Love and sorrow

On the sentience of 'common' animals in the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*

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From the very beginning with the episode of the *krauñcavadha*, the *Rāmāyaṇa* shows in many passages the awareness that animals, or rather some of their species, love and suffer both mentally and physically, and that many animals can feel emotions. This paper is intended above all to be a review of passages in which these attitudes of the poem appear to be expressed. Of course, we are not dealing here in any way with the *vānara*s, the monkeys, or the great anthropomorphized vultures, but with some of the *common* animals mentioned by the poem. The identification of the sentience of animals we wish to highlight clearly derives from observation and empathy, and not from processes of anthropomorphization. This sentience is often expressed by similes, *upamā*s, some of which are consolidated into recurring images, and in some cases are on the verge of becoming, or have already become, conventional expressions, without necessarily losing their strength. These similes directly relate human beings to the animals that form the second terms of comparison. In this way, the sensations, emotions and feelings of the animals involved are placed on the same level as those of humans. More generally, the greater or lesser elaboration of these associations reflects the different level of relationships and closeness, which may also be affective, for certain animals compared to others.

Keywords: *Rāmāyaṇa*, *krauñcavadha*, non-human animals, sentience, *upamā*s.

1. The *krauñca* birds[1]

The episode of the *krauñcavadha*, *i.e.* the killing of a *krauñca* bird, recounted almost right at the beginning of the *Rāmāyaṇa* (I.2),[2] is probably the most famous passage in the entire poem, and, indeed, one of the most renowned passages in the whole of Sanskrit literature. Suffice here to recall it very briefly. While on his way to bathe in the Tamasā river, the sage Vālmīki, the mythical author of the poem, hears the singing of a couple of *krauñca* birds in love—presumably, while they are making love or courting. But a cruel *niṣāda* hunter, *i.e.* one of a tribe of forest dwellers, kills the male with an arrow. On hearing the desperate lament of the female for the loss of her mate, Vālmīki bursts out into a curse, only to be immediately surprised by the elegant form his words have assumed. And thus, according to the paretymology proposed by the text, this sorrow, *śoka*, engenders the *śloka*, the metre that will become the basis of the narration of Rāma's vicissitudes and of endless Sanskrit literature.

As is well known, Book One of the poem, the *Bālakāṇḍa*, together with its final Book Seven, are universally acknowledged as later additions to what is considered the original core of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. But, whatever dating is attributed to the *krauñcavadha* passage, this episode has long been considered crucial in the interpretation of the entire poem. For Ānandavardhana (9th century), this passage heralds what will be the dominant *rasa* of the entire *Rāmāyaṇa*, namely the *karuṇarasa*, the *rasa* of compassion and sorrow (*Dhvanyāloka* IV.5, *vṛtti*). However, for Ānandavardhana, and Abhinavagupta's *Locana* (10th-11th century), the hunter kills the female and not the male (see, in particular, Masson 1968-1969). Therefore, if in the tale recounted in the *Bālakāṇḍa* the pain of the *krauñcī*, *i. e.* the female bird, can be considered emblematic of Sītā's sad vicissitudes, the two Kashmiri authors bring Rāma's suffering into focus. But this is obviously not Vālmīki's position.

Several contemporary scholars have specifically dealt with this passage, and the *krauñcī*'s pain has been amply analysed as an image and symbol of Sītā's sufferance. Along with the already quoted work by Jeffrey Masson, let us mention here a few other relevant studies. Charlotte Vaudeville's

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[2] All references to the *Rāmāyaṇa* in these pages are to the Critical Edition and, when not otherwise specified, translations are by the present author. The quoted translations by other scholars reproduce those of the single Princeton volumes. In the revised complete Princeton translation that was published more recently (Goldman and Sutherland Goldman 2021) the revision also involved some animal names, and at some points we take this into account.

meticulous textual analysis hypothesises that the roots of the episode lie in a popular motif, expressed in songs or ballads, in which a *krauñcī* symbolises a bride who pathetically voices the pain of separation from her beloved (Vaudeville1963). Very important is Julia Leslie's research (Leslie 1998), which mainly focuses on the identification of the *krauñca* birds based on the characteristics expressed by the text—with the addition of a stanza expunged from the Critical Edition—and the relevant ornithological literature. Her very convincing conclusion is that Vālmīki's *krauñca* bird is the Indian Sarus Crane (*Grus antigone antigone* Linn.). This is a majestic bird with an elaborate courtship ritual and one that maintains a tenacious and exclusive pair bond; for Leslie, "it is quite clear that Vālmīki's usage is informed by ornithological knowledge rather than by mythology or convention" (Leslie 1998: 469). In turn, Niels Hammer expands on the theme of *karuṇarasa*, adding some findings from neuroscience; he brings out the genuine capacity for emotional suffering on the part of Sarus Cranes and the appropriateness of the choice of these birds to express the universality of pain (Hammer 2009). More recently, Simon Brodbeck has analysed the possible agency veiled by the episode and, more widely, the various dynamics lying behind Sītā's long-lasting sorrows (Brodbeck 2022, with an ample bibliography on the episode).

In any case, and even in Ānandavardhana's rather distorted interpretation, the love and pain of non-human animals [3] have been considered worthy of reverberating and representing those of 'humans.' Animal sentience is currently the focus of much research that involves neurosciences, biology, and ethology. The topic we wish to address is exactly this, namely how such sentience is expressed by the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The awareness that animals, or rather some of their species, love and suffer both mentally and physically and that many animals do feel emotions is not only masterfully highlighted from the very beginning of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in the episode of the *krauñcavadha*, but also clearly visible in several other passages in the poem. The following pages mainly intend to provide a review of such passages. We will consider significant stanzas scattered throughout the poem, regardless of its supposed different layers of composition, which is irrelevant as far as our theme is concerned.

