



# “AN ANALYTICAL STUDY: EMPLOYING ECOFEMINIST IN NICHOLAS EVANS’ NOVEL *THE HORSE WHISPERER* FROM HORSE-ASSISTED THERAPY PERSPECTIVE”

<sup>1\*</sup>Bassim Mohammad Ali Al-Masri

Al al - Bayt University

## Abstract

This article aims to examine the healing power of human-horse relationships in the horse whisperer, Nicholas Evans, 1997, by employing Ecofeminism theory and Horse-Assisted Therapy (HAT). This study attempts to answer the following question: what is the nature of the human-horse relationship in the selected texts? In addition, this article discusses *The Horse Whisperer* from a psychological perspective in general and the method of horse-assisted therapy in particular. It examines how female characters such as Grace Maclean, Annie Graves, and Brynn Seymour relied on horses in their healing journeys. Their physical injuries and psychological wounds, whether originated in childhood or occurred after tragic accidents, caused the female characters to experience negative emotions strongly associated with fear, shame, stress, anxiety, and depression. To get out of their misery and paralyzing conditions, female characters found a great deal of help in boosting and enhancing their closeness and interactions with horses.

**Keywords:** psychology, horse-assisted therapy (HAT), ecofeminism, *The Horse Whisperer*.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Horses have a variety of interesting and attractive ways of showing care, love, and admiration of their human counterparts. It is known that from “antiquity until the 1930s, horses were fully present in the day-to-day world (Edwards, Enenkel & Graham, 2011). However, modernity marks the end of the classical human-animal deep bond, as well as the exclusion of animals from real modern life. As a result, most people only see animals in cartoons and zoos. Horses were an essential part of human lives; they have practical applications in so many areas. Horses were used by humans for sports, companionship, and as a working animal (Merkies & Franzin, 2021). The use of horses is primarily determined by the cultural and economic backgrounds in which they exist; they are in high demand for work in poor countries, which has an impact on the owner's financial situation. In high-income countries, horses are mostly used for sports, breeding, animal assisted therapy, or as companions (Lönker, Fechner & Abd El Wahed, 2020).

Their permanent presence in people's lives established the foundation for close connections between people and their horses. However, machines in modern times have occupied the place of horses. Horses possess high intelligence, and they “can experience emotions such as pain and fear” (DuBois, Nakonechny, Derisoud & Merkies, 2018, p.1). Close relationships with domestic pets, according to human-animal relationship research, may have therapeutic effects on humans. It is established that every “horse has its own distinct personality, attitude and moods” (Bronkhorst, 2009, p. 24). There has been a growing interest in the ways in which animals have been used to benefit humans psychologically; that animals have particular criteria is a vital part of a therapy might help enhance human's lives physically, mentally and socially. Horses are among the most important animals and they play as an essential role in the treatment of humans. They “have been a part of the physical therapy field since the early 70s and are more recently playing a role in the field of mental health” (Rothe, Torres, Soler & Molina, 2005, p. 374). The social environment of the horse will also influence their voluntary interactions with humans (Søndergaard & Halekoh, 2003).

This study aims to explore the nature of human horse relationships, in the selected texts, examine the connection between ecofeminism and the therapeutics effect of these relationships. The study represents the healing of horses and the power of the human animal relationships. The novels promote characters, who approach healing and overcome with obstacles. The analysis in this study will be based in the study on psychological theory in

general and animal-assisted therapy or horse-assisted therapy (HAT) in particular. Horse-assisted therapy (HAT) “uses equines in the treatment of disorders associated with several neurological and neuromuscular pathologies” (Sánchez, Castro, Herrera & Juárez, 2014, p.87).

The significance of the horse-human relationship is highlighted in the trauma healing process. It indicates that this relationship helps individuals obtain confidence, trust, and self-worth which are vital in the healing process as a whole. Moreover, these characteristics can be gained through engagement with horses (Yorke, Adams & Coady, 2008).

