emotions.

Thus, the paper attempts to dismantle the straight forward binary of human/ non-human to subtly reverse and gradually deconstruct the idea of dividing line in Derridean way of deconstructing the binary so as to bring out an equilibrium that can be seen in the stories of Hazarika. The equilibrium is attained as the dividing line becomes fluid so as to allow the flow of human and non-human in each other's category that even an animal becomes primary to fall under the category of human and vice-versa. Detailed study of all the nine stories incorporated in the collection would explore this fluid nature of the human/ non-human binary opposition.

Though several stories have got space in the repository of English literature that reflect human animal encounter, yet, *Luck* is a unique collection throughout, that deals with nine short stories where animals emerge significantly as central figure, where each story explores a gamut of possibilities in human-animal encounter revealing various aspects of both in this interaction and thus provide a vivid understanding of all the physical being in the backdrop of nature, connected with the interweaving of human narratives and thoughts.

This article directs its attention towards the natural environment and its interaction with humans discovering the significant contributions of North East Indian historical literature to the literary panorama to expand reader's view point regarding the truths of Assam and aims to explore the interconnectedness of human and non-human in this region. In Hazarika's panorama of colourful life of non-human both nature and animals receive a brighter space which is in line

with the present ecological consciousness by presenting the intricate relationship between humans and the various species of the natural world. The various stories in the collection *Luck* engage with the natural world and its inhabitants and the miss steps made by humanity. It is to be noticed that with the thinkers like Darwin Freud, Lacan, Kristeva, Derrida etc, notion of autonomous rational entity of the human's superiority against the non-humans have been destabilized and the outcome of it can be seen in the stories where Hazarika allows the readers to take a break from the all-time human oriented world view.

Thus, the paper would work upon the hypothesis that instead of a straightjacketed human/non-human binary, the dividing line is porous and the nature of the two elements are fluid as in a famous quote by M.M. Ildan it is said that "when animals behave like humans or when human behave like animals don't be surprised because in every animal there is a human, and in every human, there is an animal." ([https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/animals-and-attitude.](https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/animals-and-attitude) )

So, the paper goes on to explore this fluid identity of human animals and nature as well as the spaces in between. These stories are in the third phase of the Derridean understanding of the binary opposition where all hierarchies are dismantled and attempt has been made to locate the gaps interpreting which we got the jumbled positions of humans and animals. This non-biased position has been perhaps taken by Hazarika because of his personal affinity for nature and animals and this inclination is because of his connections to the geographical region he hails from. This inclination is influenced by his roots in North East India where the native culture and the local setting inevitably values the idea of human's coexistence with the non-human world. Here, the ecological consciousness is naturally ingrained in their culture through mythical undertones and day-to-day beliefs.

Thus, Hazarika's *Luck* breaks down the human/ non-human boundary by contemplating over animal subjectivity and animal perspective as presented in Derrida's thought-provoking book titled *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008).

1970s marked the beginning of a re-evaluation of the human-animal relationship, leading to contemplation on animal-centric issues such as habitat preservation, species extinction, using animals as labour, their mistreatment, commodification for human entertainment, consumption, and more. These actions, driven by human needs, often disregard the larger ecosystem, contributing to environmental degradation. Within this oppressor/oppressed framework, the concept of the posthuman emerged, with H. P. Blavatsky contributing to its evolution. Cary Wolfe introduced the humanist perspective of dismantling the binary opposition between humans and animals.

This Posthuman animal studies rejected the conventional hierarchy where humans stood atop, imparting their language and culture to animals. Instead, this approach of posthuman animal study seeks to understand animals deeply by entering and participating in their world, fostering new possibilities for mutual coexistence. This line of study gained significance in the light of postmodern re-structuring of the human/non-human division to human/ non-human encounter.

This animal-centric viewpoint finds expression in various works, both written and on-screen, with an animal-centric focus. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) portrays a group of farm animals that rebel against their human owner, aiming to establish a utopian society of equal coexistence. However, with shift in time, we find that the 21<sup>st</sup> century documentary film "The Elephant Whispers," an Oscar-winning short documentary is more about the coexistence of the two, that showcases the profound bond between a couple and

elephants, exploring animal emotions and the harmonious relationship between tribal people and the nature. The documentary also serves as a window into Indian culture and traditional environmental conservation practices.