Obviously, we are not dealing here in any way with the *vānara*s, the monkeys, or the great anthropomorphized vultures, although the creation of such central figures in the *Rāmāyaṇa* may possibly have some of its remote origins in a similar form of recognition. With one exception, we shall refer to passages mentioning common animals, and not mythical ones or ones that act as human

[3] To avoid prolixity, instead of 'non-human animals,' here we will simply use 'animals,' which however should be intended in the former meaning.

characters. As has been very convincingly established for the *krauñca*s, the identification of the sentience of animals we wish to highlight derives from observation and empathy, and not from processes of anthropomorphization. Of course, this does not mean that the text necessarily expresses observations that are 'correct' from the point of view of modern biology, a correctness that even today would belong to scientists and not to ordinary people. Rather, the hermeneutic tools deployed are based on human sensibilities, and sometimes perhaps even human social stereotypes. This, in any case, is something quite different from any anthropomorphization process.

In fact, the overall picture that emerges can be defined, using the words of Amber D. Carpenter, as "a lack of recognition of a significant gulf between animals and humans" (Carpenter 2018: 17).[4] The very proof of this lack of recognition is that, as we shall see, animal sentience is often expressed in the *Rāmāyaṇa* by similes, *upamā*s, which directly relate human beings to the animals that form the second terms of comparison. In this way the sensations, emotions, and feelings of the animals involved are placed on the same level as those of humans. In some cases, the images conveyed by these *upamā*s appear on the verge of belonging, or even already belong to a sort of repertoire. But, in our opinion, most of these *upamā*s are not yet really *conventional*, because, in the passages where they do occur, they retain their strength, emotional significance, and straightforward appropriateness, and display a remarkable formal variety. Furthermore, the greater or lesser elaboration of the associations expressed by these similes reflects the different level of relationships and even affective closeness for certain animals compared to others.

2. A landscape of beings: enchantment, fear, and empathy towards humans

A great number of passages in the *Rāmāyaṇa* mention an extraordinary amount of animals of the most varied types, bringing into play an extremely wide range of conceptual and formal facets that perhaps, until now, have yet to be fully studied and to which in any case it would be impossible to do justice in a few pages.[5] This abundance already expresses a great contiguity of life between humans and animals, a contiguity that is further defined by several details, notwithstanding the fact that one of the characteristic features of the poem is undoubtedly the "relative lack of emphasis on animal husbandry

[4] Here, Carpenter is actually referring specifically to animal fables, but her remark can be given a much broader application without contradicting her analysis.

[5] Some studies dealing with animals in the *Rāmāyaṇa* are Brockington (1984: 88-98), Brockington (1998: 417-419), Lee (2000), Roy (2005); also: Amirthalingam (2013), though to be considered with caution; on some large mammals (rhinoceroses, tigers, elephants) Bose (2020: 103-104; 165-169; 264-272).

and agriculture" (Brockington 1984: 98), and this mainly because the narrative is set in the world of the *kṣatriya*s. Animals may be mentioned in more or less standard formulas, such as elephants and horses as forces in the army or as elements of the cities' prosperity; for instance, the extensive description of Ayodhyā in Book One tells us that the city is 'filled with horses, elephants, cows, camels, and donkeys' (*vājivāraṇasaṃpūrṇāṃ gobhir uṣṭraiḥ kharais tathā* ||, I.5.13, transl. Goldman 1984). Mighty horses are harnessed to chariots, and in particular cows and elephants are donated as sumptuous gifts. Bulls, lions, tigers, and elephants occur countless times in epithets, which can be repeated almost obsessively, qualifying the power of the characters, a usage that already indicates in a certain way a sort of homologation between humans and animals, but which is common, however, in many literatures. The similes between humans and animals may be recurrent and almost proverbial, or more elaborate or unusual;[6] they are based on physical characteristics or, for some animals, also on their sentience, the aspect we will try to highlight here.

The descriptions of the forest offer us a broad picture, which necessarily involves not only animals but also vegetation and 'nature' in general. These passages often mention both animals and plants in lists, which are, as is well known, a characteristic of Indian epic poetry. As has been widely acknowledged, the forest with its animals has shifting qualities in the *Rāmāyaṇa*: it may be presented as terrifying or as an Edenic place, a source of enchantment. Thus, for example, Rāma exclaims to Viśvāmitra:

> *aho vanam idaṃ durgaṃ jhillikāgaṇanāditam | bhairavaiḥ śvāpadaiḥ kīrṇaṃ śakuntair dāruṇārutaiḥ* || 12 ||
> *nānāprakāraiḥ śakunair vāśyadbhir bhairavasvanaiḥ | siṃhavyāghravarāhaiś ca vāraṇaiś cāpi śobhitam* || 13 || *dhavāśvakarṇakakubhair bilvatindukapāṭalaiḥ | saṃkīrṇaṃ badarībhiś ca kiṃ nv idaṃ dāruṇaṃ vanam* || 14 ||
>
> What a forbidding forest this is! Echoing with swarms of crickets, it is full of fearsome beasts of prey and harsh-voiced vultures.
> It is filled with all sorts of birds, screeching fearsome cries, as well as lions, tigers, boars, and elephants.
> It is full of *dhava*, *aśvakarṇa*, *kakubha*, *bilva*, *tinduka*, *pāṭala*, and *badarī* trees. What dreadful forest is this?
> (I.23.12-14, transl. Goldman 1984, slightly modified).

Instead, here follows a description of the idyllic forest:

[6] For a statistical and stylistic examination of similes and more generally of the figures of speech in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, see Brockington (1977).

tau paśyamānau vividhāñ śailaprasthān vanāni ca | nadīś ca vividhā ramyā jagmatuḥ saha sītayā || 2 ||
sārasāṃś cakravākāṃś ca nadīpulinacāriṇaḥ | sarāṃsi ca sapadmāni yutāni jalajaiḥ khagaiḥ || 3 ||
yūthabaddhāṃś ca pṛṣatān madonmattān viṣāṇinaḥ | mahiṣāṃś ca varāhāṃś ca gajāṃś ca drumavairiṇaḥ ||
4 || *te gatvā dūram adhvānaṃ lambamāne divākare | dadṛśuḥ sahitā ramyaṃ taṭākaṃ yojanāyatam* || 5 ||
padmapuṣkarasaṃbādhaṃ gajayūthair alaṃkṛtam | sārasair haṃsakādambaiḥ saṃkulaṃ jalacāribhiḥ || 6 ||

As they traveled on with Sītā, they saw varied mountain landscapes, forests, lovely rivers with cranes and sheldrakes upon the sandbanks, ponds covered with lotuses and thronged with water birds, dappled antelopes massed in herds, rutting horned buffaloes and boars, and elephants butting at trees.

