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Posthumanist urbanism: Nonhuman perspectives in Jane Smiley's *Perestroika in Paris* (2020)

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Abstract

Urban literature has traditionally reinforced species hierarchies by portraying cities as exclusively human spaces and animals as either symbolic figures or marginal presences. Jane Smiley's *Perestroika in Paris* (2020) disrupts this anthropocentric structure by placing sentient nonhuman characters at the centre of the narrative. Through the escaped racehorse *Perestroika*, the raven *Frida*, and the dog *Paras*, the novel explores how nonhuman beings actively navigate, inhabit, and ethically reshape the modern city. This paper examines how Smiley unsettles species hierarchies by granting animals narrative perspective, agency, and relational subjectivity. Taking a reference of Cary Wolfe's critique of humanist subjectivity, Peter Singer's principle of equal consideration of interests, Kari Weil's emphasis on animal vulnerability, and Donna Haraway's concept of companion species, the analysis demonstrates that the novel moves beyond mere representation to perform a posthumanist intervention. In Smiley's re-imagined Paris, the city is no longer a bounded human domain but a multi-species contact zone where boundaries between human and nonhuman, nature and culture, and reason and instinct are actively contested. By foregrounding nonhuman sensory experience and interspecies alliances without falling into reductive anthropomorphism, Smiley reveals the ethical limitations of anthropocentric urban planning and social organisation. The mare's quiet claim to urban freedom and her tentative bonds with other animals and humans gesture toward an alternative ethics of coexistence grounded in shared vulnerability and mutual recognition. Ultimately, the novel challenges readers to reconsider the moral and political implications of species hierarchies in contemporary urban life and to imagine more inclusive forms of belonging that extend ethical consideration across species lines.

Keywords: speciesism, posthumanism, urban ethics, sentient agency, interspecies relations



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I. Introduction

“What will happen if they see me?” (Smiley, 2020, p. 12)

Perestroika, wondered aloud, a young racehorse lost in the heart of Paris, in Jane Smiley’s *Perestroika in Paris* (2020). This quiet line, voiced by a nonhuman character, marks a deliberate narrative shift; a disruption of the presumed linguistic and moral silence of animals in fiction. Through the eyes and thoughts of animals who not only observe but interpret, form relationships, and question their place in the world, Smiley invites readers into a Paris not as seen by humans, but co-inhabited, co-felt, and co-narrated by other species. The novel becomes a site of ethical imagination where traditional hierarchies between species dissolve in favor of an interdependent, affective community.

This [re]imagining is not merely literary fantasy but is deeply rooted in the urgent philosophical debates within the Environmental Humanities and Animal Studies. The field of animal ethics, shaped by foundational voices like Peter Singer, challenges the morally arbitrary privileging of humans over other animals, what he calls speciesism. However, thinkers such as Cary Wolfe and Kari Weil have since expanded the discussion, suggesting that dismantling speciesism demands more than moral reconsideration; it requires a fundamental disruption of how we define subjectivity, agency, and relationality. Donna Haraway’s call for “becoming with” nonhuman others offers a further push toward rethinking human exceptionalism not only through compassion but through kinship, cohabitation, and storytelling. In this context, fiction becomes an essential tool; a narrative laboratory in which readers can encounter the world from beyond the human frame.

Despite the depth of these theoretical advancements, much of the discourse around speciesism and posthuman ethics has remained largely Euro-American in orientation. The Global South, while often positioned as a recipient of such theory, harbors distinct ecological realities and ontological perspectives, where human-animal relationships are shaped by lived proximity, religious codes, and socio-economic interdependencies. In light of this imbalance, this article asks: how can literary texts like *Perestroika in Paris*, though Western in origin, contribute to a transnational ethics of coexistence, particularly resonant in the Global South? How might its narrative strategies help deconstruct anthropocentrism and offer a model of literature as a medium for ethical reorientation?

This article explores how *Perestroika in Paris* functions as a posthuman narrative that challenges speciesist assumptions by centralizing animal consciousness, agency, and solidarity. It examines the novel through an interdisciplinary lens, drafting upon the theories of Singer, Wolfe, Weil, and Haraway, while also referencing discourses emerging from the Global South around ecological justice and interspecies ethics. The analysis involves a close ecocritical reading of the text, considering how its portrayal of urban space, kinship, and voice opens up possibilities for more inclusive environmental imaginaries. Ultimately, this paper argues that stories like *Perestroika in Paris* play a vital role in envisioning futures of ethical coexistence and nonviolent companionship across species lines.