Dhruba Hazarika's collection of short stories *Luck* is similar in theme to these works; however, the collection seems to look for maximum emotional impact through varied human-animal encounters. Writing about this collection Ruskin Bond writes, "Wild tales with difference... Hazarika's empathy with all creatures great and small comes through in these absorbing, spare and often deeply moving stories. Life in the forest and small towns of Assam is brought vividly to life by a gifted writer"(Back Cover Page of *Luck*)

Through his skilful and poignant storytelling, Hazarika captures the attention of readers through vivid imagery and an element of suspense runs in each narrative. His genuine fondness for animals is apparent, ranging from his admiration for the sleek Panther to his heartfelt sorrow over a wounded bird. Immersing oneself in the entire book is akin to embarking on a journey through the enchanting world of birds and animals. Beneath the surface, Hazarika also aims to shed light on the gradual erosion of human compassion amidst the demands of daily life.

Set against the backdrop of semi-rural Assam, the nine short stories that delve into various aspects of human-animal interactions. While the stories primarily provide a moving glimpse into ordinary life of the region, they occasionally take a dramatic turn to explore the darker and crueller tendencies within humanity. The opening story, "The Hunt", introduces four characters hailing from diverse professions but united by their shared enthusiasm for hunting for sheer entertainment. As they prepare to target a female deer, mentioned as a doe, certain ethical considerations emerge. Adrian, acclaimed as the finest hunter in *Diphu*, symbolically offers one of the

deer's ears, meticulously placed on a dry *segun* leaf, to the forest god as a gesture of reverence and piety. "Adrian sliced off one of the deer's ears and putting it on a dry *segun* leaf, offered it to the forests gods." (*Luck* 3).

Running parallel to this narrative is a mythical undertone, as the offering of the deer's ear to a forest god aligns with traditional practices meant to invoke blessings and approval for the hunters. However, when the hunters proceed to dissect the doe's stomach, they make a grievous discovery: "the tiny spindly-green, almost transparent bodies roll out of the mother's womb. There were three of them and they would probably have been beautiful fawns. The bullet had gone through one of them" (*Luck* 4). Overwhelmed by the unintended consequences of their actions, the hunters find themselves filled with remorse, standing before the forest god, pleading for forgiveness. Even the doctor among them, who brings a burdened history to the situation, is unable to suppress his emotions: "He sat down on the wet grass and sobbed. 'I can't do it. I can't do it,' he cried" (*Luck* 4).

The ripple of guilt does not remain confined to just one individual but extends to all four hunters. This shared sense of wrongdoing seems rooted in Assam's mythical fabric, where such actions naturally invite bad omens. Their apprehension of the impending consequences is mirrored in the signs of nature: "In the pre-dawn silence, a fox howled far away, and nearby dry *segun* leaves rustled down to the ground. There was putrid smell of blood and excreta, and of something else that only the night and sudden death can bring" (*Luck* 3).

In the subsequent tale, titled "Luck," the protagonist, who possesses a deep affection for animals and birds, perceives his own dwelling as a place shunned by these creatures, as well as by humans. This perception transforms him into a solitary figure, seemingly isolated by an intangible barrier: "It was as if our house was taboo for animals and birds. Perhaps also for

humans, since no men or women lasted very long, either" (Luck 6). However, a fortuitous encounter with a pigeon defies this pattern, breathing new life into the protagonist and introducing a stroke of good fortune.

This pigeon's arrival serves as a turning point, not only mending the protagonist's emotional state but also bestowing a sense of luck upon him. The narrative weaves a poignant bond between the narrator and the pigeon, concurrently infusing joy into his existence. Prior to this fortuitous encounter, the narrator's home seemed cursed, as previous pets, preceding this fortunate pigeon named "Luck," where they met unfortunate fates – either fleeing or perishing, leaving the narrator in a state of solitude and sorrow:

*I remember the sparrows we caught; the parrots, the chicken, the ducks and the rabbits that we bought. Like guests who had been forced into being guests, or people who had strayed into camps that cut off their freedom, they stayed awhile, enlivening the compound, and then, when their spell came, they were gone and there was nothing you could do about it. (Luck 6)*

More than offering solace, this pigeon- Luck, becomes the narrator's companion, filling his life with a sense of wholeness. In the presence of this avian companion, the protagonist experiences a series of firsts. He extends an invitation to his neighbours and hosts them for a meal, and his interactions with colleagues undergo a positive transformation. The pigeon, aptly named "Luck," not only brings mental solace but also imparts crucial life lessons and values. This feathered companion becomes an agent of personal growth and connection.

