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**Companionship to Commodification: Analysing Human-Animal Dynamics in  
Albert Hughes' *Alpha* (2018) and Bong Joon-ho's *Okja* (2017)**

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**Abstract**

The dichotomy between humans and animals has always created a rift between both the species. Even though both are co-existing species, humans have always prioritised their needs. The field of Human-Animal Studies, a recent development in Cultural Studies, explores the role of humans and animals in each other's lives. *Alpha* (2018) highlights the pre-historic interaction between humans and animals, leading to present-day domestication. *Okja* (2017) on the other hand, brings to the fore ethical issues that surround human-animal interaction. Analysing *Alpha* and *Okja* in the light of the ever-evolving human-animal relationship, this research explores the transition in the role of animals in human lives. The primary aim of this research is to understand how the interaction between humans and animals has reached a point where it has become distorted and one sided, always ending in the exploitation of the weaker species. Tracing human-animal interaction from the Pleistocene era to present day, this research paper will shed light on the fluctuating relationship between humans and animals.

**Keywords:** Human-Animal Studies, Companionship, Commodification, Human-Animal Dynamics, UN SDGs

**Introduction**

The question is not, Can they reason? Nor, Can they talk? But, Can they suffer? Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*  
Ever since the Earth gave way to life, animals have walked the Earth, sometimes as witnesses to the evolution of the planet and other times as collateral damage in the so-called evolution of mankind. Woven into the fabric of our being, they feature in all parts of human lives, in the form of companions, danger and, even food. According to Charles Darwin, most species that have survived till now haven't done so because they are intelligent or strong, but because

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they could adapt to adverse conditions. Be it the evolution of snakes from limbed creatures to limbless reptiles or whales and dolphins, from land mammals to fish, animals have adapted themselves to the changes of Nature.

With time, our interaction with animals has also evolved and this shift in the relationship has occurred because of human development. Animals once, were only enemy creatures to survive against but today, they play varied roles. However, the earliest recorded human-animal interaction is certainly between the hunter and the prey. On the topic of the earliest human-animal interaction, Anuradha Roy writes, “It is argued for a long time – well into the medieval period – humans felt but a close kinship with animals. The paleolithic hunter regarded his prey as a powerful ritual partner and looked upon the latter with respect” (16). Therefore, it becomes important to understand how and why this shift came where animals, once man’s most trusted companions, got reduced to a mere means for monetary gain.

In present times, it is imperative to understand how such shifts take place and what they represent regarding ecological balance and harmony among species. Focusing on the potential of cinema to influence and mould perceptions regarding animals, this research paper explores *Alpha* (2018) and *Okja* (2017), analysing human-animal bonds in both films. While *Alpha* (2018) and *Okja* (2017) focus on different aspects of human-animal interaction, it is important to note that, in presenting two completely different time periods, this research paper aims to explore the shift in human-animal interaction, from companionship to commodification.

### **Human-Animal Studies: Mapping the Terrain**

“Animals are as old as literature. This is to say that animals have been represented in literature since its beginnings. From the earliest epics, fables, parables, and plays, animals have donned a great variety of guises to become the privileged presences that show us how to be human. But it is also to say that animals are there at the very origins of literature” (Robles 2). In literature, animals have generally been used to symbolise human behaviour and characteristic traits. Evidently, phrases like ‘the cunning fox’, ‘the innocent doe’, and ‘the greedy hyena’ are often used, thereby anthropomorphising animals. Thus, nonhuman beings have always been seen with respect to humans and never for the individual creatures that they are. The field of Human-animal studies (hereafter HAS) targets this anthropocentric approach and tries to look at animals through a different lens. Frans de Wall’s argument in his work *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?*, resonates strongly,

Are we open-minded enough to assume that other species have a mental life? Are we creative enough to investigate it? Can we tease apart the roles of attention, motivation, and cognition? Those three are involved in everything animals do; hence poor performance can be explained by any one of them... It takes human ingenuity indeed to know how smart an animal is. (34-35)

HAS looks at the various ways in which humans engage with animals. This involves a deep exploration into any nation's social, cultural and ethical fabric. Social and cultural norms dictate how humans view animals and in turn, how they treat them. For instance, Hindus consider certain animals sacred and, thus, worship them. Similarly, Muslims refrain from eating pork, while Christians enjoy it. However, food is only a small part of this interaction. Abel Alves writes, "Rather than just a beast with foul habits and contaminating saliva, the status of a dog has actually been debated in Islam, with one Muslim holy man telling his followers that dogs might be found in heaven" (47). The field of HAS that joined mainstream Cultural Studies after the Animal Protection Movement, criticises speciesism and looks at nonhuman beings as individual conscious creatures. In his book *Why Look at Animals*, John Berger says, "Everywhere animals disappear. In zoos they constitute the living monument to their own disappearance" (36).

