



**TRAVERSING HUMANS, ANIMALS, AND YŌKAI:
AN EXPLORATION OF POSTHUMANIST IMPLICATIONS IN JAPANESE
FOLKLORE THROUGH THE SELECTED STORIES FROM *JAPANESE LEGENDS
AND FOLKLORE* BY A. B. MITFORD AND *JAPANESE FOLKTALES* BY YEI
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ABSTRACT

Japanese folklore frequently portrays animals as active agents within human society, challenging anthropocentric assumptions that privilege human dominance. This study examines selected Japanese folktales through Cary Wolfe's posthumanist framework to analyse representations of animals and human–animal relationships. The primary texts consist of selected fox (*kitsune*) and rabbit narratives from A. B. Mitford's *Japanese Legends and Folklore* and Yei Theodora Ozaki's *Japanese Folktales*. Using qualitative textual analysis, the study focuses on non-human agency, interspecies interaction, and ethical reciprocity within the narratives. The analysis demonstrates that animals are not portrayed merely as symbolic figures, but as autonomous beings capable of moral judgement, emotional response, and reciprocal engagement with humans. Motifs such as shapeshifting, revenge, gratitude, and coexistence consistently destabilise rigid human–animal hierarchies and challenge the notion of human exceptionalism. These findings suggest that Japanese folklore articulates posthumanist sensibilities that predate the formal development of posthumanist theory in Western academic discourse. By situating Japanese folktales within a posthumanist framework, this study expands the scope of posthumanist literary analysis beyond its predominantly Western focus and highlights traditional folklore as a critical site for rethinking human–nonhuman relations.

Keywords: Japanese folklore, posthumanism, Cary Wolfe, human–animal relationships, non-human agency, kitsune, rabbit, anthropocentrism, literary analysis

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Chapter 1 of this paper will consist of six subsections. Starting off with the background of the study which provides an overview of this research, the statement of the problem thereafter highlights the gaps in existing knowledge of the subject-matter. The subsequent subsections are the research objectives and research questions which serve as a guide to the study, followed by the definition of key terms relevant to the analysis. Lastly, the significance of study outlines the rationale of this research, emphasising its prospective contributions to the associated fields.

1.2 Background of the Study

Humans perceive themselves as sovereigns within the ecosystem mostly due to their unique capacity for reasoning, which distinguishes them from animals that lack such cognitive abilities (Arikan, 2017). This concept, known as *anthropocentrism*—also human exceptionalism or human supremacy interchangeably, is fraught with criticisms against its interspecies prejudicial biasness (Goralnik & Nelson, 2012). Posthumanism is one such approach. At the start of the 21st century, many social theorists determined that advancement in technology have significantly altered the potential modes of interaction among humans, non-human animals, and other entities (Moore & Moran, 2007).

Intrinsically, posthumanism encompasses a diverse array of disciplines such as animal studies, social and philosophical studies, technological transhumanism, and more (Gladden, 2018). Early posthumanist discourses often overlapped with transhumanism, which focused on technological enhancement of the human body, cybernetics, and visions of a “posthuman future”. These perspectives tended to imagine the human evolving into something new through science and

technology (Wolfe, 2010). According to Clark (2022), posthumanism occasionally serves as an epistemological inquiry into the nature of knowledge and the processes by which it is generated. At other times, it constitutes an ontological inquiry into the activities and processes associated with humanity or post-humanity. Although the term “posthumanism” and its general related studies give out futuristic and techno-centric impressions, not all theorist share these concepts in their theoretical postulation. Cary Wolfe for example, is a posthumanist scholar whose framework is grounded in animality studies, aiming to alter the perception of animals as inferior or flawed representations of the idealised human archetype (Wolfe, 2010); while posthumanist feminists Neimanis (2014) and Alaimo (2012) has their theoretical stances established upon blue and oceanic posthumanism, respectively.

