



CROOKSHANKS AND NEWTON: A COMPARISON OF THE TREATMENT OF THE FELINE COMPANIONS OF HARRY POTTER AND PROFESSOR SHONKU

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ABSTRACT

Feline companions have been considered a part of human society since time immemorial be it for a scientific cause, psychological cause or for magical purposes. They have populated around humans in the tombs of Egypt to the plethora of mythology in India and have transfigured into a myriad of native and exotic breeds. Their footprints have also graced the pages of literature out of which their footprints in Children's literature have been put under the microscope here. The feline companions dealt with in the current paper live with their intellectual humans in Britain and India and are characters in sequential stories by J.K Rowling and Satyajit Ray. The heroic deeds of Crookshanks, the feline protagonist found in the Harry Potter books (out of which only the novel, Harry Potter and The Prisoner of Azkaban has been considered) has been compared to Newton, the feline protagonist found in the Professor Shonku short stories (out of which only the short story, Professor Shonku and the Egyptian Terror has been considered).

Key Words: Crookshanks, Newton, Harry Potter, Professor Shonku

PAPER

Animals have been kept as companions since mankind learnt to dwell in packs. All the ancient civilizations have adored their canine or feline companions to the utmost importance. It is assumed that when humans began to grow and store food, a problem of rats and other vermin must have cropped up and cats were domesticated to curb the infestation. In ancient Egypt, where cats had been presumed to be domesticated first, when a royal or temple cat used to die, citizens of that immediate nation would go in mourning. In ancient India, cats

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were seen as the vahana (mount) of Goddess Shashhti since animals essential to the household were depicted as ethereal companions. Debate issues over the premier domestication of cats in Britain and is postulated to have been brought along with Greek and Roman generals and traders before Christ. Cats of every imaginable color and modernized hybrid breed have made their way on almost all the continents on the map except Antarctica, through maritime ways.

The feline companions dealt with in the current paper live with their intellectual humans in Britain and India respectively. The first feline is Crookshanks, a hybrid between a magical breed called *Kneazle* and something unknown. Harry Potter's best friend and classmate, Hermione Granger decides to bring home a cat that no one wants to adopt and he saves their lives in return. Professor Shonku has a cat, probably of local origin in his hometown of Giridih, with whom he has outworldly adventures. He too saves his live. Both the characters are parts of sequential stories where Professor Shonku features in short story series by Satyajit Ray while Harry Potter appeared in novel series by J.K Rowling. In this paper, the treatment of the heroic feline companions, Newton and Crookshanks have been compared in Ray's short story, *Professor Shonku and the Egyptian Terror* and Rowling's novel, *Harry Potter and The Prisoner of Azkaban*.

Newton has been introduced in the short story collection in the entry of 8 January. Nothing has been mentioned about his features or his breed, not even the information regarding the type of animal he is has been mentioned in the first line. The readers are left to piece out the fact that he is a pet cat as he meows around the professor's laboratory.

'I have decided to take Newton with me. He has been walking in and out of my laboratory constantly over the last few days, and meowing pathetically. Perhaps he knows that the time of my departure is quite close.

Yesterday I offered him a fish pill. He ate it happily enough. Today, I placed the head of a fish beside a pill. He chose the pill. So I need not worry about his food. All I have to do is make him a suit and a helmet as soon as possible.'

(Ray. Satyajit. Gopa Majumdar. *The Diary of a Space Traveler and Other Stories*, Puffin Classics, UK, 2015 (pdf)) (*sic*)

Crookshanks has been introduced in the third installment of the bildungsroman series of Harry Potter novels, called *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. The readers as well as Harry Potter and his friend Ron Weasley meet this cat in a pet shop for wizards and witches called *Magical Menagerie*. Ron was in the process of getting his family owned common garden rat checked, when Crookshanks appears in the scene with a commotion.



‘Ron buckled as something huge and orange came soaring from the top of the highest cage, landed on his head, and then propelled itself, spitting madly, at Scrabbers.