They had traveled a long distance and the sun was hanging low when all at once they spied a lovely pond one league across. It was blanketed with white lotuses and blue water lilies, adorned with herds of elephants, and filled with waterfowl, cranes and white and gray geese.

(III.10.2-6, transl. Pollock 1991).

In fact, our analysis of Books Two to Four in an earlier article (Pieruccini 2006) unequivocally showed that the forest in the *Rāmāyaṇa* is essentially never presented in a neutral manner. In short, and somewhat schematically, by depicting the natural environment in disturbing terms, the poet prepares the audience for a dramatic episode, typically the encounter with *rākṣasa*s, whereas a dazzling and pacified nature is largely connected with the presence of *āśrama*s. Moreover, and most importantly, the features with which the wilderness is presented can either reflect or be in contrast with the feelings of the characters. As a rule, the natural elements are presented as remaining impassive before the characters' feelings; an exemplary passage in this sense is Rāma's lament at Lake Pampā (IV.1), whose springtime luxuriance depicts an indifferent backdrop to the hero's grief. Sometimes, however, we can discern some traces of empathy.

But, before reflecting further on this last aspect, namely that of empathy between the creatures of the forest and human beings (obviously, considering Rāma and Sītā as such), let us briefly return to the subject of fear. This, in fact, does not only affect humans. In the opposite direction, even the most ferocious animals can be terrorised by human beings, as happens when an army crosses the forest:

sā bhūmir bahubhir yānaiḥ khuranemisamāhatā | mumoca tumulaṃ śabdaṃ dyaur ivābhrasamāgame || 40
|| *tena vitrāsitā nāgāḥ kareṇuparivāritāḥ | āvāsayanto gandhena jagmur anyad vanaṃ tataḥ* || 41 ||
varāhamṛgasiṃhāś ca mahiṣāḥ sarkṣavānarāḥ | vyāghra gokarṇagavayā vitreṣuḥ pṛṣataiḥ saha || 42 ||
rathāṅgasāhvā natyūhā haṃsāḥ kāraṇḍavāḥ plavāḥ | tathā puṃskokilāḥ krauñcā visaṃjñā bhejire diśaḥ ||
43 || *tena śabdena vitrastair ākāśaṃ pakṣibhir vṛtam | manuṣyair āvṛtā bhūmir ubhayaṃ prababhau tadā* ||
44 ||

Struck by the hooves and wheels of the many vehicles, the earth gave off a tumultuous sound, like the heavens when stormclouds gather.

> The sound frightened the bull elephants and the cows in their train, and they ran off to another part of the forest, perfuming the way with their scent.
>
> Boars, deer, lions, buffaloes, apes, monkeys, tigers, *nilgai*, and *gayal* were terrified, as well as the dappled antelopes.
>
> Sheldrakes, moorhens, geese, ducks, plovers, cuckoos, and curlews took the horizons in a blind rush.
>
> The sky appeared to be as covered with birds frightened at the sound as did the earth with men.
>
> (II.95.40-44, transl. Pollock 1986, slightly modified; cf. also, in particular, II.86.35-36; II.87.1-2; VI.30.14-17).

Of course, this passage is primarily meant to extol the power and majesty of an army; however, it paints a picture that is anything but unreal. The emotion of fear in animals is now widely studied, including the amply widespread awareness of the risk of becoming prey; and, most importantly, it has emerged that for wild animals the greatest fear is generated by humans, to the extent that it is triggered just by hearing their voices.[7] We will return to the emotion of fear later.

Let us now enter the rather ambiguous territory of empathy. Now, it happens that at some crucial moments of the poem, nature is depicted as suffering along with the protagonists, with various unusual manifestations and events. Animals also find space in these pictures of general sorrow or despair. In II.36, upon Rāma's leaving for exile, the stars darken, the planets assume fearful positions, the inhabitants of Ayodhyā are overwhelmed by despondency to the point of neglecting family duties, and 'the elephants dropped their food, the cows did not suckle their calves' (*vyasṛjan kavalān nāgā gāvo vatsān na pāyayan* ||, II.36.9). In the words of the brahmans who try to dissuade Rāma from leaving, the trees, unable to follow him because they are held back by their roots, are 'as if lamenting' (*vikrośantīva*, II.40.28), while, forgetful of food and motionless on the trees, the birds also appear to make an appeal to him (II.40.29).

But 'nature's' greatest involvement seems to unfold, as might be expected, around Sītā's abduction. Rāvaṇa terrifies the forest deities (*vanadevatāḥ*, III.47.17) and puts them to flight; when Sītā is seized by the *rākṣasa*, she makes a desperate plea to the site—the Janasthāna—and Mount Prasravaṇa with all their vegetation, to the Godāvarī with her birds, to the tree deities, and finally to all the beings inhabiting the forest, 'all the multitude of birds and beasts' (*sarvāṇi [...] mṛgapakṣigaṇān*, III.47.33) invoking them all to inform Rāma. Having defeated the vulture Jaṭāyus, Rāvaṇa finally succeeds in his purpose; and this is where we find the most significant passage, which is worth quoting in full:

[7] The bibliography on the subject is vast and constantly growing; for a summary article, see Murphy (2022).

