

Aminatta Forna and the Concept of Happiness

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Aminatta Forna's latest novel, *Happiness*, has deservedly won commendations from eminent critics and reviewers such as Salman Rushdie. Some readers, however, while being sensitive to its charm, to the elegance of the writing, to the power of the description and the remarkable use of detail, might find the relationship between the title and the numerous concerns of the novel rather problematic. Although titles do not always suggest the main concerns of the novel, they can act as significant pointers. This novel lays hands on apparently disparate elements such as the need to protect animals and other endangered species, the search for a disturbed young boy whose mother has been wrongfully detained by British immigration authorities, the need to care for a once brilliant scientist now suffering from Alzheimer's, the psychiatric issues involved in the defense of a young widow accused of arson, and the brutalities perpetrated by humans all over the world. Some readers might wonder whether there is a central focus and whether that focus is indeed happiness. Essentially, the main issue is how the concept of happiness fits into all of this. And yet, it is the argument of this paper that *Happiness* possesses an overarching common thread and manifests an overwhelming central concern.

On the surface, it might seem that the novel's central concern is the need to preserve the balance of nature and to condemn all those who would disturb that balance or fail to recognize man's place in that equilibrium. The novel would therefore fit admirably into the burgeoning field of eco-criticism and contemporary writers' and critics' concern with the environment. This paper suggests, however, that Forna's central concern goes well beyond that because it includes, not just Jean's activities, which have to do with nature and the environment, but also Attila's, which take up a considerable portion of the novel. I would suggest that the central concern is nature in general, and this includes not just ecological nature, but also aspects of human nature. The novel is concerned with being natural or unnatural, responding to nature's rhythms but also to the most commendable aspects of human nature such as empathy, compassion, and respect for human dignity and the sacredness of human life. This ties in with the concept of happiness, for Forna's conception of happiness is related to nature. She seems to be suggesting that happiness does not consist in achieving the perfection of nature, which is what most people would like because nature is not perfect; if it were, we would have achieved the biblical environment where lions and lambs live peacefully together.

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We must accept the qualities and natures of both lions and lambs because this is as nature would have it and not persecute creatures such as lions, wolves, or coyotes. Happiness consists precisely in realizing nature's imperfection, doing one's best to maintain the equilibrium, bringing out the best in one's own nature, being natural and spontaneous like the Cubans, and holding on to the bulwark of hope.

The novel foregrounds the activities of two main characters: Jean is a brilliant scientist involved in a study of urban foxes in London and in a crusade to protect these foxes and similar animals; Attila is a world-renowned African psychiatrist who is in London to attend a conference on trauma but gets involved in a search for his niece and her son, in caring for a scientist friend now suffering from Alzheimer's, and in the defense of a Sierra Leonean woman, Adama Sheriff, accused of arson, whose lawyers intend to mount a defense of post-traumatic stress disorder. The novel consists of sections in italics taking the reader to the past experiences of both Jean and Attila in the United States and various other parts of the world, alternating with sections in normal script describing activities in the present.

As already indicated, preserving the balance of nature is one of the novel's major issues. It is also Jean's major preoccupation. She has already done a study of coyotes, but is presently in London tracking the behavior of tagged urban foxes. Forná's message, apparently, is that these animals are part of nature and part of creation, and as such they have as much right to exist as human beings do. This is nature as it is, and we should not be striving for a perfect nature in which coyotes and foxes are either completely eliminated or coexist peacefully with lambs. Any attempt to exterminate them is therefore a wanton refusal to recognize nature's equilibrium and an irresponsible attempt to destroy its balance. It also amounts to being "unnatural." The narrative asserts that "foxes are here because humans are here, so, too, are rats and mice and pigeons" (130). Of course, there are those who would argue that although they can accept coexistence with pigeons, rats are an entirely different matter. They can carry disease and were generally considered the main agents of the "black death" among other diseases. The question inevitably arises: must man be expected to coexist with those aspects of creation normally considered to be pests that might pose a threat to the lives of many? One can easily imagine a situation in which lions, tigers, coyotes, wolves, and foxes are allowed to live and might even be protected as long as they stay in their own habitat and do not invade that of humans. But can one say the same about mosquitoes and tsetse flies? The whole concept of the peaceful coexistence of man with other elements of creation is a very complicated one.