Derived from and associated with multiple fields, the domain of posthumanism can hardly be rendered as a uniform school of thought. Nevertheless, the central idea in posthumanistic discourses has always been to decentralise “the human”, challenging conventional anthropocentric perspectives by highlighting the agency of non-human entities (Moore & Moran, 2007). With this notion in mind, themes and concepts of posthumanism have been integrated into various literary writings, analyses, and criticisms. Callus (2022) noted that the imaginary’s exploration of what it means to be human, the interaction of humans with their surroundings, the agency of non-human entities as well as the subsequent implications is potently expressed through poetry, fiction, and theatrical language. Thus, critical posthumanist studies frequently examining literature for depictions of various posthuman themes, with folklores gaining more traction recently (Kaarlenkaski et al., 2020).

First coined in the Athenaeum by English antiquarian—William J. Thoms in 1846 to define oral peasant tales specifically, *folklore* emerged as an independent field in the early 19th century

during the era of Romantic nationalism in Europe and North America (Etymonline, n.d.; Oldfather, 2025). Folklore is the collective knowledge, beliefs, traditions, and practices that a particular community shares and were gathered and recorded for the sake of culture preservation (Ihueze, 2015). More often than not, they are passed down either orally, or through behavioral examples which reflects the people's customs and culture (Baker, 2024), which can include material culture such tools, symbolic objects and conventional architectural styles prevalent within the community (Leach, 1996). Folklores exist in different forms, from oral traditions such as folktales, myths, legends, jokes, and poetry, to the customary lore that creates the premise for folk dances, rituals, celebrations, superstitions, music, art, and so on (Leach, 1996).

Amidst the burgeoning European industrialisation and urbanisation in the 19th century, folklorists expressed apprehension regarding the potential loss of oral traditions and beliefs—the cultural heritage of rural communities, with the rise of literacy (Sims & Stephens, 2011). This consequently induced the urge in certain British folklorist to document these vestiges of rural traditions as a means of advancing modernisation and disenchantment (Josephson-Storm, 2017). Dundes (1966) posits that folklore manifests in American literature in two forms—actively (functional) and passively (transcriptive). The scholar noted that individual authors occasionally adapt and revise original folkloric elements intentionally in the form of conscious manipulation; while others merely imitate and record the lore, removing them from their cultural context, hence rendering them “lifeless”. While the conscious interference of folklores frequently draws the ire of traditional folklorists, intellectuals from different fields hold diverging views of this notion. Some opines it essential for *folklore revival*, while others see it as mere falsification of the products of authentic folk processes for aesthetic and ultimately capitalistic objectives (Bendix & Hasan-

Rokem, 2012; Dorson, 1977). Ben-Amos (1971) noted that inherently, anthropologists considered folklore to be literature whilst literary scholars considered it cultural.

Notwithstanding the fact that the aforementioned aspects can be used to explicate folklore generally, the East has a different outlook on their folk heritages when compared to the West. The distinction in culture is indubitably one of the major contributing causes. Studies have shown that culture can significantly impact an individual's emotions, decision making, values, and beliefs (National Library of Medicine, 2001; Yates & De Oliveira, 2016). Hofstede (2011) in his Cultural Dimensions Theory, found that Eastern civilisations embody collectivism, while Western cultures prioritise individualism. Factors associated with familial and social groups influence behavior within a collectivist culture; conversely, personal aspirations and dispositions dictate the conduct of individuals within an individualistic culture (Wong & Cheng, 2019). According to Ungvarsky (2025), based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions model, the Eastern collectivist societies often habituated to a routine and regimented setting. Given that these environments thrive on their own cultural rules and regulations, a more pronounced leadership structure is typically established to enforce them, subsequently forming a systematic hierarchy which tend to result in increased formality when interacting with individuals beyond one's close relatives and friends. These factors in turn shaped the Eastern cultures and consequently, their folklores, which are rich in cultural ethics, morality, social interactions, philosophical, and religious elements. Korean folklore for instance, contains shamanic musical compositions featuring narrative elements concerning deities, stemming from their folk religions founded on Korean shamanism and influenced by external religions, notably Buddhism (Choi, 2012); whilst Chinese folklore has a multi-faceted root involving the nation's evolution in its religious, cultural, philosophical, and political aspects (Guan, 2024; Haryono & Ummah, 2022).