## 2. LITERATURE OF REVIEW

### 2.1 Animal-Assisted Therapy

it is important to keep in mind that the “use of animals to assist human therapeutic activities has a long history, but extensive, documented, and organized use is relatively new” (Beck, 2000, p.22). Animal Assisted Therapy has been presented throughout human history; it is tied to the ideals of healing and illness. “Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) is a goal-directed intervention in which an animal that meets specific criteria is an integral part of the treatment process” (Beck, 2000, p.20). As a result, the animal is not only a fulfillment of these ideas, but also a submission to the supernatural or scientific beliefs and laws that they are integrated with.

The human-animal bond has been linked to positive outcomes throughout history. Animal treatment has also been shown to have several positive results that can be verified subjectively, when people measure their own improvement, and subjectively when evaluation of a person’s psychological state is done by professionals. Furthermore, evidence suggests that human contact with animals may help to prevent heart disease and high blood pressure. Interaction with animals may also help determine or detect some diseases in their early stages.

Animals have been used in therapeutic settings for a long time, but prior to that, interactions with animals’ enhanced people’s physical and mental health. Let us keep in mind that animals may provide entertainment or the pleasures of pet ownership, and they can leave a positive impact on more than one person than conventional treatments. It is also important to note that the animals are expected “to provide a diversion or the joys traditionally associated with pet care. These expectations may be correct, as often the best “medicines” are appropriate concentrations of what is generally beneficial” (Beck, 2000, p. 23). The primary goal of AAT is to

strengthen the therapeutic connection and to ensure that the person's mental conditions improve, but it may also be used to begin a patient's psyche analysis, deal with cognitive distortion, or improve behavioral skills.

To begin with, introducing a therapy animal to sessions may make it simpler for therapists to connect with and improve their understanding of their patients. It is worth mentioning here that verbal communication with an animal generates positive results for the animal involved in the treatment process. Furthermore, it tends to strengthen the relationship between the patient and the therapy animal. The therapeutic partnership entails the mutual and collaborative formation of goals and intentions for each session, as well as the establishment of an emotional bond between the therapist and patient (Compitus, 2021).

Beetz, Uvnäs-Moberg, Julius & Kotrschal (2012), maintain that the beneficial outcomes of human-animal interaction (HAI) are manifested in various areas and in individuals of varying ages, regardless of any specific medical or psychological health states. They state that the "findings indicate that interactions with animals can improve societal focus, interpersonal communication, emotional state, and stress-inducing factors such as cortisol levels, heart rate, and blood pressure" (Beetz, et al, p. 10). This engagement can help improve the patient's mental and physical health and assist them while trying to overcome his or her condition in order to be able to reintegrate socially into their communities.

## 2.2 Horse Assisted Therapy

Today, the number of individuals suffering from mental, behavioral and physical health concerns is increasing, and this sort of treatment dates back to the 18th century. Animals such as rabbits, dogs, chickens, and horses are involved in the processes that rely on animal treatment; their presence influences the treatments; horses are a good example of this. Because of their stature as magnificent creatures and sensitivity, they are especially and regularly employed in Animal Assisted Therapy. In a therapeutic environment, it is sometimes used to generate an atmosphere through treatment activities Buck, Bean & De Marco, 2017).

Horse Assisted Therapy (HAT), as the name indicates, is a more specific and narrower than the general frame of Animal Assisted Therapy. It is a method that uses horses in an appropriate setting to cure humans who are

physically or mentally ill, with the assistance of a therapist who helps the patients in reaching their treatment goals. There is a variety of regulations and processes that must be followed for this goal, especially when dealing with traumatic circumstances. Horses may appear to be a simple concept, but quiet and well-trained horses are required. A therapist must also be effective in their therapy procedures and preparation (Robinson, 2022).

According to Buck, Bean and De Marco, (2017), horses are prey animals and are considered particularly appropriate for psychotherapy treatment; they can accurately deal with emergency cases in their environment, keep the herd secure, can run away when they feel danger, and stay closer to their herd to protect each other. People identify the behavior of horses and their feelings when they interact with the herd, granting them the opportunity to reconsider the relevance of their relationship, especially during stressful, furious, or dreadful situations.