The notion of urban foxes suggests that the foxes have migrated from their own habitat and invaded that of humans, and it is a rejection of the conventional view that animals belong in the countryside, not in the city. Forná suggests, however, with the undoubted backing of a number of experts on the issue, that the foxes have migrated to the city because humans, oblivious of their real place in the equilibrium of nature, have invaded their habitat. With the growth of cities and the need for more and more arable land to supply the desires of humans, the animals' habitat has been shrinking. In most cases, the movement of animals in or near the urban areas is a direct response to actions by humans. The coyotes, for instance, have been victims of this human aggression. As the narrative asserts, "with humans gone the deer and the coyotes would probably return to the habitat from which they had been ousted" (130).

That statement also suggests an extremely important issue that *Forna* confronts: the concept of adaptation and adjustment to the changing landscape of nature in order to ensure survival. The entire tenor of the novel suggests that animals, or even other aspects of nature such as trees and plants, have been much more successful at adapting and adjusting than humans have been. Again and again the novel lays stress on the cleverness of animals, displayed not just in their adaptability, but in their capacity to outwit humans. Coyotes, for instance, are described as “masters in the art of disguise and master illusionists” (43). Humans, at their best, are capable of adapting, like Attila who is at home in almost any situation. Generally speaking, however, animals and other forms of nature have the head start. As the author says referring to the birds, “they were an example of nature’s immeasurable adaptability. Animals adjusted to survive despite the efforts of man” (101). To show their respect for the balance of nature, humans must learn to coexist with the other elements of nature. This is one of the reasons for the prominence of the urban foxes who have learned and are prepared to coexist with humans in an urban setting. They are not bothered by humans because they have learned to live with humans, though humans have not learned to live with them. The same is true of the coyotes: “In towns and cities across the country coyotes lived side by side with men, though only the coyotes knew it” (239).

Far from being willing to coexist with other elements of nature, however, humans have emerged as the real predators and destroyers. Humans have therefore assumed some of the worst qualities that used to be associated with animals, while animals are seen in a much better light, either as victims of humans’ brutality or as more resilient or cooperative species.

In this connection, it will be helpful to take an extended look at the very first section of the novel entitled “The Last Wolf,” where a man called “the Wolfer” offers his professional services to an American community to exterminate the wolves in the area. The name “the Wolfer” suggests that the man, not the wolf, is the predator. Worthy of note is the author’s compelling rhetoric, which moves the reader toward total identification with the wolf, whatever our own normal views of wolves may have been, and total condemnation of the brutality, inhumanity, and “unnaturalness” of the wolfer. We see the complete insensitivity and callousness with which he calculates the profits he’ll make from his nefarious activities and as he makes his unnatural plans for killing the wolf, plans that will also lead to the deaths of two innocent dogs that he involves in his brutal plans. The Wolfer is a dishonest con man who glories in his unspeakable brutality. He is also presented as a coward who cannot confront the wolves on equal terms because they are cleverer and more competent than he is, so he resorts to using poisoned baits that kill, not just the wolves but innocent foxes. When the poison fails, he uses a live hare as bait, but the next morning the hare is found frozen to death. All this amounts to the most wanton destruction of nature. In the end he kills not only the wolf but the wolf’s mate, leaving their orphaned cubs to perish. The utterly insensitive and narcissistic wolfer then throws the corpse of the female dog into a ravine because it is useful to him no longer and attaches that of the male dog to the back of his horse because its mangled corpse would attest to the brute strength of the wolf he has succeeded in killing. He then drags the carcass of the wolf behind his horse as he rides through the village.

The author’s condemnation extends to the community the Wolfer pretends to serve. Its viciousness is exposed as its members tell all kinds of lies to persuade the Wolfer

to kill the wolf. In one of the stories, the Wolfer, in an attempt to bolster his reputation and establish his credentials, tells the community about “the queen wolf of Colorado ... roped and quartered by four horsemen riding in different directions... . Two hundred Christian folk had gathered to see the captured wolf brought in on the back of a cart” (3). There are surely associations with lynching here, and we cannot miss the sarcasm in the phrase “two hundred Christian folk.” When the Wolfer eventually kills the wolf and the people come to see it, we contrast their barbarity with the wolf’s nobility. “In the main square where the gibbet once stood, they strung the wolf up by the neck, until its eyes bulged and its tongue lolled, and they beat its body with poles” (7). These people could actually have been mangling the body of a human being as their ancestors once did to actual human beings whom they saw as animals.