In Japan, folklore is known as *minkan denshō* (民間伝承, literally “dissemination among the people”) (Castiglioni, 2021). An eminent aspect that distinguishes Japanese folklore is its inherent qualities that stems from its origins of the Shinto religion (Baker, 2024). As a result, they are abundantly imbued with tales and narratives that centralises animals as prominent characters and are frequently infused with spiritual meanings, moral values, or symbolic connotations. These animals often exhibit anthropomorphic characteristics and are portrayed as sentient or intellectual entities (Vrba, 2023). Another major constituent in Japanese folklores is the *yōkai* (妖怪, literally “strange apparition”), a class of otherworldly creatures and spirits. Otherwise known as *ayakashi* (あやかし) or *mononoke* (物の気), these supernatural beings are often depicted as possessing animalistic features and behaviours. Some are even noted as gods—*kami* (神), or messengers for these deities (Hirota, 2022). In Japanese folklore, animalistic beings frequently defy their biological classifications, transforming between animal and human forms and establishing complex emotional and ethical connections with human characters or among themselves (Mayer, 1981). The symbolical elements and narrative positioning of these non-human characters in traditional Japanese folktales offer a mostly overlooked avenue to investigate how enduring cultural lore contest species limits and anthropocentric beliefs.

These intrinsic elements consequently pave the way for Japanese folklores to become a favourable platform for posthumanism studies. As the animals in Japanese folklore often serve to reflect human traits or societal norms (Baker, 2024), challenging the lurking anthropocentric nuances through a critical posthumanist lens would provide a fresh perspective and further understanding of the dynamics between humans and non-human animals. As proposed by Cary Wolfe, the “post” in “posthumanism” refers to an existence that transcends and exists alongside humanity, suggesting an alternative entity (Wolfe, 2010, pp. xv, 122). Following this line of

thought, this study conducts a detailed textual analysis of selected folktales to investigate the way non-human animals are portrayed, interpreted, and treated in these folk narratives, in view of uncovering any underlying posthumanist elements.

This research uses a selection of Japanese folktales as its core corpus, specifically narratives featuring the fox (*kitsune*) and the rabbit. These animals are prominent figures in Japanese folklore, with the *kitsune* frequently portrayed as a trickster, a playful shapeshifter, or a loyal companion, and the rabbit as an embodiment of cleverness and vulnerability (Mayer, 1981). The stories are primarily taken from A.B Mitford's *Japanese Legends and Folklore: Samurai Tales, Ghost Stories, Legends, Fairy Tales and Historical Accounts* (2019) and Yei Theodora Ozaki's *Japanese Folktales: Classic Stories from Japan's Enchanted Past* (2018) as these anthologies present a varied array of folktales featuring the chosen animals.

1.3 Statement of Problem

This study seeks to fill the gap at the nexus of folklore and posthumanism by extending the framework into Japanese folktales. Although the theory has garnered considerable attention in recent years, there remains a notable lack of posthumanist exploration in folklores. Dekeyser (2023) found that a significant portion of academic dissertations applies posthumanist frameworks on artificial intelligence, techno-science, and digitalisation ontologies. However, despite the surge of study on posthumanism in the socio-economic, technocentric, and anthropological sphere, there has been considerably less of it in studies of folklore (Cruz, 2022; Thompson, 2018).

The gap in literature is particularly evident with regard to Japanese folklore. Scholarship in this field has predominantly adhered to paradigms of social history, cultural anthropology, and semiotics of the nation (Shimamura, 2018), partly because past Japanese folklorists predominantly

authored works for native audiences, with minimal desire to engage foreign researchers (Oguma, 2016). This insularity can also be traced to Japan's *sakoku* (鎖国, literally "chained/locked up nation") policy enacted by the Tokugawa Shogunate which restricted foreign contact and rendered Japan a "closed country" from the 17th century until 1854 (Kazui & Videen, 1982). Consequently, Japanese folklore studies developed in a state of historical isolation, limiting their integration into global theoretical debates.

More often than not, animals are portrayed differently in Western and Japanese folktales. Animals, or animalistic beings in Western folk literature are frequently subjected to a lower social standing and are subservient to humans (Cardi, 2022). Japanese folktales on the contrary, often perceives these beings as entities of their own agencies, having the choice to befriend, betray, and even exploit humans for their own benefits (Cardi, 2022; Casal, 1959; Cooper, 2013).