Horses may detect persistent memories for specific persons based on past experiences and nuanced emotional displays. Chiara Scopaetla (2019), conducted a study that “described how horses are able to form long-lasting memories of specific human individuals only by the previous observation of these individuals’ subtle emotional expressions in pictures”( Chiara Scopaetla, 2019, p.7). Horses may form connections with good memory by rewarding them with grain and fruits such as carrots or apples. It has also been shown that horses can react to and recognize humans based on past interactions. As a result, horses, according to Scopaetla (2019), can discern between positive and negative interactions since they are associated with a pleasant experience that is likely to be recalled. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is connected to harm, be it mental or physical, and is usually resulted from exposure to severe bodily pain, death, sexual abuse and other causes. PTSD is widespread with disabling conditions that lead to re-experiencing such past experiences with all they entail of pain. Persons with PTSD experience the past incidents in the form of nightmares and undesirable memories and, of course, they attempt to avoid such negative emotions and feelings. PTSD is usually long-lived and extends for years, which can lead to dysfunctional behaviors.

Despite the absence of scientific research, Equine-Assisted Therapy (EAT) for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has gained significant improvements. The majority of the cases that utilize Animal assisted therapy include horses as horseback riding practices frequently enhance the process of physical and mental therapy. It is worth mentioning that “therapeutic activities with horses are widely used also in individuals with autism

spectrum disorder” (Scopa, Contalbrigo, Greco, Lanatà, Scilingo & Baragli, 2019, p. 8). Patients have had a number of beneficial impacts in the areas of social, communication/language, stress/behavior, and a decrease in autistic symptoms.

### 2.3 Ecofeminism: Theoretical Views

In the novel, the ecofeminism themes and horse-assisted therapy play significant roles in the narratives. These themes are intertwined, highlighting the connection between human and non-human animals, as well as the importance of respecting and nurturing the natural world.

It was in the late nineteenth century that female authors have argued that Western women and horses have an innate connection. The relationship is commonly categorized as one of female empowerment and freedom. Female equestrianism plays “a vital role in tackling women's oppression and their status in a masculinized society” (Savvides, 2011, p. 60). Woman-horse relationships emerge from a symbolic woman-animal connection that is “rooted in a dualistic separation of feminized nature/emotion from masculinized science/rationality” (Savvides, 2011, p. 61). Horseback riding was strongly linked with men's masculinity, however, riding a horse has also changed gender codes; horses and equestrian sports are now gender coded as female who has been engaged in this type of sport to gain more opportunities to participate in championships (Hedenborg & White, 2012). It is abundantly obvious that the woman-horse relationship has served as a fertile ground for addressing ecofeminism ideas.

### 2.4 *The Horse Whisperer*

Kolona Budi Lestari in “*The Horse Whisperer*’s Novel's Psychological Conflicts of Annie Character Written by Nicholas Evans (1997), investigates both intrinsic and extrinsic components present in Nicholas Evans’ novel (1995). Intrinsic elements are the components that make up the literary works such as plot, conflict and setting (p.3). While the extrinsic element investigates the main character utilizing the psychoanalysis in *The Horse Whisperer* and examines the text thoroughly, utilizing Sigmund Freud's Psychological Theory of the Id, Ego, and Superego. This article analyzes the power struggle that the protagonist experiences in novel. Additionally, this article attempts to answer the following questions: How are the theories of the Id, Ego, and Superego applied to the novel's protagonists' psychological conflicts? And how do intrinsic elements work to build the story of the



novel? The author of the article finds out that the novelist depicts multiple psychological characteristics that make this novel appealing.

This study may fill a gap in the literature by adopting Animal-Assisted Therapy and Horse-Assisted Therapy to examine humans and animals through narrative. The goal is to also examine the ways in which ecofeminism theory deals with the relationships between women and nature in the aforementioned novels. It will also investigate the significance of horses in the novel chosen for the purpose of this study. *The Horse Whisperer* is regarded as one of the most important horse-related texts. In this novel, there is also a discussion of the theme of horse whispering. As a consequence, Evans' novel perfectly fits with the article central argument.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs an analytical approach to answer and analyze *The Horse Whisperer* (1995), a novel written by Nicholas Evans by employing ecofeminism theory, and Animal-Assisted Therapy and Horse-Assisted Therapy (HAT). Horse-Assisted Therapy is applied to demonstrate improvements in the main characters' psychological attitudes. This framework is very useful in showing us how the human characters' bonds with horses in novel helped some characters overcome their psychological traumas they had experienced in the past. “The horse becomes a symbol of the power of human consciousness and a symbol of time” (Bronkhorst, 2009, p. 25). The methodology that is employed in this study based on ecofeminism as well as Animal-Assisted Therapy and Horse-Assisted Therapy (HAT).