II. Literature Review

Dominant narratives in urban literature have long reflected anthropocentric biases, casting nonhuman animals as mere backdrops or symbols in human-centered plots. Animals have historically been rendered mute, passive, and instrumental; “objects” within the literary imagination rather than subjects in their own right (Weil, 2012). *Perestroika in Paris* by Jane Smiley intervenes in this literary tradition by challenging such speciesist conventions and foregrounding nonhuman sentience in the heart of a human metropolis. In doing so, the novel aligns itself with an emerging posthumanist literary trajectory that seeks to decenter the human and engage ethically with the more-than-human world.

Cary Wolfe’s (2010) foundational work on posthumanism critiques the privileging of human exceptionalism within Western philosophy and literature. He argues that dismantling speciesism requires us to challenge the Cartesian rationalist subject that defines itself through disconnection from animals, nature, and embodiment. Smiley’s Parisian animals: *Perestroika*, *Frida*, *Raoul*; each possess autonomy,

ethical dispositions, and forms of inter-subjective awareness that bypass such binary logic. Rather than being anthropomorphized, these animals are presented with rich, embodied consciousness, resonating with Wolfe's posthumanism and Singer's (1975) utilitarian ethics, which advocate for the recognition of animal suffering and interests as morally significant.

Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* sparked global debates by emphasizing the moral relevance of sentience, urging the dismantling of speciesist hierarchies that place human pleasure over nonhuman suffering. While Singer adopts a rationalist ethical possibility, Smiley's literary portrayal adds emotional and ecological depth to this ethical reconsideration. Her depiction of *Frida's* loyalty, *Perestroika's* curiosity, and *Raoul's* cautious wisdom animates the ethical potential of interspecies relationships beyond utilitarian categories.

Kari Weil (2012) extends the conversation by framing animal vulnerability as an ethical appeal. She emphasizes the capacity of animals to disrupt human-centric knowledge systems and demand new epistemologies grounded in intimacy, trust, and embodied co-presence. Smiley's narrative arc reflects this by reorienting the urban space, from a purely human domain into a shared ecology. The Parisian streets and gardens transform into interspecies commons where the animals' navigations mirror affective and ethical disruptions to the status quo.

Donna Haraway's (2003) concept of "companion species" is especially relevant here. Haraway suggests that human-animal relations are co-constitutive, shaped by histories of mutual engagement and care. Smiley captures this beautifully through the unlikely friendships that develop across species in the novel. *Frida* and *Perestroika's* relationship exemplifies Haraway's ideal of companionship built on reciprocity rather than domination, cohabitation instead of control.

Despite this robust theoretical groundwork, few literary critics have yet offered an extended posthumanist reading of *Perestroika in Paris*. This presents a significant gap in scholars. Existing studies on urban ecologies (Armbruster & Wallace, 2001; McHugh, 2011) have largely focused on environmental degradation or human-animal conflict. In contrast, Smiley's novel re-imagines the city as a site of ecological kinship, suggesting a trans-cultural ecology of coexistence. This paper contributes to filling that gap by analyzing how literary texts like Smiley's challenge anthropocentrism and provide new imaginative theories for interspecies ethics.

III. Thinking Otherwise: A Posthuman Approach to Animal Subjectivity

This study operates within a qualitative and textual analysis structure, grounded in the theoretical underpinnings of posthumanism and radical animal studies. Central to this investigation is the dismantling of speciesist hierarchies through narrative form, where Jane Smiley's *Perestroika in Paris* serves as the primary literary text. The theoretical approach integrates Cary Wolfe's critique of human exceptionalism as articulated in *What Is Posthumanism?*, where Wolfe argues that ethical life must begin "beyond the species line." This is complemented by Peter Singer's utilitarian ethics of animal suffering, which provides a moral foundation for reassessing sentience and agency. Kari Weil's ideas on interspecies vulnerability and Donna Haraway's "companion species" model further shape the inquiry into cross-species cohabitation and relational ethics.

The research is firmly qualitative and interpretive in nature, using close textual analysis to examine how Smiley constructs nonhuman consciousness, emotion, and moral decision-making. The characters: *Paras*, *Frida*, and *Raoul*; are not allegories for human experiences but are instead fully realized subjects who enact forms of resistance and care beyond human language and control. Their interspecies alliances are read as narrative strategies that subvert traditional anthropocentric plot structures.

By situating *Perestroika in Paris* within a posthumanist ethical theory, the research exposes the novel's potential to challenge literary norms that silence nonhuman beings. It also explores how urban ecologies, often coded as sites of human culture, can become terrains for multispecies encounters and solidarity. This methodology is chosen not only to highlight the textual strategies employed by Smiley

but also to trace the reverberations of these narratives in cultural and ethical discourse. The aim is to advocate for a literary criticism that not only analyzes the animal's place in fiction but also questions the cultural theories that condition our treatment of other species.