The theme of affection for animals and its profound influence is also evident in Hazarika's story titled "The Leopard." This narrative highlights not only the love and significance

attributed to cows but also underscores the power of friendship. The story revolves around three companions who skip school to embark on a journey up the *Hengerabari* hills in search of a lost cow in the dense hill, shrouded in trees, sometimes bewildered wanderers akin to a jungle. In this quest, the trio, feeling like mature individuals, exemplify a human-to-human connection fuelled by concern for an animal. Their experiences lead them to establish connections with the intricate animal realm of the jungle:

*We saw a fox flash past us, sleek and secretive.  
And once a pair of porcupines trying to copulate  
at the base of a boulder, as a crow swooped  
angrily down at them at short intervals. Snakes of  
different sizes and colours crossed our path but  
did us no harm. I remember startling one away  
from a wild fowl's nest built in the brambles by a  
narrow stream. (Luck 30)*

Ultimately, their search concludes in the tragic discovery of their pregnant cow, which has fallen prey to a wild tiger. This poignant occurrence, the killing of a pregnant mother animal, resonates across two stories, 'The Hunt' and 'The Leopard', serving as a poignant reminder of life's unrelenting reality and the ecological equilibrium that sustains it. These narratives exemplify the intricate interplay of nature, revealing its capacity for retribution.

In these two stories, the concept of nature exacting its revenge emerges prominently. This way Hazarika seems to express the way nature treats human and animals equally, erasing any binary. In his stories, the cyclic nature of existence pervades everywhere, no matter one is human or animal. In 'The Hunt,' the doctor's remorse upon inadvertently killing a pregnant doe, along with the three unborn fawns, mirrors the cyclic nature of existence. This parallels the sorrow he has experienced in losing his own wife and child a year ago.

Similarly, 'The Leopard' portrays the death of a pregnant cow at the hands of a leopard. In a turn of fate, the villagers retaliate by killing the leopard when it ventures into their cattle shed around daybreak. Subsequently, villagers stumble upon "two starving (leopard) cubs beyond Blue Mountain" (*Luck* 33).

A parallel theme of nature seeking revenge can be observed in the story 'Ghostie' – "About a month later, news emerges that Pyn, a plumber had been struck by a speeding motorcycle while crossing the road near *Laitumkrah*. This incident confines him to a hospital bed for three weeks, rendering him unable to consume solid food and relying on a bedpan for his needs." (*Luck* 74). Jycho, one of the three friends of around ten years in the position of the protagonist, speculates, "Maybe it happened to Pyn because he hit Ghostie. Maybe, huh?" (*Luck* 74).

It is to be noticed, here, that Hazarika, mostly, presents animals in his stories as emblematic of fertility, evoking images of a flourishing natural world teeming with vitality and the capacity for abundant reproduction. Dealing with this idea, Hazarika, again dismantles the binary focussing more on animals' capacity where they endowed with fertility and glides on to humans. As in 'The Hunt' and in 'The Leopard' similar illustration of this notion is found in 'Chicken Fever,' where the imagery centres on laying hens. Here, the protagonist Barman rescues the militant girl who was to be attacked by the troops under Barman, but he saves her as he envisions her future power as a mother. He remarks, "But I left you safe, girl. You'll live, and one day you will be a mother, like that fat, brave hen. You'll live, and make life. And perhaps you'll remember me" (*Luck* 60).

Talking of yet another perspective, away from either human or non-human category, the paper delves into dealing with an in-between category through the depiction of the bond between

human owners and their pets which is distinctive, with mutual emotional dependency that develops gradually. Pets rely on their owners for essential provisions such as sustenance, shelter, and care, while owners derive a distinct sense of well-being from these animals. Research underscores the role of pets in reducing stress, lowering blood pressure, increasing oxytocin levels, and even mitigating pain. Above all, pets offer companionship that can help combat loneliness. Engaging with pets has been associated with positive mental and physical outcomes. Hazarika frequently captures this unique owner-pet relationship in stories like 'Luck' and 'Chicken Fever.' This connection becomes evident when Rattan Deb Barman- the protagonist in 'Chicken Fever', stands before the hen coop, his heart pounding with anger, after a one-eyed mongoose kills his rooster. Barman's fury in the aftermath of the mongoose's attack on his pet is palpable. He makes a vehement promise to avenge his pet's death, vowing to inflict a slow and painful demise upon the mongoose. His anger is evident as he declares, "One day I'll kill you, I promise. I'll kill you slowly so that you will know the pain you have given me. You bastard, I'll wait for the day when I can skin you and roast you alive and feed you piece by piece to the pigs at the sweeper's colony." (*Luck* 37)