### 4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Equine-facilitated psychotherapy is another name for Equine Assisted Psychotherapy. It is basically a form of psychotherapy that utilizes a horse that provides treatment for people who suffer from mental illness. Additionally, the environment in which horses exist can provide help for people to overcome their traumatic experiences. It is important to understand here that Equine-facilitated Psychotherapy is different in substance from therapeutic riding. One of the major aspects of horse therapy is that it is concerned with physiological

characteristics (Bachi, 2013, p. 298). As stated earlier, spending time with horses bring about feelings of freedom and a sense of safety as well as promote mindfulness, self-esteem, and self-confidence.

In addition, Horse Assisted Therapy is a form of animal based therapeutic intervention. It is assumed that horse interventions are influencing people with different illnesses in a positive way (Jordhoy, 2014, p. 5). Horses can provide “a variety of benefits that may improve quality of life, such as increased confidence, lower stress and self-efficacy” (Hatcher et al.,2019, p. 1). Moreover, Brenna (2013, p. 2) states: “to spend time with animals has been claimed to have therapeutic value for centuries” Thus, the recovery process may also seem more natural, especially among individuals who are acquainted with horses, particularly horse owners or riders. Horses serve as fundamental components in both institutionalized and natural healing. Horse assisted therapy is assumed that horse interventions are influencing people with different illnesses in a positive way.

The current study attempts to offer an in-depth investigation of *The Horse Whisperer* (1997) from a psychological standpoint, using Horse-Assisted Therapy. It examines how heroines such Grace Maclean, Annie Graves, and Tom Booker's ties with Pilgrim (Grace's Morgan horse) impacts their psychological health following a traumatic event in their lives. The methodology that employed in this study is drawn from the field of psychology by paying particular attention to the Horse-Assisted Therapy (HAT) and its theoretical frameworks.

In *The Horse Whisperer*, the accident is caused by snow and ice, when a big truck hit the two teenagers Grace and her friend Judith, while they were mounting their horses, outside the arena of the stable. This accident will determine the course of events in the novel, leaving indelible impacts on the characters and shape their reactions to injury and loss. The novel highlights the ways in which the main characters experience trauma and suffering and, at the same time, guide the processes of their healing.

In general, animals were employed in literature to show their significance in providing comfort to humans. Additionally, they can be central to any psychotherapeutic process that man needs to overcome loss and heal from physical and psychological wounds. In more recent years, horses became known for their ability to help people with both physical and emotional challenges. Buck, et al (2001) highlights the role of horses as treatment



of trauma. “Today horses are used for a range of therapeutic activities including treatments for traumatic brain injury, autism spectrum disorders, sensory disorders, and stress or related disorders such as PTSD” (p. 390). As stated earlier, horses possess unique characteristics that have contributed to making humans heal and as a result they continue to be increasingly common choices for Animal-Assisted Therapy. However, they continue to provide other forms of healing functionality to humans including traumatic brain, trauma, autism spectrum disorders, sensory disorders, stress-related disorders.

Since the 1950’s there has been an increasing interest in using horses as active participants in therapy for humans with somatic and more recently development learning and psychological difficulties. It first applied to physical health difficulties in the 1960s. Horses were first used for mental health therapy in the 1990s (Selby, 2009, p. 1). Moreover, horses act as mirrors that reflect the depths of human beings and human hearts. Human-horse interaction enhances the exploration of personal emotions. The power of intuition can generate an understanding of the self, nature, relationships, and communication. Additionally, horses are capable of emotion growth, self-efficacy and self-esteem, knowledge and well-being, quality improvement of people's lives (Rothe et al., 2005, p. 375).

In fact, horses provide a tremendous amount of emotional assistance to humans. “By using their emotional competence, horses could have evolved the capacity to foreseeing and accordingly reacting to the human’s emotional state” (Scopa et al., 2019, p. 6). Horse is a sensitive animal. It might establish and maintain a link with humans based on the equality of emotions and sensitivity.