In 1976, Michel Foucault came up with his concept of Biopower and Biopolitics, bringing to light, the role of disciplinary power in managing life. Foucault talks about the role of prisons, schools and hospitals in regulating populations. "One might say that the ancient right to *take* life or *let* live was replaced by a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death" (Foucault 138). Similarly, a major aspect of HAS deals with the mass production of meat and callous killing of nonhuman beings. The meat producing industry manages animal population by breeding them specifically to slaughter them.

**Albert Hughes' *Alpha* and Bong Joon-ho's *Okja*: Companion Species and Captive Lives**

*Alpha* (2018), set in the Pleistocene era, takes the audience to prehistoric times when human civilisation had just begun, and the only interaction between humans and animals was of the hunter and the prey. The hunt, in the movie, has not been shown as mere killing of animals, but as a sacred ritual, a communication between humans and animals, blessed by the Pagan Gods and ancestors. Based on the relationship forged as a result of mutual trust and reverence, *Alpha* doesn't put animals and humans in opposite frames. Moreover, this kind of reverence towards animals shows their staying true to the hunter-gatherer lifestyle.

Probing into the complexities of the relationship between Keda, the son of the tribal leader, and Alpha, a she-wolf, the film explores the themes of survival and companionship, serving as a testament to the symbiotic relationship between humans and animals. The animals who were only seen as enemy creatures, are now a part of the tribe. The movie, thus, sets the tone for the domestication of animal species. Rho welcomes Alpha saying, "Keda has brought you home to us. You are family. We welcome you into our tribe" (00:09:34-8). Margo DeMello, borrowing from Anthropology, writes:

As anthropologist Tim Ingold points out (1994), the relationship between animals and humans among traditional hunter-gatherers was often one of mutual trust in which the environment and its resources are shared by both animals and people; animals that were hunted by humans were seen as equals. Hunter gatherers tend to see animals as rational,

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intelligent creatures like themselves, with the same spiritual importance as humans. Animals are not the same as humans, however; they are brothers in a sense but can still be eaten. (79) Set in Korean countryside, *Okja* explores rampant consumerism, failing animal rights and concerns regarding environmental ethics. The film shows how big corporations exploit anything and anyone to serve their means. Portraying a dystopian society where The Mirando Corporation controls food production, the movie unravels the dark side of meat consumption and the callous actions that precede it. *Okja* presents a world where animals are commodified to curb the problem of hunger. Lucy Mirando, the CEO of The Mirando Company, under the guise of ‘new core values of environment and life’, produces genetically mutated (GM) animals, performs experiments, and sells them as meat. Her ten-year vision of giving one super-piglet to each farmer across twenty-six countries and having them participate in a competition depicts how little she thinks of animals. She even says, “Such a shame we had to tell all those little white lies. It’s not our fault that the consumers are so paranoid about GM foods” (00:36:44-32). Observing meat culture, Margo DeMello writes,

Conflict theorists would argue that oppression- whether aimed at humans or other animals- results from institutional and economic forces, not individual attitudes or practices. Because profit is the goal in a capitalist economy, both humans and animals are harmed if doing so improves profits. American agribusiness gives very little consideration to the quality of life for animals ... (167)

Ignorant of the schemes, Mija develops an emotional bond with *Okja*, which makes it difficult for her to let go of her when the corporation sends its people to bring *Okja* back. The plot progresses as Mija undertakes a dangerous journey to rescue *Okja* from being slaughtered for food. Mija’s association with the Animal Liberation Front symbolises hope and resistance for animals like *Okja*, who are destined to be meat. On the one hand, the film celebrates Mija and *Okja*’s sisterly bond; on the other, it deals with graver environmental and ethical issues.

The meat production industry today, is one of the most callous and yet, profiting industry. The reason for this lies not in the percentage of people who support meat-eating, but in the presentation of the meat. It is the equally cut, perfectly packaged pieces of animal flesh that takes the attention off the fact that it is still a dead creature. “The words we use for meat helps us avoid thinking about the ethical implications of our diet. It is easier to order a pound of beef from the butcher than a pound of cow” (Herzog 31).

