

**TOGO: CAUGHT BETWEEN REMOTENESS AND RELIABILITY
FOCUSING ON HUMAN AND ANIMAL RELATIONSHIP AS A NARRATIVE
OF TRUST DURING THE TIME OF THE EPIDEMIC**

Niraj Chaudhari,
Assistant Professor,
Government College, Daman.

Abstract

It is a general cognition born out of various undesirable events in history, experienced by humans through the pages of art and literature, 'from the womb of unfortunate calamities something incredible arises.' The gravity of human emotions and their ability to form passionate and trustworthy relationships, either with humans or with animals is tested from time to time and ends up being successful in placing a mark of its kind. The history of human's reliability on animals and their exceptional bonding with each other are evident in the perception that they are undoubtedly an integral part of each other's lives and that they should not be distinguished. In the time of the emergency of any kind, the animals are proven as a trustworthy medium of communication or transmission, as well as they, found to be an extraordinary companion to humans. This paper will focus on the outstanding relationship between humans and animals that is powerfully depicted in Ericson Core's masterpiece film 'Togo' (2019), which set a new example of the narrative of faith or trust during the time of the Epidemic.

Key Words: Animal, Epidemic, Human, Narrative, Reliability, Relationship, Remoteness, Trust

**TOGO: CAUGHT BETWEEN REMOTENESS AND RELIABILITY
FOCUSING ON HUMAN AND ANIMAL RELATIONSHIP AS A NARRATIVE
OF TRUST DURING THE TIME OF THE EPIDEMIC**

- Niraj Chaudhari,

From the very initial stage of the origin of human civilization, the man was introduced with the strong sentiments of companionship, a mutual feeling, which motivated two people either of a similar gender who transformed this very feeling into a friendship or of different gender having intention to form or produce a tiny group called family. As time passed and human civilization started taking shifts towards progression man came into contact with various species including birds and animals, who he thought could be handy in the work he had been doing effortlessly. This idea of involving animals in human activity gave rise to the process of domestication of animals, which resulted in the formation of honest and trustworthy relationships between humans and animals. Through the pages of history, stories have been told about the unbroken bonding that humans and animals shared even at the moment of heavy crisis. As William Crawford Gorgas wisely puts it in his *Sanitation In Panama*,

‘In times of stress and danger such as come about as the result of an epidemic, many tragic and cruel phases of human nature are brought out, as well as many brave and unselfish ones.’
(Gorgas 67)

Ericson Core’s 2019 film *Togo* is a great example of a narrative which attempts to point out the unimaginable relationship between man and animal, and how in the difficult time this relationship has to undergo through the enigma of remoteness and reliability, but in the end, it sets a new example of love and trust between human and animal.

During the two greatest wars the world has ever fought and various critical circumstances humans came across, domesticated animals were constantly used as means of transport and communication in the past. Michael Morpurgo’s *War Horse* gives a picturesque view of how

the domesticated horses were not only used but also dealt with the utmost care and responsibility in World War I. *War Horse* also has reference to how the French Army used domesticated pigeons as messengers amid the war. These animals were listening to their masters and fighting for them with all the strength that they could gather. Set in the post-World War I period *Togo* is also an adventurous story of Leonhard Seppala and his eponymous titular sled dog based on the true event of the serum run to Nome which occurred in 1925 to transport diphtheria antitoxin serum through harsh conditions during an epidemic of Diphtheria. At the time of the Epidemic, even when it is difficult to trust humans, Togo sets a remarkable example of human and animal relationships, by successfully saving the lives of the people of Nome.