Similarly, an alternate facet of this bond emerges in the story 'Ghostie.' Here, the narrative delves into a complex love-hate relationship between three boys and a stray dog named Ghostie. This canine figure repeatedly appears mysteriously, sparking the boys' curiosity. They perceive it as a recurring presence wherever they go. Their intrigue gradually morphs into malevolent intentions. The boys, existing somewhere in-between innocence and malevolence, display casual cruelty as a characteristic of childhood "Young boys, someone has said, are condemned to walk the ragged line between innocence and evil, occasionally being casually cruel as only children can be" (*Luck* 69). They relentlessly provoke Ghostie, kicking a ball

forcefully at its nose or damping it with boiling water. Remarkably, the dog remains unresponsive, embodying an almost saintly figure that the boys dub as the "spirit of final justice" (*Luck* 77). This intricate love-hate bond between young boys and a stray dog encapsulates a distinct category, neither pet nor stranger, residing in a realm of its own.

Now looking at another perspective, we find Hazarika's narratives often portray animals as carriers of luck. Just as a pigeon brings fortune to the young bachelor in the title story, "Chicken Fever" celebrates the successful accomplishment of Barman and his team's mission without any loss of life. Barman attributes this success to the luck brought by a black hen, stating, "I know it was the black hen that brought us luck. It was good luck. Very good luck." (*Luck* 60)

Not just luck, but Hazarika's love for animals is also marked by delicate intricacy, indicative of keen observation and accurate portrayal. Such vivid word painting serves as evidence of Hazarika's deep affinity for animals. For instance, while describing the animal protagonist Ghostie in the story of the same name, Hazarika narrates:

*In the early-morning sun the brown and white of his skin appeared different than it would later in the day. He stood with his head erect, chest curving out as if tensing itself against a possible attack--or perhaps because he had no fear of the world. From a distance, with the sunlight bouncing off the thin fur, he looked like a regal apparition.*  
(*Luck* 66)

Moving to the discussion of human/non-human binaries, Hazarika's stories offer a nuanced portrayal where these categories are not rigidly confined to just humans and animals. The boundaries between them are porous, giving rise to a spectrum of intermediary spaces. Hazarika's narratives compel the readers to explore these in-between spaces that

signify bonds stretching from humans to animals, spanning a range of categories. Despite the apparent duality of human/animal, the stories showcase diverse and overlapping relationships.

Pets, though animals, blur the boundaries and become closely aligned with the human category in the binary opposition. They attract love and affection from humans, effectively becoming part of the family, as seen with the pigeon in "Luck" and the hen in "Chicken Fever." Conversely, the mongoose aligns more with the second category, and its instinctive action of killing the rooster renders it a target of human anger. A similar complex blend of categories is found in the case of the girl from the militant group. While being human, she shares a connection with second category as she belongs to the militant group, and Barman, in the name of his pet black hen, rescues her.

The human-animal binary is thus enriched with a range of in-between spaces and overlapping categories, defying a simplistic dualism by the conclusion of "Chicken Fever," where Barman returns from his mission to his doorstep:

*Rattan handed the rooster and the hen to the boy who took them carefully and looked up at him, eyes wide with relief. From somewhere behind him, Rattan heard his wife: 'Are you alright?' 'Yes, I am fine.' He stepped forward. 'See what I brought you for dinner.' He lifted the roe. (Luck 62)*

Again, here the rooster and the hen, in one hand of Rattan, are to be taken care of whereas the roe in the other is called as 'dinner'.

Indeed, the classification of entities aren't solely based on their physical nature as human or non-human, but rather on the actions and treatment they experience. This approach

takes into account the dynamic interactions and relationships between humans and animals, which can transcend conventional categories.

Immanuel Kant's viewpoint adds an important aspect to this discussion. According to Kant, the key distinction lies in the capacity for autonomy and rationality. While both humans and animals possess desires that can drive them to act, humans possess a unique ability to deliberate and make choices independent of their immediate desires. This capacity for rational decision-making and autonomy is closely tied to the concept of having a "will." In Kant's philosophy, autonomy is a hallmark of humanity, and it stems from their ability to act based on their own rational principles rather than being driven solely by instinct or desires.