Revolving around human-animal interaction, both artists have tried to depict two different sides of this interaction. While *Alpha* talks about survival and sows the seed of human-animal companionship, *Okja* attacks consumerism and corporate exploitation of animals for mass meat production.

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*Alpha* explores the growing relationship between Alpha and Keda, who come together to survive against predators and nature. Throughout the movie, we see how Keda, although a part of the tribe, is completely different from them. When Keda attacks Alpha during the fight, he doesn't leave her injured and alone but tends to her care. He brings her water and even shares his food with her, and because of this, Alpha becomes loyal to him. Keda treats Alpha like a fellow human being, however, different in habits and language, bound together by the need for survival.

Keda was taught at the beginning of his training that whoever can't hunt shouldn't be a part of the tribe, which is similar to animal nature, where injured animals are rejected by their packs because they can not keep up. Keda, taught by his father to lead without emotion but unable to find the courage to kill the wolf, goes against his teachings and tries to help the injured wolf by carrying her into a den. This act of kindness sets Keda apart from the tribe, reinforcing the mother's fear as she says, "He could die. I am afraid. He leads with his heart, not his spear" (00:13:43-33). The father, however, seems sure of his son's strength and says, "He is stronger than you know. He is stronger than even he knows" (00:13:30-23). While Alpha and Keda find a symbiotic relationship, *Okja* tests the pre-existing bond of Mija and Okja, amidst corporate greed. Mija forces her grandfather to buy Okja back from the company, but he fails, which makes her leave for Seoul to rescue Okja. Mija's journey to Seoul can be seen quite daunting for a girl her age. Irrespective of her age, she embarks upon a dangerous journey to save her sister. The movie pans Mija's innocence, love and kindness against Lucy Mirando's ignorance, cruelty and greed. Still, another crucial part in the movie is played by The Animal Liberation Front, an organisation whose mission is to rescue all animals who have been made victims of the selfish motives of humans. The ALF helps Mija in reuniting with Okja.

While Okja is a victim of animal cruelty in the film, she also becomes the reason for the downfall of the corporation. On the final day of the competition, it comes to everyone's notice how the scientists in the laboratory test these super-piglets for accurate body fat, force mating to increase production and treat them with electric shocks to make them cooperate. The forced mating with Okja and a pig twice her size is extremely horrific to watch and even worse are the consequences of this violence. Okja, after being subjected to such treatment, bleeds into her eyes and undergoes severe trauma, as a result of which, she refuses to recognise Mija. The film doesn't just show the ugly side of meat production, but also sheds light on human apathy towards nonhuman beings. Nik Taylor writes about slaughterhouses in the following words.

Terms like "yield" and "output" are used to depersonalize the animals who are seen as stock/ products, as opposed to individuals with a life, history and individual biography. The terminology makes very clear, and acts as a constant reminder, that the primary purpose of animals at slaughterhouses is as a financial commodity. The commodification goes hand

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in hand with a stress on productive efficiency: good slaughterhouses are those that can quickly commodify living beings into meat. (93)

Understanding the political, social and cultural scenario is very important to explore how they shape the narrative and add to the viewers' understanding of historical and social practices. In the context of *Alpha* and *Okja*, these factors help in understanding the progression and evolution of human-animal relationships. *Alpha* sets the narrative in a pre-historic setting, focusing on mutual respect and interdependence between humans and animals. In contrast, *Okja* serves as a commentary on the exploitative industrial setting and commodification of animals, thereby reducing their existence to a mere profit-making means. Where *Alpha* sheds light on the evolving understanding of humans regarding animals, *Okja* addresses moral and ethical dilemmas regarding animal welfare. In *Okja*, the role of media is quite significant as the corporation labels her as a 'super-pig', reducing the value of her life and increasing demand in the audience. From *Alpha* to *Okja*, a clear turn of events can be seen in human-animal interaction.