Moreover, horses are occasionally employed in therapeutic settings as they assist individuals in negotiating hardships and other difficult situations that are emotional in nature. There are several psychosocial effects of Horse-Assisted Therapy, which may include improved self-esteem and self-confidence. People who rely on horses for healing purposes may also experience a sense of empowerment and self-presence as well as feelings of freedom, independence and competency (White-Lewis, 2020, p. 62). Some patients receive such therapy in healthcare facilities and under the supervision of psychological health experts, where they are able to engage in tasks such as grooming, feeding, and riding horses.

Judith and Gulliver's deaths had a tremendous impact on the protagonists, whose suffering was unbearable. Here, we can see that the trauma that the horse and the protagonist have to endure is identical. Despite the trauma that the horse has to suffer, he continues to play an important role in helping Grace overcome her wounds. In other words, Pilgrim in this context becomes the wounded character in the novel and at the same time is the source of therapy. In this horrible context, the horse continues to play a therapeutic function. Grace, who was badly hurt, recognizes the importance of her horse, Pilgrim, as an indispensable source of assistance. The protagonist, Grace Maclean, is the only one who is aware that her horse possesses the potential for help. As mentioned above, horses continue to impact humans aesthetically as they represent “visual imagery of power and beauty” (White-Lewis, 2020, p. 64). Grace is aware of such potentials, practically and aesthetically, and she also attempts to utilize such benefits to speed up her own recovery. She appears to benefit immediately from the connection she has with her horse especially in terms of self-efficacy.

It is important to keep in mind that Grace is conscious of how her skills and abilities enable her to achieve her goals. She understands that the cultivation of a relationship between humans and horses should be based on mutual understanding, without which it would be challenging for anyone to achieve her or his objectives. Horses are viewed “as understanding, non-judgmental, emotional, and fun, but also as educational and therapeutic” (Kern-Godal, et al. 2016, p.8).. For the purpose of emphasizing the therapeutic advantages of horses, Grace and her horse Pilgrim will be the main focus of this section on *The Horse Whisperer*.

Rothe (2005), recognize the importance of arranging activities that involve horses, which entail that children learn, improve, and employ their verbal and nonverbal communication skills. Additionally, they need to enhance their skills as responsible leaders and know when to be assertive, and think creatively when they tasked to resolve problems. Such skills are necessary for the Equine facilitated psychotherapy to work successfully. Any meaningful interaction with horses entails exploring one’s emotions, instinctiveness, inner power, and hidden potentials. Such qualities will enhance people’s abilities to understand themselves and to be better communicators. More importantly, such traits are important for Grace as they will help her develop a profound understanding of herself, her psychological challenges, especially those developed so severely following the tragic accident.

Tonya Alexandri claims that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is Grace's condition, and the only way to cure it is through “re-experiencing aspects of the original trauma” (7). Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is defined as a “pervasive and debilitating disorder, occurs following traumatic events involving exposure to, or threat of, physical harm, death, or sexual violence to oneself or another. Symptoms include re-experience”(Arnon, et al., 2020, p. 557). Moreover, Merckies et al (2018) claim that persons who suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can face some challenges on their path of healing, especially if feelings of fear, anxiety, and mistrust stand in the way. In such cases, horse-assisted therapy can be the solution in the sense that it serves as “an attractive treatment modality as interactions with horses can provide a feeling a safety and modulate arousal and fear responses in humans” (p.64). Therefore, in order for Grace to learn to master the trauma she suffers and be able to revisit it without becoming overwhelmed, she will inevitably have to be exposed to Pilgrim and their bond will need to be restored" (p. 7). She consequently experiences a number of issues, including anxiety, stress, and disability as a result of having a leg amputated.

Grace is mindful of her need for her beloved horse. “I've been thinking about Pilgrim,”she says (Evan, 1997, p. 67). It turns out that the way she is recovering is strongly connected to Pilgrim's problems with health. Her strength, though, grows from her profound connection with Pilgrim. When her right leg was partially amputated, Pilgrim also experienced movement instability, which led the horse trainers to mistreat him and decide to get rid of him. In the novel, it is noticed that Pilgrim is a skilled observer, constantly on the lookout for movement and expression. He frequently replicates Grace's actions or feelings, demonstrating empathy and connection and making her feel protected. Grace also maintains a feeling of self-awareness by using the Pilgrim's actions and interactions like guidance as well as possibilities to comprehend what is going on throughout such life transitions.