One of the most noticeable and impressive of the author’s techniques is the constant juxtaposition of the activities of animals with those of humans. The effect is to suggest that in many ways animals are like humans and vice versa. For instance, a woman who is showing Jean some properties “reminded her of an anxious dog gnawing its paws” (20). When Attila enters the scene, he, like the fox, is alone “in a dark place surrounded by strangers” (10). In matters of sexuality there is much similarity. The vixen, like human beings, “was laying its claim to a small territory she could call her own and then in the next few weeks she’d begin her search for a mate.” We are also told that Jean “envied a creature like Light Bright who carved out her own territory and built herself a den and only then searched for a mate” (97). Light Bright’s howling in search for a mate is juxtaposed with Jean’s going out to meet the American. She, like Jean, reserves the right to choose her mate. This juxtaposition applies to more sinister matters as well. The episode about the fox attacking cats is juxtaposed with humans going to war and committing atrocities. Indeed there is the suggestion that, far from being better, humans are worse in this respect than animals. In Attila’s words, “war is in the blood of humans” (118).

Jean’s search for the tagged foxes in order to protect them, and Attila’s search, first for Ama and then for Tano, constitute the main action of the novel. One is a search for human beings, the other is a search for animals, but the two searches are similar. The human beings and the foxes have been objects of persecution and cruelty, and both Jean and Attila are, in a sense, agents of rescue. They are both experts trying to save God’s creatures, and they are kindred spirits, both very knowledgeable scientists who are upright and compassionate and prepared to stand up for the objective truth. It is not surprising that Jean gets drawn into the search for Tano and, once the boy is found, assumes the responsibility of caring for him, just as Attila cares for Rosie. Both are responding to the best instincts of their nature; both are being “natural.” Both searches demand systematic and meticulous work and bring out the professionalism in both individuals. Indeed, the expertise that Jean has acquired in the search for the foxes proves invaluable in the search for Tano, and Tano, the object of the search, behaves like a hunted, insecure animal. “Once he had run away he’d head home obviously, all animals do, he’d head back to the den... . Foxes stake out an area and then stay in it... . The boy is no different. He’s going to stay where he feels most secure (84).

The novel is replete with scenes demonstrating not only humans’ irrational and unnatural hostility to some animals, but also man’s unnatural inhumanity and brutality toward his fellowman. The main reason for Attila’s prominence in the novel is not just

that he has a brief relationship with Jean but that his profession has taken him to various places in Europe, Africa, and Asia that have been plunged into mindless civil wars where thousands of lives have been lost or irrevocably damaged. One of the most memorable scenes in the novel relates to the war involving Bosnia:

They were silent. The Kenyan twirled the tea bag: "The first day here we went out on Patrol through the villages to the east. Most people had gone and the houses were empty, our orders were to enter and make checks. We were afraid of mines." He shook his head, picked up a long-handled spoon and squeezed the tea bag against the side of the glass. "There were no mines, at least we had God to thank for that. Outside a house I found the body of a woman. I went through the back door into the kitchen. I searched upstairs and came down, I found nothing. Only there was a bad smell. When I passed through the kitchen, I noticed something I had not noticed on my way in, a large pot on the stove. There was a baby's body sticking out of it. Someone had taken this woman's baby and pushed it head down into the meal she had been cooking. The skull had burst, the brains ...' He shook his head and placed the long-handled spoon on the saucer. He did not drink his tea. (66)

One wonders how human beings could do this to their own kind. Animals, at least, do not descend to this level. It is now human beings who behave as animals were once thought to behave. At times brutality toward animals is juxtaposed with brutality toward human beings. The killing of the wolves and coyotes, particularly by the wolfer to whom a statue is erected, is juxtaposed with the near-extirpation of Native Americans, a genocidal activity comparable to what happened in Bosnia. The following passage, though literally describing pointless brutality toward an animal, is surely meant to evoke similar instances of man's brutality toward other humans. It is surely reminiscent of the days of hanging, quartering, and beheading. "And on a stick, pushed into the earth close to the fire, as though it were a guest at the barbecue of its own flesh, was the head of the animal" (240).