utpāta vātābhihatā nānādvija gaṇāyutāḥ | mā bhair iti vidhūtāgrā vyājahrur iva pādapāḥ || 32 || *nalinyo dhvastakamalās trastamīnajale carāḥ | sakhīm iva gatotsāhāṃ śocantīva sma maithilīm* || 33 || *samantād abhisaṃpatya siṃhavyāghramṛgadvijāḥ | anvadhāvaṃs tadā roṣāt sītācchāyānugāminaḥ* || 34 || *jalaprapātāsramukhāḥ śṛṅgair ucchritabāhavaḥ | sītāyāṃ hriyamāṇāyāṃ vikrośantīva parvatāḥ* || 35 || *hriyamāṇāṃ tu vaidehīṃ dṛṣṭvā dīno divākaraḥ | pravidhvastaprabhaḥ śrīmān āsīt pāṇḍuramaṇḍalaḥ* || 36 || *nāsti dharmaḥ kutaḥ satyaṃ nārjavaṃ nānṛśaṃsatā | yatra rāmasya vaidehīṃ bhāryāṃ harati rāvaṇaḥ* || 37 || *iti sarvāṇi bhūtāni gaṇaśaḥ paryadevayan | vitrastakā dīnamukhā rurudur mṛgapotakāḥ* || 38 || *udvīkṣyodvīkṣya nayanair āsrapātāvilekṣaṇāḥ | supravepitagātrāś ca babhūvur vanadevatāḥ* || 39 || *vikrośantīṃ dṛḍhaṃ sītāṃ dṛṣṭvā duḥkhaṃ tathā gatām* | 40ab

It was only a gust of wind as Rāvaṇa flew up that shook the trees with their flocks of different birds, but it seemed (*iva*) they were waving their arms and crying, "Do not be afraid!"

With lotuses overturned, fish and water creatures frightened, sighs rising from their vaporous waters, the lotus ponds seemed (*iva*) to be grieving for Maithilī as for a friend.

From every side lions, tigers, deer, and birds swarmed together and went running after them in a fury, following Sītā's shadow.

As Sītā was being carried off, the mountains also seemed (*iva*) to wail, their craggy arms outstretched and waterfalls staining their faces with tears.

At the sight of Vaidehī being carried off the majestic sun that brings the day was overcome with gloom, and his glowing disk faded to pale white.

"There is no such thing as righteousness, much less truth, uprightness, or kindliness, if Rāvaṇa can carry off Vaidehī, the wife of Rāma." So all the creatures grieved, and the grieving spread from group to group.

Their young looked desolate and began to weep, and though their eyes were clouded by falling tears, the frightened little creatures kept looking up.

The spirits of the forest were seized with violent trembling in every limb, to see the wretched plight of Sītā, to hear her wild screams.

(III.50.32-40ab, transl. Pollock 1991, slightly modified, and with additions in brackets).

Note the repetition in this passage of *iva*, 'seemed', 'as if', an important hint of how the text presents some of the reactions of the elements of the forest substantially and consciously in terms of poetic fantasy; see also the *vikrośantīva* of II.40.28 quoted above.

In a famous passage (III.58.12-22) that will inspire Kālidāsa's wonderful Act Four of the *Vikramorvaśīya*,[8] Rāma, who is distraught over Sītā's disappearance, turns passionately but uselessly—he will receive no reply—to a series of plants and animals, asking them to give him news of his beloved. Then, increasingly in the grip of mad despair, he descends to the banks of the Godāvarī:

[8] For a detailed analysis of the motif and its subsequent developments, see Pieruccini (2023).

sa tām upasthito rāmaḥ kva sītety evam abravīt || 6 || *bhūtāni rākṣasendreṇa vadhārheṇa hṛtām api* | *na tāṃ śaśaṃsū rāmāya tathā godāvarī nadī* || 7 || *tataḥ pracoditā bhūtaiḥ śaṃsāsmai tāṃ priyām iti* | *na ca sābhyavadat sītāṃ pṛṣṭā rāmeṇa śocitā* || 8 || *rāvaṇasya ca tad rūpaṃ karmāṇi ca durātmanaḥ* | *dhyātvā bhayāt tu vaidehīṃ sā nadī na śaśaṃsa tām* || 9 ||

He stood at the shore and cried, "Oh, where is Sītā?"

But the creatures would not tell Rāma, nor would the Godāvarī river, that it was the lord of *rākṣasas* who had taken her and thereby condemned himself to death.

The creatures then urged the river, "Tell him about his love." But she refused to reveal Sītā's fate, no matter how piteously Rāma asked.

For the river was thinking about the evil Rāvaṇa—how he looked, what he could do—and was too afraid to tell what had happened to Vaidehī.

(III.60.6-9, transl. Pollock 1991, slightly modified).[9]

Like Rāma's desperate plea to the animals and vegetation, Sītā's prayers also remain unanswered. In all these passages that revolve around Sītā's abduction, the silence of the forest is of course instrumental in the unfolding of the events. But, above all, it greatly contributes to the poetic appeal of the text, just as the silence of the cloud does in Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta*. Clearly, here the poet (or poets) of the *Rāmāyaṇa* does (do) not fully succumb to the temptation of 'humanising' the elements of wild nature. On the other hand, this silence reaffirms the existence of a kind of substantial barrier between human beings and the forest as a whole. It is an incommunicability which, as we can only briefly recall here (see, again, Pieruccini 2006), seems to be a widely recurring feature of the poem.

But, if the suffering of animals for the human vicissitudes appears to be largely the outcome of poetic imagination (and see below for the weeping horses), this does not detract from the fact that the *Rāmāyaṇa* recognises that certain categories of animals are capable of emotions and feelings for *their own* vicissitudes; and this recognition is unequivocally the result of direct observation, because, as we said before, it appears to be related to the greater or lesser intimacy of human beings with the different categories of animals.

3. Closer to humans: elephants, cows and bulls, and horses

In ancient India and also often today, the lives of humans were and are deeply intertwined with certain animals. Let us start with elephants, whose domestication, including their massive use in the army, was

[9] Other examples of the effects on the forest and its animals caused by the events associated with the exile and Sītā's abduction include II.41.3, III.58.6, III.59.5.

a decisive historical feature for South Asia (see, in particular, Trautmann 2015). In recent decades, a very large number of studies have highlighted the intelligence and sensibility of these animals and described the ways in which such traits are manifested.[10] Alongside purely physical images, based for instance on their strength and power, the *Rāmāyaṇa* presents us with their social life, affectivity, and capacity for both physical and mental suffering.[11] This regularly happens through similes that, as mentioned above, place human beings and animals on the same level. Here are some examples.