The film begins in 1925 when there is an outbreak of Diphtheria that mostly affected the children of the town named Nome in Alaska. The whole town is worried since there is no way to bring the serum from Nenana due to the severity of the weather. The only hope of the people now is Leonhard Seppala, who with his sled dogs led by Togo has a reputation of winning all Alaskan sweepstakes, is convinced to collect the serum and bring it back to save the people from the deadly disease. Putting forward the severity of storm Leonhard Seppala says, 'When an animal denies his nature and runs for the barn because he fears the storm, a man better fear the storm.' (Togo 5:32- 5:38) This indicates how well a man knows the nature of an animal, but still, he decides to collect the serum, because maybe more than Togo's nature he believes in their outstanding relationship and the unbreakable bond they share. This powerful beginning of the film showcases how the people from the town are caught between the dilemma of remoteness and reliability. Will this space between two places be successfully surpassed? Will Seppala and his sled dogs be able to make it through? And even if they do, what price will they have to pay for that? These are the questions that trouble the audience throughout the film. Whatever the situation is, the people of the town put their trust in Seppala and his sled dogs, particularly Togo, who was named after Tōgō Heihachirō admiral of the fleet in the Imperial Japanese Navy and one of Japan's greatest naval heroes. The trust all the town's people have in Seppala and Togo does not come automatically, it comes from the mutual bonding the entire town shares with these animals who are part of their lives.

The collective trauma of the people of the town is closely observed by the director through the powerful presentation of individual anxiety of the characters in the film like George Maynard the Mayor of the town, doctor Curtis Welch, and Seppala's wife Constance Seppala. On the one hand, when Constance warns Seppala saying, 'You're not prepared for what it's going to do to you, I promise you.' (Togo 12:27-12:30) We get an exact hint of what kind of psychological crisis they are going through, On the other, when she agrees to Seppala's decision of leaving the town to collect the serum she puts all her trust in Togo saying, 'Hey. Hey. you bring him back to me, okay? And you come back to me.' (Togo, 15:33-15:40) In such extreme circumstances when everything is almost at stake when it is almost obvious that this geographical vacuum is ready to devour everything that comes in its way, Constance and the people of Nome rely on a flock of animals and their master.

The story of the film moves in a flashback manner where Seppala tries to get away with a new born Siberian Husky pup due to his vulnerable disposition, whereas Constance convinces him to raise him with the other sled dogs. To everyone's astonishment, the small puppy does not bear to be away from Seppala and persistently escapes the kennel to be with him when he is out for training his other dogs. Tired of his teasing, Seppala tries to give away the Husky twice, but his efforts turn out to be futile since the puppy comes back to him victoriously. There is a similarity between this incident in Togo and at the beginning of Lasse Hallstrom's family drama film *Hachi: A Dog's Tale* (2009), where Parker Wilson professor of music, finds a lost puppy on the station platform. When the puppy remains unclaimed professor, himself keeps him and names him Hachi when his Japanese professor friend Ken insists on him as he sees Japanese character eight ("Hachi" in Japanese) on his collar tag. Hachi, who is now grown up, starts following Parker to the station and refuses to go home after Parker's continuous insistence, and even when he agrees to go home, he always comes to attend Parker at the time of his arrival. Similarly, in John Kent Harrison's 2004, war drama *A Bear Named Winnie* set in the backdrop of world war I, based on the fictional character of an anthropomorphic teddy bear namely Winnie the Pooh created by English author A.A. Milne, inspired by Lieutenant Harry Colebourn a Canadian veterinarian and soldier and his bear cub named Winnie which he donated to London Zoo, we found that how initially Lieutenant has to abandon Winnie in Forrest as it is ordered by General