“NO, CROOKSHANKS, NO!” cried the witch but Scrabbers shot from between her hands like a bar of soap, landed splay-legged on the floor, and then scampered for the door.

...”What *was* that?”

“It was either a very big cat or a quite a small tiger,” said Harry. ..., Hermione came out, but she wasn’t carrying an owl. Her arms were clamped tightly around the enormous ginger cat.

“You *bought* that monster?” said Ron, his mouth hanging open.

“He’s *gorgeous*, isn’t he?” said Hermione, glowing.

That was a matter of opinion, thought Harry. The cat’s ginger fur was thick and fluffy, but it was definitely a big bowlegged and its face looked grumpy and oddly squashed, as though it had run headlong into a brick wall. Now that Scrabbers was out of sight, however, the cat was purring contentedly in Hermione’s arms.

“... poor Crookshanks, that witch said he’d been in there for ages: no one wanted him.”
(Rowling J.K, Chapter 4. *The Leaky Cauldron*. Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, Bloomsbury Publishing. UK. 1999. Pgs 65-66 (pdf))

Both Crookshanks and Newton appear time and again, meowing and hissing in the tales, acting as interludes to the adventures of the scientist and the students of the magical school. They have very limited active part and appear as mute characters that simply appear as folly to the principle characters. In the initial story in the series featuring Professor Shonku, Newton accompanies him, his manservant, Prahlad and a robot dubbed Bidhushekhar to the infiniteness of the space on his master’s command. He does not fancy being enclosed in a spaceship and walking around on the plains of planet Mars. The presence of Crookshanks can be found through the characters unknowingly sitting on him and being hissed at. He swishes his ‘bottlebrush tail’ around Harry’s limbs or scares Ron with his targeted ‘yellow eyed’ stare for Scrabbers. Both the tom cats however love to be around their masters and vice versa as it is pristinely evident in the texts.

Rowling has given attention to even the minutest of details regarding Crookshanks’ mute presence giving the audience little scope for imaginative picturization. Ray on the other hands limits his detailing probably to stick to the criteria of short stories for the adventures of his



protagonist. Newton finds bridled credence in comparison to Crookshanks, as even the mention of his breed, color, age, height, weight etc has skipped mention in the short stories. He has been skipped in a lot of stories as Professor Shonku aka scientist Trilokeshwar Shonku is a globe trotter like his creator and doesn't accompany his master in many of his journeys. All though he had been in Shonku's mind every time the subject of pets or cats came up. For example, in *Professor Shonku and the Egyptian Terror*, upon asked the choice of mummies for Shonku's research, he chooses human over cat. He contemplates that, 'I had my favorite Newton to think of. He is always around in the laboratory and might react badly to the presence of a two-thousand-year-old mummy of a cat.' Only the parts in the stories where the master is home, can we find Newton meowing and rubbing against his legs.

In the short story, *Professor Shonku and the Egyptian Terror*, Shonku travels to Egypt to fulfill his dream of visiting the country with ancient technology and meets British archeologist, Dr. James Summerton. His invention, Miracure-all, a panacea, rescues Summerton inches from death after a bite by a Scarab beetle during excavation inside a cursed tomb. Out of gratitude, he lets Shonku carry a mummy to his hometown for his personal research, annoying a native who claims to be the descendent of the mummified man. Once back in the Indian city of Giridih, the native stealthily attempts an ambush on the professor who had just begun to unveil the face of the mummy. The ambush fails when Newton deposits three long gashes on the attacker's façade, shocking him into a heart attack that kills him. Summerton shortly discovers that the native's mummified ancestor, who bore the same physical appearance complete with three gashes on his right cheek, was punished by 'the cat-faced Goddess Nephdate' for humiliating her.

Newton had suddenly pounced on his master's attacker and given him a nasty scratch on his right cheek in such a spiteful mood that his master was astonished. The action by Newton is justified in the last lines of the story,

'I found Newton playing near my feet. I took him in my arms and asked: 'Well, Kitty, are you too an incarnation of Goddess Nephdate?'

'Miao', replied Newton with a Cheshire grin.'