Characters surrounded by their harem are compared to bull elephants surrounded by their circle of elephant cows (e.g. V.9.9; VII.32.3; VII.32.16; VII.32.24). The most poignant image of conjugal affection between elephants is the following, which is a comparison with Daśaratha who tries to console Kaikeyī, even though he does not understand the reason for her distress:

> *kareṇum iva digdhena viddhāṃ mṛgayuṇā vane | mahāgaja ivāraṇye snehāt parimamarśa tām ||*
>
> He began to caress her affectionately, as a great bull elephant in the wilderness might caress his cow wounded by the poisoned arrow of a hunter lurking in the forest.
> (II.10.4, transl. Pollock 1986).[12]

Women are said to weep and wail at tragic events just as elephant cows do when the herd leader is captured or killed; this is said when Rāma leaves Ayodhyā (II.35.25), and also for the *rākṣasī*s at the killing of Rāvaṇa (VI.98.5). Sītā's grief and terror are like those of an elephant cow separated from her lord in the forest (V.19.17) or captured by a lion and separated from her herd (V.15.22; see also V.26.1).[13]

> *gṛhītāmālitāṃ stambhe yūthapena vinākṛtām | niḥśvasantīṃ suduḥkhārtāṃ gajarājavadhūm iva ||*
>
> She was like an elephant lord's captured mate who, bound fast to a post and cut off from that leader of the herd, heaves deep sighs in her profound misery.
> (V.17.17, transl. Goldman and Sutherland Goldman 1996).

[10] There is a very extensive bibliography on the subject; scholars of the utmost importance in this field are Iain Douglas-Hamilton and Joyce Poole.

[11] On elephants in general in the poem see the already cited Bose (2020: 264-272).

[12] The bull elephant's love for his mate is an important poetic motif in the 'long' version of Act Four of the *Vikramorvaśīya*. For a summary of the textual problems of this play and the pertinent bibliography, see the already quoted Pieruccini (2023).

[13] These last two passages elaborate in an emotional sense the frequent similes derived from the image of the elephant being attacked by a lion (cf. e.g. II.8.25; VII.7.11; VII.7.45; VII.32.65).

It is interesting to note that, in actual fact, the most majestic and important elephant in the herd is often an old female, a matriarch.[14] The images where emphasis is placed on the male are perhaps evidence of a misunderstanding that reflects the human patriarchal society.

The physical suffering inflicted by the use of the goad is amply recognised. There are frequent comparisons between what causes pain to the characters and the torment of the goad (e.g. II.35.31; II.42.5). After hearing Guha's words, it is said of Bharata that 'in profound distress he suddenly collapsed, like an elephant pierced near the heart by goads' (*paramadurmanāḥ | papāta sahasā totrair hṛdi viddha iva dvipaḥ* ||, II.81.3, transl. Pollock 1986). Moreover, a wild elephant suffers deep distress if it is captured, as we have already seen in a comparison with Sītā:

> *vṛddhaṃ paramasaṃtaptaṃ navagraham iva dvipam | viniḥśvasantaṃ dhyāyantam asvastham iva kuñjaram* || 2 || *rājā tu rajasā sūtaṃ dhvastāṅgaṃ samupasthitam | aśrupūrṇamukhaṃ dīnam uvāca paramārtavat* || 3 ||
>
> The charioteer approached in desolation, his body coated with dust, his face bathed in tears—an old man deeply suffering like an elephant newly captured, and like the elephant heaving sighs, pensive and beside himself with grief. [...]
>
> (II.52.2-3, transl. Pollock 1986; cf. II.68.28).

Let us remember that breeding elephants in captivity is very expensive, because the animal has to reach the age of around fifteen years before it can be used for work. Thus, common practice has always been to capture wild elephants to be tamed and trained (van der Geer 2008: 194).

Now, let us consider cows and bulls. The generous love and care the cow shows for her offspring is paradigmatic already in the *Ṛgveda* (Srinivasan 1979). The *Rāmāyaṇa* is undoubtedly decisive in consolidating the image of the mutual affection between cow and calf, which, as we know, will forever be extremely popular, to such an extent that the Sanskrit term *vatsala*, 'affectionate', is derived from *vatsa*, 'calf.' The actual special relationship between cow and calf has always had important implications for the rearing of these animals, and the topic can nowadays count on an immense bibliography, largely oriented towards highlighting the productive and economic advantages of the various separation procedures.[15]

[14] I owe this remark to Alexandra van der Geer (personal communication), to whom I express my gratitude.

[15] Marino and Allen (2017) is a rich summary essay on the rather recent state of research which, on the contrary, directly considers the profound cognitive, emotional and social capabilities of these animals.

The comparison of a mother with the cow deprived of her offspring is recurrent when Rāma is about to face exile. As he prepares to depart, a distraught Kausalyā tells her son 'without you I am just like a cow without her calf' (*vinā tvayā dhenur ivātmajena vai,* II.17.32), and bursts into laments, 'like a cow who has seen her son fettered' (*sutam iva baddham avekṣya saurabhī*, II.17.33).[16] She says she wants to follow him: 'How would a cow not follow her calf if it wanders off?' (*kathaṃ hi dhenuḥ svaṃ vatsaṃ gacchantaṃ nānugacchati* |, II.21.6, transl. Pollock 1986). All the queens are in despair, 'as cows deprived of their calves' (*vivatsā iva dhenavaḥ*, II.36.7). Kausalyā says she has been rendered without offspring by Kaikeyī as a cow is stripped of her calf by a lion (II.38.17). But, even in her misery, she is equally affectionate with Bharata, who has fallen to the ground in despondency: 'Distraught, Kausalyā embraced him, as a loving cow presses her calf to her bosom' (*kausalyā* [...] *enaṃ* [...] *pariṣasvaje* || 6 || *vatsalā svaṃ yathā vatsam upagūhya tapasvinī* |, II.81.6-7). As for Kausalyā, cf. also VI.23.11.