The fact that *Okja*'s life depends on a financial exchange managed by the Corporation, shows how deep the roots are, of the commodification industry. It is extremely ironic that a living creature like *Okja* is seen equal to a gold pig, in worth. Mija however, makes her choice very clear when she says, "I want to buy *Okja* ... alive" (00:16:00-15:55). The gold pig given to Mija, by her grandfather becomes a symbol of reclamation of rights and identity. Moreover, it mirrors the shallowness of the corporation, which doesn't care about anything except money and covers its exploitation through manipulative language. As a critique of commodification of animals, *Okja* uncovers striking truths about the meat production industry. Lucy's monologue is an important part of the film as it conveys all that needs to be rectified regarding animals. Moreover, what she considers a great vision, is actually her being devoid of any feelings for animals. "Okja transcends not only geographical and cultural borders but also the human-animal divide by posing a fundamental question: should we love or eat the animal?" (Yee Ang).

In both movies, certain symbols and scenes reoccur to emphasise core ideas or to hint at the attempted social commentary. Keda's spear is a means of survival in the wilderness; however, to him, it communicates the idea that violence is necessary for survival. Similarly, the cave paintings are tangible records of *Alpha* and Keda's relationship. Moreover, it hints at the beginning of the domestication of animals. *Okja* uses two very important symbols to criticise the exploitation of animals. *Okja*, the super-pig and the golden pig, a family heirloom, can be seen in contrast to each other. *Okja* stands for life and rights and raises questions about ethics, whereas the golden pig represents materialism, commodification and greed. The slaughterhouse is the representation of the exploitative model for animals and is a critique of the meat production industry.

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As a movie about companionship and domestication, the last scene in *Alpha* is highly significant as it captures the movie's core idea. Alpha and Keda sitting together with Alpha's cubs, represents new hope for symbiotic relations between humans and animals. The companionship between Alpha and Keda can be seen as a transformative moment in human history, marking the planation of the seeds of domestication. The whole tribe going on a hunt with the wolves, hints at a cultural shift, where humans and animals can co-exist, benefiting from each other. "Today, there are more than four hundred breeds of dog, all with specialised appearance and behaviour and all derived from the wolf" (DeMello 103).

The most significant theme in *Okja* lies in the striking contrast between Mija and The Mirando Corporation. The glass wall creates a sense of unapproachableness and shows how people like Mija, who do not belong in the city, can never penetrate that wall of façade. Even though Mija fails to save all the super-pigs, the movie doesn't fail to instill hope in the audience. In the scene where Okja and Mija exit the slaughterhouse, a super-pig behind the wire hedge slides her baby towards Mija, signifying hope for her baby. Both movies end with the birth of animals, symbolising a new era that awaits humans and animals.

### **Conclusion**

From an anthropological point of view, humans finally creating a strong boundary between animals and them, did not just keep them safe, but also gave them the power to encroach upon animal territory. While humans thrived through science and invention, animals were left helpless, at the mercy of humans. Matthew Scully, expounding on the relationship between humans and animals, writes in *Dominion*, in the following words.

Animals are more than ever a test of our character are called to treat them, of mankind's capacity for empathy and for decent, honorable conduct and faithful conduct and faithful stewardship. We are called to treat them with kindness, not because they have rights or power or some claim to equality, but in a sense because they don't; because they all stand unequal and powerless before us. Animals are so easily overlooked, their interests so easily brushed aside. Whenever we humans enter their world, from our farms to the local animal shelter to the African savanna, we enter as lords of the earth bearing strange powers of terror and mercy alike. (xi-xii)

*Alpha* and *Okja* are not just stories of human-animal companionship but are tales of resilience and individuality. In today's world, where humans have occupied the first place in all sectors, such films highlight the need to revisit certain notions. Human-animal companionship has been one of the most common themes in literature, but never in the way HAS scholars discuss it. Animals have shared the planet with humans since the beginning of time, yet the point of co-existing has been a debate for as long as we can remember. The advent of modernisation made our lives significantly easy but took us too far from our nonhuman companions; the only ones left today as tamed pets in our homes. The selected

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films talk about the human-animal bond at various levels, exploring mutual care and understanding between the two species.

This research paper also aligns with the UN SDGs, specifically Goals 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and 15 (Life on Land). In today's materialist world, animals are exploited in countless ways to make profit. However, the most gruesome is the fate of those who are labelled as meat. *Okja*, therefore, is a powerful commentary against slaughterhouses and the meat production industry. Thus, such works of art play a significant role in bringing about awareness in order to create a safe space where humans and animals can coexist. The evolution of relationships between species is an inevitable phenomenon but as beings with the most agency, it is imperative for us to take action towards a better future, where all species can live in harmony.

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