Kant's perspective aligns with the nuanced portrayal of human-animal relationships in Hazarika's stories. The characters' actions and treatment of animals reflect their ethical inclinations and the choices they make. Some interactions showcase a deep sense of compassion and understanding, while others reveal more callous attitudes.

By focusing on actions and decisions, rather than solely on physical attributes, the stories in Hazarika's collection highlight the intricate and multifaceted nature of the human-animal relationship. This approach recognizes that the classification of entities isn't fixed, but rather emerges from a complex interplay of emotions, ethics, and rationality.

In his significant contribution, "The Case for Animal Rights," Tom Regan, an American philosopher, presents a compelling argument that asserts the existence of rights for animals comparable to those attributed to human beings. Regan challenges the prevailing notion of animals possessing an inferior and unequal status, contending that this perspective is misguided. Moreover, he criticizes the fallacy of establishing an equivalent moral standing for animals on utilitarian

principles. Instead, Regan advocates for grounding the ethical significance of animals in the framework of rights-based moral considerations.

Much like Kantian philosophy, Tom Regan shares the perspective that all entities with a "subject-of-a-life" possess intrinsic value and should be treated as ends in themselves, rather than as a means to an end. Regan aligns with the argument put forth by French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 'The Social Contract,' where Rousseau posits that individuals have either explicitly or implicitly consented to relinquish certain freedoms in exchange for protection of their rights and the maintenance of social order under the authority of a ruler or majority decisions.

In accordance with this line of thought, Tom Regan asserts that non-human or animals also possess rights. His book 'The Case for Animal Rights' (1983) elaborates on this concept, asserting that animals should be granted rights because they, like humans, are "subjects of a life."

The notion of treating animals as "subjects of a life" is notably evident in Hazarika's stories, where instances abound of humans yielding to their affection for animals and respecting the autonomous wills of these creatures. Such occurrences can be found throughout, but the mention of the title story is must, where the narrator demonstrates a keen awareness of the independent intentions of animals.

The story develops with day-by-day increase in the bond of the narrator and the pigeon as the pigeon was the only companion to the lonely bachelor and secondly, the pigeon brought luck for him. The narrator was proud of Luck and was overwhelmed by its grace and intelligence. It's many a times that the narrator saved the pigeon and brought it back from the verge of death. For instance, when Luck was sick, the narrator ran down the road and reached the vet four miles away. The narrator served Luck like a mother.

But this lovely bond turns out to be a love-hate relationship because like all other creatures that the narrator tried to tame, this pigeon too flew away though leaving behind its family:

*His daughters and sons, grandsons and two great-granddaughters inhabit my house. The box above the veranda is always full, the nests in it keep getting bigger and bigger. Pigeons from other houses in the locality have shifted in and my purchase of gram and rice has increased. But none have the poise and nobility of Luck. And three years after it happened, as I write about it, I know that Luck, the survivor, Luck, the pigeon with intelligence, Luck, the lover and adventurer, Luck, my lucky charm, would want me to tell you how it was (Luck 28).*

This story is a unique nature writing and a simple inartificial documentation of the inevitable clashes and communion between the narrator and the pigeon can be seen. Here, the pigeon plays the role of bringing man back to life and taught him the true sense of happiness.

Thus, in various narratives, Hazarika skilfully presents the dual aspects of human nature, both the virtuous and the malevolent. Animals, featured prominently in these stories, serve as conduits to reveal the intricate dimensions residing within individuals. Ranging from the innocence embodied by animals like deer in 'The Hunt,' Hazarika seems to undertake the role of guiding humanity towards moral rectitude. With 'Luck,' he infuses life with vivacity, emphasizing the wholeness found in the interplay between humans, nature, and animals.

In 'The Leopard,' a rich and diverse ecological system is brought to the forefront, while 'The Chicken Fever' subtly unveils suppressed sentiments of affection, both for fellow humans and animals. This emerges through the protection of hens and the depiction of an innocent, naked woman

concealed amidst haystacks. Through 'Ghostie,' Hazarika delves into the narrative of seemingly innocent children crossing ethical boundaries, revealing their capacity for malevolence.

Through these narratives, Hazarika challenges the anthropocentric worldviews that traditionally position animals as inferior to humans. By emphasizing emotional reciprocity, ecological awareness, and species fluidity, *Luck* aligns with posthuman thought and Derrida's call to reconsider the ethical and ontological status of animals. The collection thus becomes a literary experiment in dismantling binary hierarchies and envisioning a world of shared subjectivity and interdependence.

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