The image also returns in other contexts. Upon hearing that Rāvaṇa has been killed, the women of the *rākṣasa*s roll on the ground with their hair loose, 'afflicted by grief as cows whose calves have been slain' (*duḥkhārtā gāvo vatsahatā yathā*, VI.98.2). The simile can also be used for a male character, so that Śatrughna implores Rāma: 'I cannot live without you, as a calf deprived of his mother' (*mātṛhīno yathā vatsas tvāṃ vinā pravasāmy aham* ||, VII.63.8). A rarer image of joy occurs when, on seeing the hair ornament that Sītā has handed over to Hanumān as a pledge and token of recognition, Rāma says in tears:

> *yathaiva dhenuḥ sravati snehād vatsasya vatsalā | tathā mamāpi hṛdayaṃ maṇiratnasya darśanāt ||*
>
> Just as a cow in her maternal affection overflows with love for her calf, so does my heart overflow at the sight of this magnificent gem.
> (V.64.3, transl. Goldman and Sutherland Goldman 1996).

Let us now make an exception by mentioning a cow that belongs to the realm of myth, namely Surabhi. An irate Bharata narrates a short episode about Surabhi to his mother Kaikeyī, to extol the love between mother and son, in this case Rāma and Kausalyā. In the story (II.68.15-23), Surabhi is distraught on seeing the conditions in which two of her—extremely numerous, as the myth claims—sons are made to plough the land. When Indra questions her about why she is so sad, the cow explains:

[16] I replace *kiṃnarī* with *saurabhī* according to Pollock's suggestion (Pollock 1986: 360).

etau dṛṣṭvā kṛṣau dīnau sūryaraśmipratāpinau | vadhyamānau balīvardau karṣakeṇa surādhipa || 22 ||
mama kāyāt prasūtau hi duḥkhitau bhāra pīḍitau | yau dṛṣṭvā paritapye 'haṃ nāsti putrasamaḥ priyaḥ || 23 ||

I see how haggard and desolate these two bullocks are, how the rays of the sun are burning them, and how the ploughman beats them, overlord of the gods.
They were born of my body, and for me to see them sorrowful and oppressed by burdens is agony. There is nothing so dear as a son.
(II.68.22-23, transl. Pollock 1986, slightly modified).

Apart from this display of maternal affection, the passage is quite interesting because it expresses the recognition of the hardship and pain that humans can impose on these animals (see also II.12.9).[17]

The image of the bull surrounded by cows can also be used to extol the magnificence of a great lord like Rāvaṇa surrounded by his harem (V.9.8).[18] In contrast, cows without the bull conjure up images of sorrow. Ayodhyā abandoned by Rāma is said to be

goṣṭhamadhye sthitām ārtām acarantīṃ navaṃ tṛṇam | govṛṣeṇa parityaktāṃ gavāṃ paṅktim ivotsukām ||

[l]ike a herd of cows in the middle of a pasture when their bull has left them, and they no longer graze the new grass but are anguished and wistful [.]
(II.106.9, transl. Pollock 1986).[19]

When Vālin is killed, the *vānara*s are saddened, 'like forest-dwelling cattle in a great forest full of lions, when their bull has been struck down' (*vanecarāḥ siṃhayute mahāvane yathā hi gāvo nihate gavāṃ patau ||*, IV.22.25, transl. Lefeber 1994). Vālin's bride Tāra declares that, although he is dead, she wants to stay by his side with her son, 'just as a cow with her calf stays by her bull when he is suddenly struck down by a lion' (*siṃhena nihataṃ sadyo gauḥ savatseva govṛṣam ||*, IV.23.26, transl. Lefeber 1994).

The images that relate human affectivity or pain to those of horses are limited, but nonetheless significant. In part they belong to the same conceptual sphere as those concerning cows, appearing in the same *sarga*s. When Kausalyā sees her son arrive, 'she approached him in delight, as a mare might her colt' (*abhicakrāma saṃhṛṣṭā kiśoraṃ vaḍavā yathā ||*, II.17.9, transl. Pollock 1986; cf. above, II.17.32 and II.17.33). Here too, physical fatigue is mentioned. In the same passage, Kausalyā is distressed on hearing

[17] With some variations, Surabhi's grief at the treatment of her offspring is also narrated in *Mahābhārata* III.10. See Feller (2024: 8-12).

[18] In the next verse, mentioned above, the comparison is with a large elephant surrounded by cow elephants.

[19] I have replaced the incongruous *patnīm* of the Critical Edition with *paṅktim*, following Pollock's suggestion (Pollock 1986: 521).

news of the exile, 'like a mare forced to draw a heavy load' (*vaḍavām iva vāhitām*, II.17.18, transl. Pollock 1986).[20] Ayodhyā abandoned by Rāma is

> *sahasā yuddhaśauṇḍena hayāroheṇa vāhitām | nikṣiptabhāṇḍām utsṛṣṭāṃ kiśorīm iva durbalām ||*
>
> [l]ike a filly wildly whipped on by a battle-drunk rider, a weak filly, one that should be stripped of all her trappings and still running free[.]
> (II.106.17, transl. Pollock 1986, modified; for *utsṛṣṭāṃ*, cf. note, Pollock 1986: 521).

When the charioteer Sumantra returns after accompanying Rāma into exile, he tells Daśaratha that his horses refused to start and shed tears (II.53.1). The motif of the weeping horses is shared both by Indian and various other ancient literatures. As is well known, Siddhārtha leaves his father's house on the horse Kanthaka, and when Siddhārtha dismisses him and the charioteer Chandaka, Kanthaka sheds tears (cf. e.g. *Buddhacarita* VI.53) and, according to various sources, he immediately dies of grief. Outside India, the most famous example is undoubtedly that of Achilles' immortal horses who weep at Patroclus' death (*Iliad* XVII.426-440). The origins of this motif may lie in the very deep empathic bond known to develop between the riders and their horse of choice. Here we come across an anthropomorphization of animal behaviour. Indeed, many species of animals can shed tears, but, despite traditions and accounts of various kinds and epochs, according to the current state of research biologists generally agree that it is impossible to prove that animals weep because of an emotional response; rather, emotional weeping seems to be a uniquely human prerogative.[21]

4. In the margins: *mṛga*s, and birds

Let us now turn to animals that we can consider more distant from the everyday life of human beings. As can also be deduced from the translations proposed above, the term *mṛga* can be understood as a general designation for all forest animals; however, together with some more specific terms, it is often

[20] Pollock remarks in a note: "Observe how the simile here nicely takes up and advances the one in verse 9" (Pollock 1986: 358).