Hallhollandhe, but she comes back all the times to their surprise. In all these circumstances one can distinctly observe that there is a small string of an attachment that binds the human and animal together and eventually the bond becomes inseparable. When Parker's wife Cate was asked the question by their grandson Ronnie: 'Where did Grandpa find Hachi ?'(Hachi 1:20:6-1:20:8) Cate answers him saying, 'Ronnie, actually, Hachi found your grandfather.'(Hachi 1:20:9-1:20:12) It is true in the case of Hachi, Winnie, and most importantly Togo that they were the ones who initially put their trust in their masters and couldn't bear to be away from them, and they were ready to go through every hardship to win the heart of their masters. Togo's continuous persuasion of Seppala is the reason that after abandoning him twice, Seppala decides to run him with a sled with other dogs, and that's where the story change, that's where the audiences come to know that this small husky cannot bear to be away from Seppala and is ready to sacrifice everything to gain his reliance, that's where the narrative of trust begins. When Seppala harnesses the puppy with the sled he comes to know that the husky has the ability to outrun the other dogs and he is capable to lead the sled, that's when he becomes his lead and when with the first ride itself Togo wins Seppala's heart he names him Togo after the famous Tōgō Heihachirō. Now when they have come a long way to defeat this pandemic when they have spent years with each other, Seppala who was once ready to give away Togo, cannot even bear to think of what he was about to do in the past, when Seppala's friend Tulimak praises Togo saying,

'I only tolerate you because I like your little dog. There are advantages to being at this roadhouse on race days. Most dogs, when they reach Shaktoolik, have worry in their eyes. This one never. This one wants to hurry up and win so he can chase caribou and fight polar bears.'

(Togo 43:28- 43- 55)

Seppala with a regret confesses, 'I tried to give him away, you know. Twice.' (Togo 43:58-43:60) Seppala's honest confession indicates how Togo's trust in him captured his heart and soul.

While Seppala and Togo are out on the way to Nenana people of Nome are waiting for their arrival holding all the trauma inside. After twelve hours of Seppala's departure, the Governor comes up with the option of relay run, Listening to this news Constance hastens to meet Jafet Lindberg and the Mayor when she comes to know that fourteen relays are running from Nenana one after another carrying the serum and they are planning to meet Seppala at

the roadhouse all of them are worried, because according to Constance, Seppala might have crossed the roadhouse already, and they are afraid that he might not meet on the way to Henry the musher who is bringing the serum from another side. With a hint of panic, Constance argues,

‘There are a thousand ways a driver can miss another on the trail. A thousand ways in good weather. You know this. So, if my husband doesn’t magically run into your relay team, the one he is not even looking for, he and his dogs will drive on for Nenana. And your relay driver, when he realizes he’s missed them, he will set out on his own.’ (Togo 55:40-56:19)

Ironically, they cannot do anything but wait, since there is nothing that can be done. The incident strongly highlights the one-sided initiative that the government has indirectly imposed on the people of Nome which can possibly lead every one of them into nothing as if they don’t even exist. Had it not been Seppala and Togo what would have happened who would have created the breach between this physical as well as psychological remoteness and reliability? The question remains unanswered. The waiting of the people is highly symbolic in the Epidemic narratives since the time plays a principal role in such a critical situation. People wait for the miracle to happen. In his novel *Blindness* Jose Saramago wisely states,

‘you have to wait, give it time, it’s time that rules, time is our gambling partner on the other side of the table and it holds all the cards of the deck in its hand, we have to guess the winning cards of life, our lives,’ (Blindness, 317)

and that’s what the people do. They wait until all of them eventually start to recover from the disease called “White Blindness”, and that’s what the people from Nome have to do. They have to wait.

Having collected the serum from Henry, on the way back to Nome, Seppala again takes the same route across the sound, but this time it is riskier since the ice is breaking apart. Togo rescues the whole team including Seppala by pulling a huge piece of ice as they are stuck with it. The similar incidents take place in *The Call of The Wild*, where Perrault and Françoise are rescued by Buck from a deadly avalanche. That’s how he wins their hearts. These incidences exhibit how far an animal can go to prove his loyalty towards the human. They show how a strong and honest bond of friendship can be formed between them. Passing off the serum to the fellow musher Gunar Kaasen’s hand Seppala and his sled team led by

magnificent Togo execute the mission successfully. He is just worried about Togo since he is wounded and dying. When they return to Nome, the entire town comes to Seppala's home to celebrate their success. Though Seppala is upset about Togo's health, he continues his training without Togo, but Togo couldn't live without Seppala as soon as he goes beyond his sight Togo follows him, Seppala couldn't help welcoming him with open arms. Eventually, Seppala realizes what Togo wants is not sled but him and he says, 'I always thought he lived for the sled. What he lived for, was me.' (Togo 1:41:48-1:41:53)