Furthermore, the school of posthumanist thought has maintained a predominantly Western perspective throughout its trajectory. For instance, Cary Wolfe's posthumanist stance is rooted in the Western intellectual paradigm through his reference and critiques of the core tenets of the theory, such as liberal humanism and posthumanist concepts that align with the Enlightenment (Wolfe, 2010, pp. xvi, 243). This Western-centric bias has led Eastern cultural texts—Japanese folklore in this context, to be largely excluded in posthumanist literary study.

This study intends to address these gaps by examining selected Japanese folktales through a posthumanist lens, aiming to explore whether such narratives contain elements that challenge anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism. In doing so, it seeks to broaden the parameters of posthumanist inquiry by incorporating Japanese folkloric traditions, thereby fostering a more inclusive and culturally diverse perspective on human–nonhuman dynamics within literary studies.

1.4 Research Objectives

1. To examine the portrayal of animals and human-animal relationships in selected Japanese folktales.
2. To explore the potential posthumanist elements in Japanese folklore as reflected in the depiction of animals and human-animal relationships in the selected Japanese folktales.

1.5 Research Questions

1. What are the ways in which animals and human-animal relationships are portrayed in the selected Japanese folktales?
2. What potential posthumanist elements in Japanese folklore are reflected in the depiction of animals and human-animal relationships in the selected Japanese folktales?

1.6 Definition of Key Terms

1. Posthumanism: A multifaceted critical theory that criticizes human exceptionalism (Lalrodingi, 2021). Advocates for the interconnectedness between humans and the biological, technological, and ecological spheres in response to anthropocentrism (Wolfe, 2010).
2. Anthropocentrism: Primarily defined as human-centeredness. Represents the ethical conviction that only humans possess intrinsic value and that all other entities possess value solely in their capacity to serve humans or in their instrumental worth (Goralnik & Nelson, 2012).
3. Interspecies Relationships: The relationships and interactions between humans and non-human species, particularly animals, which are frequently examined to comprehend relations across the interspecies boundaries (Kieson, 2025).

4. Non-human Animals/Animals: Encompass those that are indeed animals or exhibits animal-like traits (Borkfelt, 2011), that is, including animal-related *yōkai* and supernatural beings (Matsuura, 2024).
5. Non-human Agency: The ability of non-human entities to take action and influence events, shaping outcomes and interactions within a given context (Pearson, 2015).
6. *Yōkai*: Supernatural beings in Japanese folklore, often characterised by their unusual traits or abilities. They manifest in various non-human forms such as animals, spirits, monsters, and gods (Matsuura, 2024).
7. *Kitsune*: Shape-shifting fox spirits in Japanese folklore, often seen as tricksters or divine beings (Matsuura, 2024).
8. *Tanuki*: Mythical raccoon dogs in Japanese folklore. Possesses transformative abilities and are renowned for their illusions and deceptive play (Matsuura, 2024).

1.7 Significance of the Study

The study possesses significance in literary analysis of Japanese folkloric literature and the posthumanist framework. In contrast to the futurological nuances or the Anthropocene posthumanism is regularly and recurrently associated with, this study seeks to not only breach the gap but provide a “retrospective” perspective towards the notion by integrating posthumanism into the traditional Japanese folktales—a commonly underrepresented corpus in this field. The study enhances the posthumanist discipline by extending it outside of its mostly Western academic foundations. Additionally, exploring the Japanese folklore via a posthumanist perspective signifies the importance of non-Western ontologies that may have inherently been decentering the human long before the conception of the posthumanist theory. Through critical examination of non-human

animals depicted in the selected stories, this study prompts further contemplation on the implications brought about by human-animal boundaries in cultural narratives.

Furthermore, as folklores are the embodiments of a particular community's traditions, customs, and values, this study will bestow glimpses into the socio-cultural features of prehistoric Japanese communities through their narratives. This research may open up new avenues for further ethical and moral reflections by highlighting the human-animal relationships alongside the ways of perception and treatment imposed on non-human entities—challenging anthropocentric views and contemporary animal rights, for instance.