IV. Disrupting Speciesism: Literary Interventions in Urban Space

Jane Smiley's *Perestroika in Paris* is a quietly subversive novel that re-configures the human-animal relationship by staging sentient animals not merely as narrative devices but as central, ethical agents within an urban ecology. The narrative follows *Perestroika*, a racehorse; *Frida*, a street-savvy dog; and *Raoul*, a philosophical raven, as they navigate a Paris that is both enchanted and structurally indifferent to nonhuman lives. Through its gentle prose and radical empathy, the novel poses fundamental challenges to speciesist assumptions that undergird the Anthropocene city. The analysis that follows engages a close reading of the novel, applying a posthumanist theoretical lens to demonstrate how Smiley foregrounds nonhuman agency, interspecies intimacy, and ethical cohabitation in an urban landscape.

"She romped and grazed, and minded her purse, sniffed a jump here and there, and recalled her race. She inspected interesting herbs and bushes, got into the woods, and then there she was, at the side of what she knew was a road. Roads were for vans - she had traveled many a road." (Smiley, 2020, p. 3)

This line encapsulates the liberatory undertone of the novel where *Perestroika*, having escaped the racetrack, finds herself experiencing urban life not as a hostile terrain but a potential habitat. The Paris of Smiley's novel is not anthropocentric in design, but it becomes posthuman in affective capacity. This aligns with Kari Weil's (2012) assertion that "vulnerability is not a deficit but a possibility, a doorway into relationality" (p. 16). *Perestroika*'s freedom and vulnerability in the city mark the beginning of her ethical transformation from property to participant.



Figure 1: Stray horses navigating traffic on marine drive in Patna, India, illustrating the real-world presence of nonhuman animals in urban Indian spaces. This image echoes the themes of urban freedom and interspecies coexistence depicted in Jane Smiley's Perestroika in Paris (2020). Photograph by the author, 13 Aug. 2025.

A. Sentience Beyond Species

Raoul the raven and *Frida* the dog bring sentience into dialogue with species-specific intelligence. Smiley carefully avoids anthropomorphizing them; instead, she renders their consciousness through their own

sensory worlds:

“Raoul knew exactly what was going on. He stood on the sill of the old lady’s window, tapping. He could see that she had passed, and he knew that it was the animals who had to save the boy.” (Smiley, 2020, p. 173)

Here, Smiley aligns with Peter Singer’s (1975) argument in *Animal Liberation* that sentience, not species membership, is the moral baseline for ethical consideration. *Raoul’s* memory and interpretive skills position him as a knowledge bearer, capable of navigating the symbolic economy of the human world. His love of collecting shiny objects becomes a metaphor for alternative value systems that lie outside capitalist or utilitarian logics.

B. Posthuman Subjectivities and Haraway’s Companion Species

Donna Haraway’s (2003) idea of “companion species” finds its clearest articulation in the relationship between *Perestroika* and *Frida*. The dog and horse communicate through gestures, shared routines, and emotional resonance rather than linguistic exchange. Their companionship re-imagines urban intimacy through non-verbal reciprocity and mutual care:

“Frida regarded the horse some more. She was so big and yet so dumb. Well, “innocent” was a better word. Obviously, she had been taken care of her entire life and had no idea how the world worked.” (Smiley, 2020, p. 7)

This echoes Haraway’s (2003) concept that “companion species are about significant otherness, not identity but relationality.” The urban park becomes a stage for these acts of co-presence, subverting the city as a purely human domain.

C. City as a Multispecies Commons

Paris, often romanticized as the epitome of human culture and rational order, is turned inside out in Smiley’s narrative. The animal characters do not invade the city but inhabit its interstitial spaces: abandoned gardens, open markets, and closed alleys. These places, marginal to urban planning, become central to a multispecies ethics of survival and care. This resonates with Matthew Calarco’s (2008) critique of biopolitical exclusion, which argues that “animals are managed through techniques of invisibilization.”

“IT DIDN’T TAKE Paras long to adjust to her new surroundings - daylight hours inside the fence, in the shadow of the bushes, nighttime roaming the Champ de Mars.” (Smiley, 2020, p. 24)

In this moment, the novel stages a utopian glimpse where human withdrawal allows for animal flourishing. It contests speciesist urban design by imagining a shared world beyond surveillance and domestication.

D. Literary Reclamation and Ethical Reorientation

The narrative acts as what Rosi Braidotti (2013) would term a “nomadic ethics”, moving beyond humanist modes of subjectivity and opening toward transversal identifications. The animals are not metaphors but epistemological actors. They do not symbolize freedom; they exercise it. They do not merely reflect human themes; they generate posthuman possibilities.