Togo dies two years after the Epidemic, leaving an unforgettable mark of friendship and love in the soil of Nome. The film ends with Seppala remembering Togo whenever he crosses the routes they have trodden together. This significant ending of the film symbolizes the eternal warmth he carries in his heart for Togo. When he says, 'If you were lucky enough to know a great one, they never really leave. They stay with you as long as you live. Harnessed to your heart, giving their all.' He strongly believes that Togo can never leave him; he will always be around him, as he used to be. Seppala's belief is similar to Hachi's, who waits for Parker at the railway station until he dies, poor soul doesn't have an idea that the person he is waiting for for the last nine years died the very day when he did not return home for the first time and kept him waiting. Had Hachi not died he would have waited for Parker for the ages. In *War Horse* also we see how impossible it is for Joyie to forget anything about Albert even his whistle which imitated the stuttering call of an owl. In *The Call of The Wild*, as Jack London pointed it out at the end of the novel,

'He crosses alone from the smiling timber land and comes down into an open space among the trees. Here a yellow stream flows from rotted moose-hide sacks and sinks into the ground, with long grasses growing through it and vegetable mould overrunning it and hiding its yellow from the sun; and here he muses for a time, howling once, long and mournfully, ere he departs.' (London 55).

Each year Buck returns to the campsite, where he spent his last moments with Thornton, Hans, and Pete to mourn their death before he returns to the wild. So is Seppala having Togo's visions, whenever he tramples the path, they both would trample together.

Conclusion:

Breaking the cliché of the long-term celebration of a human to human relationships, Togo becomes an example of those rare narratives of trust between humans and animals that are

celebrated once in the ages. Togo's attachment towards Seppala is no less than the attachment two human friends share with each other. Perhaps it is more genuine and honest. Caught between the anxiety of remoteness and reliability, Togo provides us a potentially capable posthuman perspective of life beyond human limitations, which opens up the doors to various possibilities that are beyond human reach. The relationship between Seppala and Togo, their collective resistance against the unfortunate catastrophe, their trust beyond human belief, changes everything once and for all. Most importantly it changes the idea of heroism for eleven years old Ronnie, as he says,

'I never met my grandfather, he died when I was just a little baby. But when I hear about him and Hachi, I feel like I know him. They taught me the meaning of loyalty. That you should never forget anyone that you loved. And that's why Hachi will forever be my hero.' (Hachi 1:23:36-1:23:58)

Work Cited:

- *A Bear Named Winnie*. Directed by John Kent Harrison, Performance by Michael Fassbender and Gil Bellows, FilmRise, 2004.
- Gorgas, William Crawford. *Sanitation In Panama*. New York and London, D. Appleton and Company, 1915.
- *Hachi: A Dog's Tale*. Directed by Lasse Hallstrom, Performance by Richard Gere and Joan Allen, Blue Lion Entertainment Co., 2009.
- London, Jack. *The Call of the Wild*. Amazon Classics, Kindle Edition, 1903.
- Morpurgo, Michael. *War Horse*. Scholastic Press, Kindle Edition, 2010.
- Saramago, José. *Blindness*. Translated by Giovanni Pontiero, Vintage-Random House, Kindle Edition, 1997.
- *The Call of the Wild*. Directed by Chris Sanders, performance by Harrison Ford and Dan Stevens, 20th Century Studios, 2020.
- *Togo*. Directed by Ericson Core, performance by Willem Dafoe and Julianne Nicholson, Walt Disney Pictures, 2019.

- *War Horse*. Directed by Steven Spielberg, performance by Jeremy Irvine and Tom Hiddleston, DreamWorks Pictures, 2011.