(Ray, Satyajit. Surabhi Banerjee. 'The Egyptian Terror'. *The Incredible Adventures of Professor Shonku*. Penguin Books India. New Delhi. 1994. Pg 110 (Print))

It is interesting to note here that the name of the cat-faced Egyptian Goddess is not Nephdate, it is in fact Goddess Bastet or Bast who was the Goddess of warfare. Bubastis, the Egyptian burial ground where Shonku and Summerton find the mummy of the ancestor and cats, was the chief centre of worship of the goddess. Goddess Bastet has been seen as a protector of the



pharaoh and the chief male deity Ra, the sun god and has been depicted fighting an evil snake named Apep, Ra's enemy. Similarly in the short story, Newton acts as the protector of the principle character and is depicted as fighting his mortal enemy, the Egyptian native.

'Bast (BAHST) is the Egyptian goddess of play and pleasure, frolic and fun, music, dancing and partying. Also known more formally as Bastet, she was the ruler of Lower Egypt's holy city of Bubastis, which was devoted to all of those playful qualities - and to cats... Bast was so cherished by her people that cats were considered secret creatures, bejeweled in life by their owners and mummified like humans in their death.

Her feast day was celebrated with unbridled enthusiasm on October 31st... Bast originated as the lion-headed goddess Sekhmet, who represented the raw power of the sun and presided over healing. Sekhmet, a powerful goddess in her own right, is now considered the fierier, fiercer aspect of Bast. Bast is often depicted as a female with a cat's head, often holding a *sistrum*: a famous musical instrument of ancient Egypt that was set to drive away evil spirits. She is also quite often pictured as a black or gold cat with a beautiful jeweled collar.'

(Brockway, Laurie Sue. 'Bast: Be Playful as a Pussycat'. *The Goddess Pages: A Divine Guide to Finding Love and Happiness*. Llewellyn Publications, Woodbury, Minnesota. First edition, 2008, pg 262(ebook))

This leads us to believe that the creator of Newton the cat, Satyajit Ray skipped this essential detail that the cat was male and was being compared to a female goddess. The above quoted line from the short story being analyzed here poses this question, "I took him in my arms and asked: 'Well, Kitty, are you too an incarnation of Goddess Nephthys?'" The underlined pronoun and adjective represent the dilemma of genders presented by the author before us. The archeological depiction of the mythological cat-faced goddess mentioned by the author also hints at the appearance of the pet cat of the scientist as the physical appearance of Newton are missing. We might then presume that Newton might have black or gold in color. Further argument can be that the cat may or may not have been black as Indians seldom prefer a black cat due to various superstitions but the fact that Prof. Shonku was a man of science and he did not heed to superstitious warnings before relocating the mummified ancestor of his attacker, is proof enough that the cat could also have been black. At this point, we can only speculate using researchable pointers.

In the novel, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Crookshanks saves his masters namely; Hermione Granger, Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley; but not by being an incarnation of the cat-faced goddess but by exposing a wanted criminal hiding under a disguise. He had the ability to recognize witches and wizards who had masqueraded themselves into animals by a kind of intense magic known as 'transfiguration', something

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that the witches and wizards in the book couldn't. Hence he, from the very moment of his introduction into the lives of the principle characters, is seen engaging in a chase after the criminal refugee, Peter Pettigrew. It is revealed that Crookshanks is the most intelligent of his kind as he turns ally to a wrongly accused and punished, Sirius Black whom he again recognizes as a wizard in animagus state and tried throughout the course of the novel to supply Peter Pettigrew. Ron, who had inherited Peter Pettigrew incognito as a rat, had bickered and quarreled with Hermione, the owner of Crookshanks throughout the course of the novel for Crookshank's endeavors to catch the rat named by the Weasleys, 'Scrabbers'. At one point, Scrabbers' blood is found on a bed sheet and he is reportedly missing and assumed to have been eaten by Crookshanks. Remus Lupin and Sirius Black fill in about the actions of Scrabbers and Crookshanks with Harry and his friends during the climax of the novel upon forceful confrontation.