[21] Animals are said to be weeping at Sītā's abduction; see above. In other passages of the *Rāmāyaṇa* horses' tears are an omen of defeat, associated with other omens (e.g. VI.65.18; VI.94.26). For a broader review of comparable passages, also from the *Mahābhārata*, see Goldman, Sutherland Goldman and van Nooten (2009: 1355). On Kanthaka, see Ohnuma (2016) and Ohnuma (2017: 101-128) in particular. Among other examples of horses weeping for the destiny of their masters, we may recall the episodes concerning Julius Caesar (Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, *Caesar*, 81), the Celtic hero Cú Chulainn (see e.g. MacKillop 1998, s.v. Liath Macha and related entries), and Husain at the battle of Karbala, 680 CE (for some texts and Indian traditions, Pinault 2001). For a clarification of the biological-behavioural issue, see e.g. Gračanin, Bylsma and Vingerhoets (2018).

used to refer instead only to wild herbivores such as gazelles, antelopes, and deer, as a hyperonym for all these different animals. The most famous *mṛga* of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is, of course, the 'magic deer,' *māyāmayo mṛgaḥ* (III.40.31, etc.) into which the *rākṣasa* Mārīca is transformed. Now, as we have argued elsewhere (Pieruccini forthcoming), the treatment reserved for these animals in the myths and narratives of ancient India constitutes a kind of marker: their killing highlights moments of crisis of great conceptual and narrative importance, as in the case of the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s 'magic deer,' while their protected and safe presence is emblematic of a full pacification between human beings and the environment. This pacification is highlighted in the context of Brahmanical hermitages and places connected with Buddhism, where a kind of coexistence with these animals is implied.

Such myths and narratives are hinged, both negatively and positively, on the fact that these *mṛga*s are par excellence the victims of hunting, the favourite activity of *kṣatriya*s—and which Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa also practise during their exile. But apart from humans, these animals are also easy prey for the beasts of the forest; in general, they are regarded as defenceless, timid, and quickly frightened: 'fear [is the characteristic] of *mṛga*s' (*mṛgāṇāṃ tu bhayaṃ*, IV.58.9). If we consider that—in the *Rāmāyaṇa* as in the subsequent *kāvya*—the various lexical formulations of the '*mṛga*'s eyes' constitute a common epithet to define a woman's beauty, it is obvious that, in the Indian conception, such beauty and vulnerability combine perfectly to define a female condition, which of course in the *Rāmāyaṇa* is applied to Sītā. For example:

> *priyaṃ janam apaśyantīṃ paśyantīṃ rākṣasīgaṇam | svagaṇena mṛgīṃ hīnāṃ śvagaṇābhivṛtām iva ||*
>
> No longer seeing the people dear to her but only the hosts of *rākṣasa* women, she was like a doe cut off from her herd and surrounded by a pack of hounds.
> (V.13.23, transl. Goldman and Sutherland Goldman 1996).
>
> *tāṃ dṛṣṭvā hanumān sītāṃ mṛgaśāvanibhekṣaṇām | mṛgakanyām iva trastāṃ vīkṣamāṇāṃ samantataḥ ||*
>
> Hanumān watched fawn-eyed Sītā as she glanced around in all directions like a frightened fawn.
> (V.15.28, transl. Goldman and Sutherland Goldman 1996).

On the other hand, besides the passages referring to Sītā, where we also find more specific obviously feminine gender terms to refer to these animals,[22] the fear considered characteristic of *mṛga*s is also

[22] Cf. III.43.9; II.33.9, where Sītā is frightened as a doe (*pṛṣatī*) seeing a trap; III.54.31 and V.56.52, where, among the *rākṣasa* women, she is compared to a doe (*hariṇī*) surrounded by tigresses.

employed for similes involving male characters. In Kaikeyī's words, Daśaratha shakes like a *mṛga* at the sight of a tiger (II.10.30); overpowered fighters are like *mṛga*s frightened by a tiger or a lion (III.26.19; VI.59.42). But different nuances are also possible: for example, the sight of male and female *mṛga*s living together may be an image of serenity, contrasting with Rāma's unhappiness when he is separated from Sītā (IV.1.46).

As for birds, they can be captured, and here we have the unhappiness of being encaged. Mantharā, distraught at Śatrughna's wrath, is said to be 'staring like a caged *krauñcī*' (*krauñcīṃ vilagnām iva vīkṣamāṇām*, II.72.25). Hanumān imagines Sītā locked up in Rāvaṇa's palace 'softly moaning like a caged mynah bird' (*nūnaṃ lālapyate mandaṃ pañjarastheva śārikā* ||, V.11.15, transl. Goldman and Sutherland Goldman 1996). But the most frequent reference seems to be, or clearly is, to birds which are living free. Here we once again come across the *krauñcī*, and the female of the *kurara*, *kurarī*, a word usually translated as osprey. Some passages compare their cries with those of grieving and distraught women: thus, Daśaratha's wives lament like *krauñcī*s (II.34.35), Vālin's bride laments like a *kurarī* (IV.19.28), and so also it is supposed Sumitrā will be lamenting at the news that Lakṣmaṇa might be dead (VI.39.9).[23] The comparison appears to be based on the particular sound that the calls of these birds have.[24]