As this is a fundamentally niched area of study, this analysis functions to lay the groundwork for future intellectuals exploring this field. Future researchers would benefit from the novel insights this study provides and could expand on it to suit their explorations in related subject-matters. For current academicians, the distinction between the focus of this study against the general direction of other posthumanism researches may yield avant-garde ideas in the leitmotifs of the discipline *hic et nunc*. All in all, the study offers valuable insights for alternative interpretations of the portrayal of animals and human-animal relationships in traditional storytelling, encouraging deeper reflection on the thematic and representational elements within folkloric literature.

1.8 Conclusion

The modules of Chapter 1 have outlined the core premises of this study by contextualising Japanese folklore within the posthumanist framework. It established the research objectives and questions following the identification of the research problem and gap. Also, key terms essential to the study's analytical approach were defined. This study investigates the depictions of animals

and human-animal relationships in selected Japanese folktales to identify potential posthumanist aspects, offering insight into how traditional non-Western narratives can contribute to posthumanist discourse. Next, Chapter 2 proceeds with a discussion of the corpus, the theoretical and analytical frameworks, and a review of relevant past studies.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 is the review of literature of areas that lay the foundation of this research. Consisting of four main sections, the first addresses the backgrounds of the authors of the main texts, the corpora, and the chosen stories, subsequently followed by the second section—an overview of Japanese folklore, outlining aspects such as its historical evolution, multi-faceted influences, and methods of dissemination. The third section then discusses human-animal relationships within posthumanist discourse, juxtaposing anthropocentric views and traditions with critiques articulated by this study’s main framework theorist—Cary Wolfe, alongside other key thinkers. The applications of Wolfe’s posthumanism in literature, culture, and media are examined in the final section, which highlights the contributions, strengths, and deficiencies which attest to the importance of employing the scholar’s framework in the context of Japanese folktales.

2.2 Overview of Primary Texts: Mitford and Ozaki

The two main corpora chosen for this research are the anthologies—*Japanese Legends and Folklore: Samurai Tales, Ghost Stories, Legends, Fairy Tales, and Historical Accounts* (2019) by A. B. Mitford and *Japanese Folktales: Classic Stories from Japan’s Enchanted Past* (2018) by Yei Theodora Ozaki. Both works offer insight into how the key animal figures—foxes (*kitsune*)

and rabbits are positioned within folkloric narratives. The following sections outline the relevant background of each author, the scope of the anthologies, and summaries of the stories selected for analysis.

2.2.1 A Diplomat in Edo Japan: Background on A. B. Mitford

Algernon Bertram Freeman-Mitford (1837–1916), also known as Lord Redesdale, was a British diplomat and writer whose work influenced Western conceptions of Japan in the late 19th century. Mitford, who served as Second Secretary and interpreter to the British Legation in Edo (renamed Tokyo in 1868) from 1866 to 1870, developed a strong interest in Japanese customs and oral traditions during a period of political and cultural transition known as the Meiji Restoration (Gobinskaya, 2020). His most influential work—*Tales of Old Japan (1871)*, drew on these experiences and became one of the earliest major English-language efforts to document Japanese cultural practices and folklore (Royal Collection Trust, n.d.). The anthology was reprinted in 2019 by Tuttle Publishing under the title *Japanese Legends and Folklore: Samurai Tales, Ghost Stories, Legends, Fairy Tales, and Historical Accounts*, featuring a foreword by renowned Japanese folklorist Michael Dylan Foster (Foster, 2019, p. 4). He commends the book as “a collection of souvenirs and snapshots of a country on the edge of modernity” (Foster, 2019, p. 8).

Mitford’s collection has been the subject of cultural and diplomatic studies due to its impact on British perceptions of Meiji Japan. His work was published amid the rise of *japonisme*, when Japanese aesthetics such as *ukiyo-e* influenced European literature, theatre, and the Art Nouveau movement, further fueling the Western fascination with Japan (Gobinskaya, 2020). It has also been analysed for early Western portrayals of *bushidō* (the samurai moral code) and Japanese domestic life. As an author, Mitford presented a version of Japan that was both exotic yet relatable to Western audiences (Foster, 2019, pp. 4–8).