Crookshanks saves the life of his master and Harry when they are attacked by a tree called the *Whomping Willow* that guards the entrance of a house called, *Shrieking Shack*. He intelligently presses his front paws at a knot in the Willow's trunk that freezes it and stops lashing the duo. Crookshanks then leads the way inside the Shack to their abducted friend, Ron and protects Sirius Black from Harry's vengeful hands. He stands guarding the wronged man to protect his innocence and have the criminal Peter Pettigrew brought to the light of human justice. He feels particularly proud when the humans acknowledge his contribution and when they proceed to the castle to right the wrongs, 'Crookshanks leapt lightly off the bed and led the way out of the room, his bottlebrush tail held jauntily high.' He also tries to fight Lupin when he transforms into a werewolf and becomes a hazard to his masters. Further in the novel, he seems almost human like when he carries out Sirius' errand to buy Harry a costly flying broomstick (Firebolt) and when it is revealed that he had stolen passwords for Sirius to enter Hogwarts.

The final appearance of Crookshanks in the book is similar to Newton's in the short story. Ron, who takes it personally that he had harbored a criminal in his house for thirteen years in the disguise of a common rat and blames Crookshanks for his savior actions, now warmed to the cat. When Sirius sends an owl as replacement for his lost pet rat, he decides to trust him. 'He looked closely at the owl for a moment; then, to Harry's and Hermione's great surprise, he held him out for Crookshanks to sniff.

"What do you reckon?" Ron asked the cat. "Definitely an owl?"

Crookshanks purred.

"That's good enough for me," said Ron happily. "He's mine."



(Rowling J.K, Chapter 22. *Owl Post Again*. Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, Bloomsbury Publishing. UK. 1999. Pg 486 (pdf))

Further appearances by Crookshanks can be found in the sequel, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (Book 5) where he can be seen chasing other pets and magical objects in the ancestral house of Harry's Godfather, Sirius Black, where meetings to defend the innocents against a common nemesis were held. Newton however appears and disappears in Professor Shonku's laboratory in Giridih. While the meaning of Crookshank's name derives from two English letters, 'crook' and 'shanks', meaning 'bent' and 'a person's leg, especially the part from the knee to the ankle' respectively jointly denoting 'bend legs', the name 'Newton' could be a reference to the revolutionary scientist, Isaac Newton as the cat's owner has been picturized as a revolutionary scientist himself.

To conclude, both the pet feline heroes display significant elements of personification where they have been made to resemble human emotions and capabilities. While Newton grins secretively like the famous talking cat 'Cheshire' from the realm of Lewis Carol's *Alice in Wonderland*, Crookshanks feels proud of his actions and even runs errands in a wizarding market and steals passwords. Cats are known to purr at humans as a mode of communication and they have been known to make different kinds of sounds to indicate varied shades of emotions and moods. Grinning meaningfully however, is a human trait and so is feeling proud and pressing buttons purposefully. This attribution of human traits in feline characters is similar to 'fables', a literary genre meant to deliver a lesson, where mythical creatures are bestowed with human tendencies such as the power of speech or human intelligence. The short story and novel in question here fall under the category of 'Children's Literature, perhaps that is why the feline characterizations have been modeled on fables.

Also it can be concluded that both the short story and the novel, which are parts of longer series, have been anthropomorphized, which is 'the attribution of human traits, emotions, or intentions to non-human entities'. While Personification can be attributed to any and every inanimate object, be it an abstract noun or a concrete noun with a gender in literature; Anthropomorphism is more commonly used in Fables, Fairy tales and children's literature. It is to be noted however that other depictions of anthropomorphic animals found in *Aesop's Fables*, *Panchatantra*, *Jataka Tales* etc display far more humanoid traits and features such as the power of speech, deduction, planning, sense of purpose etc. Other anthropomorphized characters in the Harry Potter books are Aragog, a giant talking spider; Nagini, a gigantic snake that can communicate to people who know their language (parseltongue) etc. None of other animal characters appearing in Professor Shonku's diary are anthropomorphized.



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