Furthermore, the orphaned boy *Étienne*, who lives with his blind great-grandmother, forms the human nexus of this multispecies constellation. Yet, he is not the savior. His bond with the animals

emerges from mutual need and fragility. *Étienne* is emblematic of what Wolfe (2010) describes as the “undecidability of the human.” His vulnerability and openness position him as a liminal figure who bridges species boundaries without asserting dominance.

“Of course Paras does not “talk” to *Étienne*—none of the animals talks to *Étienne*—but Paras does make her wishes known, and one morning a few days after Madame’s feast, *Étienne* wakes up very early, when the world is still absolutely dark, and he cannot go back to sleep. When he looks out his window at the horse, she is standing, staring upward at him. He puts on his clothes and goes to her silently. When he gets there, he sees that Frida is asleep, and the raven, too, is quiet in his nest. There is a bright, silent moon—that is all. Paras sidles up to the sixth step. *Étienne* slides his leg over her back, wraps his hands in her thick mane, and settles himself. He is as wide awake as he has ever been. Paras walks out the gate.” (Smiley, 2020, p. 168)

This inversion of communicative hierarchy, where animals become better listeners than humans, speaks directly to Cary Wolfe’s (2003) call for posthuman ethics grounded not in speech or logos but in responsiveness and affect.

E. Comparative Implications and Existing Studies

Compared to earlier literary works where animals are either allegorical (George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*) or domesticated sidekicks (Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild*), *Perestroika in Paris* establishes a radical literary paradigm. The animals are neither symbolic of human traits nor solely dependent on humans for narrative legitimacy. Instead, they instantiate what Kari Weil (2010) calls “a turn to the animal,” marked by an ethical unknowingness and invitation to rethink subjectivity.

Recent scholars such as Sandhra Sunny’s 2024 article in the *Rupkatha Journal* asserts that contemporary literature challenges anthropocentric views by highlighting the richness and complexity of animal experiences, fostering a deeper appreciation and respect for non-human beings. Smiley’s novel counters traditional speciesist narratives by giving animals ethical complexity and emotional depth, not tethered to utility but rooted in co-presence.

F. Implications for the Urban and Literary Imagination

The novel opens up a conceptual theory for imagining cities not as dominions but as ecotones, thresholds of multispecies life. It positions the urban space as a potential commons for shared life, where each species brings a different tempo, perception, and relational mode.

The implications extend beyond literary theory. If cities are to survive ecological collapse and ethical bankruptcy, the narrative suggests, they must welcome vulnerability as a strength and embrace interdependence over domination. As Calarco (2021) and Weil (2012) argue, ethical transformation requires not only policy shifts but cultural imagination, a task where literature like *Perestroika in Paris* plays a foundational role.

V. Conclusion

Jane Smiley’s *Perestroika in Paris* emerges as a profound literary experiment that dismantles speciesist hierarchies by centering animal sentience, interspecies relationships, and ethical coexistence within the human-built city. Through the lives of *Perestroika*, *Frida*, *Raoul*, and *Étienne*, Smiley constructs a Paris that is no longer a purely anthropocentric space but a porous, emotionally textured landscape where multiple species engage, survive, and form bonds beyond utility or domestication. The novel not only narrativizes animal agency but invites a reconceptualization of urban ethics and literary subjectivity through a posthumanist lens.

The significance of this argument lies in how *Perestroika in Paris* contributes to a growing body

of literature and theory that challenges the entrenched human-animal binary. Taking the works of Cary Wolfe, Donna Haraway, and Kari Weil, this analysis highlights how the novel foregrounds vulnerability, care, and multispecies solidarity as ethical alternatives to domination, ownership, and instrumentalism. Smiley's characters are not vehicles for anthropomorphic sentimentality but active participants in crafting a shared urban commons.

Broader implications of these findings suggest a cultural and philosophical shift in how we imagine cities and their inhabitants. As climate change, habitat loss, and urban overdevelopment escalate tensions between human and nonhuman life, narratives like Smiley's urge us to think differently, not just about animals, but about ourselves as cohabitants of a fragile, interconnected world. Literature becomes not just a mirror but a method for reimagining ethical relations and spatial politics.

Future research might explore how such literary reconfigurations of animal subjectivity intersect with legal and urban policy structures. Can storytelling, for instance, influence city planning that considers animal mobility, safety, and emotional welfare? Further interdisciplinary studies can examine how animal-centered narratives alter our understanding of justice, care, and ecological design in urban studies, philosophy, and law. Additionally, comparative studies with non-Western literary traditions may enrich the discourse on posthuman urbanity by bringing in culturally diverse imaginaries of the human-animal relation.

Ultimately, *Perestroika in Paris* reminds us that our ethical horizon expands not through abstraction, but through attention to the lives already sharing our spaces: seen, unseen, heard, and still unheard.

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