According to Horse-Assisted Therapy, horses “live in a heightened state of awareness. This allows them to perceive outside stimuli with precision, keeping them, and their herd, safe. Horses pay close attention to even the most subtle shifts in congruency and mirror their behavior accordingly” (Buck, 2019, p. 391). Grace and her horse, Pilgrim, are united by feelings of shame, guilt, anxiety, and frustration, and it seems as though neither is

capable of recovery without each other. Both need to depend on each other to facilitate the process of survival and healing. It is this mutual recognition that helps both of them stay on the track of recovery. Both Pilgrim and Grace are shown to be affected by post-traumatic syndrome with symptoms that are usually seen in human beings.

One of the behaviors that Grace begins to exhibit in her process of coping with her anxiety that marks her new reality is isolation. She chooses to isolate herself in her room, weeping and watching clips of herself and Pilgrim. By constantly evoking past scenes of both of them, she indeed highlights the vital presence and healing potential of Pilgrim. In other words, this shows that the horse has an impact on her physical and emotional wellbeing.

Annie's assertion demonstrates the essential function that the horse serves in her daughter's well-being, which corresponds to the horse assessment theory's intrinsic belief: that horses reflect an individual's emotions, feelings, and nonverbal communication (Vidrine, Owen-Smith & Faulkner, 2002, p. 590). This type of recognition is manifested in one particular situation in which "Annie had a sudden thought. She needed to find someone to calm Pilgrim's troubled heart. But perhaps this need wasn't about Grace at all. Perhaps it was about herself" (Evans, 1997, p. 12). Any developments that Grace made to overcome her physical and psychological problems combined with a progress the horse made such a deep relationship shows clearly the power of the horse and his ability to create safe ground of trust and confidence for people who care about him.

Moreover, according to Horse-Assisted Therapy, a patient-horse bond is beneficial. They gain awareness of their problems, a better understanding of themselves, and the ability to exert pressure on themselves to change. Grace describes her horse, Pilgrim, to Tom as: "He was such a beautiful horse, she said. You mean he is a beautiful horse. Pilgrim was watching them from the far end of the field" (Evans, 1997, p. 39).

As was shown in my discussion of *The Horse Whisperer*, horses can provide significant help to people who suffer from grief and sadness. In addition, the interaction between horses and young people may have positive

physiological, physical and psychological effects opens up for the possibility of using horse-assisted activities for promoting health and preventing illness.

## CONCLUSION

Horse Assisted Therapy is all about the therapy that is given to individuals when they participate in some activities that involve horses. The type of therapy that horses provide is very important and it is experienced through general caring for horses and, more specifically through providing water and food for them.

Throughout history, horses have been indispensable to humans, constantly serving them and contributing significantly to the construction of their societies, cultures, and civilizations. Humans adopted and domesticated horses to be utilized for agricultural purposes, transportation, geographical exploration, and warfare. In recent history, horses continued to be of great benefit to humans by retaining their traditional uses to a certain extent. However, the industrial revolution swept the European continent and other regions in the world altered the ways in which humans benefited from horses. Horses have become major players in the realms of sports and entertainment. In addition to such well-established and well-known utilizations of horses, humans have made a considerable use of horses in psychological therapy and physical training treatment. Horse Assisted Therapy (HAT), Equine-assisted Psychotherapy (EAP), Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP), Equine-Assisted Counseling (EAC) and Equine-Assisted Learning (EAL) are different names to an increasingly growing field, in which horses provide important psychological and physical help to traumatized and injured patients.

Finally, As was shown above, the horses serve as powerful interventions in their lives and played a major role in helping them cope with their own stress and trauma. The presence of horses created the chances to communicate emotionally to the characters and it was clear that this type of communication was needed to help both of them begin the process of healing. It is clear that emotions of warmth, love, belonging and connectedness that the horses provided increased characters' mindfulness and helped them heal.

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