Trauma is at the core of this novel's concerns: trauma suffered by both animals and humans. As a psychiatrist, one of Attila's main areas of interest is individuals who have been traumatized and are suffering as a result of the unnatural barbarism of their fellow men. In a sense, both Tano and his mother are victims of trauma, both suffering as a result of the relentless persecution of some in authority. But the most obvious victim of trauma is Adama Sheriff, who has lost her husband and is on trial on a charge of arson. The defense enlists Attila's expert support to demonstrate to the court that Adama is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. It is made clear, however, that Adama's suffering has been caused, not so much by her husband's death in an accident as by the antagonism of her British community. In a bid to further demonstrate the connectivity between the protection of endangered animals and the protection of people, one of the novel's aspects that some might find puzzling, Fornia shows that it is not only humans that are traumatized, but animals are as well. Indeed there is a suggestion that animals are more traumatized than humans because many of the so-called human trauma victims are fraudulent anyway. One of the most powerful passages in the novel is that describing a wall replacing a median on the highway. The animals, who cannot leap over the wall, are either run over or die of terror. The wall is unnatural and traumatizes the foxes. "Where once an animal took their chances crossing the highway, with the introduction

of jersey barriers they became trapped halfway across between an impassable wall and rushing traffic. Either they were hit by a car or died of terror” (172).

The prospect for humans is much better because their suffering does not necessarily cause damage. Natural resilience makes it possible for humans to emerge out of the suffering stronger and healthier than before. This is the point that Attila wishes to make about Adama’s case and to the prestigious conference of psychiatrists at which he has to deliver a keynote address.

All this leads us back to the concept of happiness and the relation between the novel and its title. In a sense, both Jean and Attila are searching for happiness in a very turbulent world. The question that many will ask is, How can the main issue be happiness in a novel that deals with so much suffering, brutality, and inhumanity? The simple answer is that happiness is being offered as an alternative to the very suffering and misery that pervade. But this is too simplistic, and it does not solve the problem of how that alternative is to be achieved.

There are several references to happiness in the novel. Here is an example: “The trouble with happiness, thought Attila, was that people were led to believe happiness ... was man’s state of nature... . But they were mistaken” (290). This is an extremely relevant statement because it points to the relationship between the book’s title (involving the concept of happiness or what man considers happiness to be) and a natural, unspoiled state of nature in which, presumably, man and other forms of nature, such as animals, live in mutual happiness or mutual antagonism. The concept of happiness, therefore, is related to man’s attitude toward the balance of nature and therefore to the concern of the environmentalists. Attila rejects the widely accepted view that man would be happy if he were to return to a prelapsarian state because nature was meant to be perfect and the prelapsarian state was perfect. Nature in this context is not just ecological nature, but also the nature of man, a nature that did not cause man to be brutal to animals or to persecute his fellow man. As Quell puts it, “This is how most people want to live... . They want to be safe, they want to be comfortable, they want to believe they are in control of their lives, and they want that thing we call freedom” (206). This would be perfect happiness, however, it is unattainable because nature is not perfect. Nature is not prelapsarian. To aspire to this kind of state is to refuse to accept the animal in us and therefore our relationship with other animals. The message here is similar to Jonathan Swift’s in *Gulliver’s Travels*,¹ where he ridicules those who claim that nature is perfect or that man is the perfection of virtue or the perfection of nature. To demonstrate that man cannot be perfect, he shows us what we have to contend with in the filthy yahoos. It is for this reason that, although this is clearly an environmentalist novel, there is no romantic glorification of nature. The real nature is one in which a pigeon can be efficiently killed by a falcon or a coyote could devour a lamb even before it is properly delivered. This is the way of an imperfect nature, and we must accept it. But this should not be cause for despair. While accepting the limitations, man can still make a determined effort to be better than he is, to be the best that he could possibly be. He could also strive to make nature more welcoming and comfortable for himself and other species.

Happiness consists, therefore, not in striving after an unattainable prelapsarian state, not in achieving the perfection of nature, not in acquiring material possessions, but

1 Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, ed. Albert Rivero (New York: Norton, 2002).

in being oneself, being natural and spontaneous, like the Cubans; responding to the rhythms of nature and being at home in nature, like Jean; having the courage of one's convictions and stating one's views honestly and frankly, like Jean and Attila; doing what one was put on this earth to do to the best of one's ability and realizing one's best potential, also like Jean and Attila. Above all, it includes keeping hope alive. "I am hopeful, Komba had said, I am hopeful. He did not say, I am happy. That was his outlook on life. Another person might have talked about happiness; but Komba did not. Hope was of a different order from happiness" (290).