However, whether they are referred to generically or by more specific names, birds are very often mentioned by relating their song, or behaviour, to being full of passionate love. This is, obviously, an interpretation that projects human emotionality on these animals. A recurring term that is used to qualify them is *matta* (e.g. IV.66.36; V.1.42; V.7.23; VII.31.19), which is exactly the same term that defines elephants in rut. Canonical images of *kāvya* are the pair of *cakravāka* in love (IV.27.16; V.14.30; cf. Pieruccini 2002), or the dance of peacocks:[25]

> *śikhinībhiḥ parivṛtā mayūrā girisānuṣu | manmathābhiparītasya mama manmathavardhanāḥ* || 17 || *paśya lakṣmaṇa nṛtyantaṃ mayūram upanṛtyati | śikhinī manmathārtaiṣā bhartāraṃ girisānuṣu* || 18 || *mayūrasya vane nūnaṃ rakṣasā na hṛtā priyā | mama tv ayaṃ vinā vāsaḥ puṣpamāse suduḥsahaḥ* || 19 ||
>
> The peacocks circled by peahens on the mountain ridges heighten my desire, though I am already filled with desire.
>
> See, Lakṣmaṇa, how this peahen sick with love dances before her dancing peacock mate on the mountain ridges.

[23] Cf. also VI.23.3 and VI.98.26. In the *Mahābhārata*, *kāvya* and so on, the cry of a *kurarī* is a common term of comparison for female laments: see Karttunen (2020: 205).

[24] A good starting point for listening to the calls of these birds is the website https://xeno-canto.org/.

[25] For extensive sources on the peacock dance, see Karttunen (2000: 263-264).

> Surely the peacock's beloved was not carried off by a *rākṣasa* in the forest. But for me, living without Sītā in this month of flowers is unbearable.
>
> (IV.1.17-19, transl. Lefeber 1994).

These lines appear in the famous passage in which Rāma contemplates and describes the beauty of Lake Pampā in springtime, which we have already quoted above. It should be emphasised that in this passage, while the whole of nature forms a contrast to Rāma's grief on his separation from Sītā and numerous animals are mentioned, it is almost exclusively the birds that fuel his burning passion.[26]

5. Distance, and some conclusions

The remarks we make now may seem rather obvious, but they assume importance when considered in the context of our discourse. Other animals are mentioned very frequently in the *Rāmāyaṇa*; among the most prominent from a quantitative point of view are snakes, and they are involved in an abundance of similes.[27] The feeling, if we can call it that, attributed to these animals is anger: 'acute anger [is the characteristic] of serpents' (*tīkṣṇakopā bhujaṃgamāḥ*, IV.58.9). The meaning is obvious: these are poisonous and dangerous animals, and this aspect recurs frequently in the various images and often proverbial-like expressions that are based on them.

As for similes, Kaikeyī, for example, is compared to a poisonous snake by Kausalyā (II.38.2-3); or, again for example, the pugnacious *vānara*s are said to be 'like venomous serpents inflamed with anger' (*jvalitāśīviṣopamāḥ*, VI.18.37, transl. Goldman, Sutherland Goldman and van Nooten 2009). But, whether their noxiousness is implied or not, or not openly, the references to these animals occur with great regularity in similes connected with *physical* characteristics or acts: in particular, characters hiss like snakes or emit sighs similar to their hissing,[28] they writhe like snakes,[29] have arms like snakes,[30] the

[26] Here it is essential to recall that, alongside *cakravāka*s and peacocks, several other birds are connected, with varying nuances, to love and passion in the literatures of classical India: see the already mentioned Karttunen (2000, 2020) and Trynkowska (2022) on pigeons and doves.

[27] Obviously here too we are not considering semi-divine or otherwise mythical snakes; even if, at times, the text may be rather ambiguous when mentioning such animals.

[28] A very frequent comparison: e.g. II.19.1; II.20.2; II.68.28; II.86.26; III.2.20; IV.6.16; IV.16.11; V.8.10; V.8.26; V.13.30; V.20.28; V.36.22; V.65.7; VI.36.5; VI.39.1; VI.41.18; VI.48.22; VI.57.81; VI.76.1; VI.87.42.

[29] E.g. III.20.4; III.47.21; VI.89.2; VII.77.3.

[30] E.g. V.1.52; V.8.19; V.47.8; VI.48.49; VI.55.99; VI.55.115; VI.61.47.

shedding of skin is mentioned,[31] or again Sītā's long black braid is similar to a snake.[32] In addition, the evidently already stereotyped equation of snakes with weapons and, in particular, lethal arrows, *i.e.* note well, inanimate objects, is frequent, and indeed becomes almost obsessive in Book Six.[33]

Now, in India, encounters with snakes can be considered a common occurrence; the discourse becomes even more schematic for other dangerous animals, which are to be avoided, but whose habitat is essentially the forest. The tiger, for instance, besides being mentioned in the lists of animals living in the forest, appears—as we said above—in epithets expressing the power of a character, or in passages emphasising its aggressiveness and ferocity (cf. Bose 2020: 165-169). But there is no hint at a possible *sentience* of this animal—how, indeed, could there be any? The acknowledgement of the sentience of animals discussed above is essentially based on their frequentation by humans and, crucially, on the possibility and—this must be emphasised—the willingness and ability to observe them directly. The textual situation is proof that what emerges originates from concrete observation; it is also the demonstration of some genuine concern for animals that live closer to humans, or at least have the possibility of some articulate relationship with them. The recognition of their affectivity, and of their physical and moral suffering, is also an act of empathy towards them, and the fact that this recognition can take the form of recurring images, a great reservoir for the subsequent *kāvya*, does not detract from its value. On the other hand, that this suffering may be matched by the expression of a possible remedy is not something we can expect from a work like the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

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[31] E.g. II.38.2; III.4.31; VI.24.33.

[32] Cf. V.13.24; V.23.9.

[33] In Book Six, the arrows with which, on his first attack, Indrajit totally covers Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, bringing them close to death, are in fact snakes that thanks to his magical powers the *rākṣasa* has turned into arrows (VI.35.8); these snake-arrows flee upon the arrival of Garuḍa, the great enemy of snakes (*sarga* VI.40).

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