Overview of Japanese Legends and Folklore: Samurai Tales, Ghost Stories, Legends, Fairy Tales, and Historical Accounts (2019)

The book comprises more than 30 narratives, encompassing a diverse range of genres including heroic samurai epics, ghost stories, Buddhist sermons, ritual practices, and traditional folktales. The collection serves as a quasi-memoir, merging cultural observation with personal experience to provide a synthesis of Mitford's commentary and literary narrative. In his 1871 preface, the author acknowledged the challenges of cross-cultural translation but affirmed the content's authenticity, including illustrations engraved in Edo by Japanese artists (Mitford, 2019, p. 9).

For this study, four narratives featuring the fox (*kitsune*) and the rabbit are selected—three focusing on foxes, followed by one featuring the rabbit:

1. *The Foxes' Wedding* tells of a joyous matrimonial celebration between a young white fox and a vixen, marked by elaborate rituals and communal harmony.
2. *How a Man Was Bewitched and Had His Head Shaved by the Foxes* centres on a man who is manipulated by fox spirits, experiencing hallucinations that result in public embarrassment.
3. *The Grateful Foxes* depicts a tale of reciprocal kindness, where a man's compassionate act towards a wounded fox cub leads to an unexpected and heartfelt reward.
4. *The Crackling Mountain* unfolds a dark revenge tale in which a *tanuki* (rendered as "badger" in the collection) harms an elderly couple, only to face brutal retribution from a vengeful rabbit.

2.2.2 A Daughter of Two Worlds: Background on Yei Theodora Ozaki

Yei Theodora Ozaki (1871–1932), also known as Eiko Seodora Ozaki, was a Japanese-English author and translator best known for her adaptations of Japanese folktales for English-speaking audiences in the early 20th century (Blackwell's, n.d.). Born in England and later raised in Japan following her parents' separation, Ozaki held a distinctive bicultural perspective that enabled her to convey Japanese narratives to Western readers with precision while maintaining their cultural depth. Ozaki's literary career began after she left her father's household in Japan. She worked as a secretary at the British Legation, where she met Mary Fraser and later accompanied her on travels to Europe (Blackwell's, n.d.; Fraser, 1909). During this period, Ozaki was encouraged by Fraser's brother, novelist Francis M. Crawford, to write and publish Japanese stories in English (Fraser, 1909). Widely regarded as a classic of cross-cultural storytelling, Ozaki's first major work—*The Japanese Fairy Book (1903)*, has been reprinted numerous times posthumously (Blackwell's, n.d.).

In her 1903 preface, Ozaki explains that while the stories are not direct translations, she sought to preserve their thematic elements and cultural context while adapting them in a way that would appeal to Western young readers (Ozaki, 2018, p. 15). Her style retains Japanese names, food items, and references to local customs, offering a subtle yet authentic connection to the Japanese culture. Lucy Fraser—a scholar of Japanese literature and popular culture, commends Ozaki's efforts to weave local cultural elements into her storytelling while ensuring intelligibility for readers who are unfamiliar with Japan (Fraser, 2018, pp. 9–13). Perhaps due to this balance, Ozaki's folktale adaptations have attracted attention in translation studies and intercultural children's literature. Her work has also been explored through death studies, which raise broader questions about mortality and the value of human life (Cholbi & Timmerman, 2021), as well as

through structural analyses like Propp's, which demonstrate how her storytelling reflect traditional roles and ethical patterns in folklore (Vrba, 2023).

Overview of Japanese Folktales: Classic Stories from Japan's Enchanted Past (2018)

The 2018 Tuttle collection of Ozaki's work, *Japanese Folktales: Classic Stories from Japan's Enchanted Past*, brings together several of her most well-known tales. The book contains 22 stories, comprising a variety of animal fables, hero tales, moral parables, and myths, several of which are adapted from traditional sources, such as the works of Sadanami Sanjin. Many of the tales reflect Meiji-era values and storytelling conventions. The anthology also features classic illustrations by a Japanese artist that complement Ozaki's narratives (Ozaki, 2018, p. 15).

For this study, three narratives featuring rabbits are selected:

1. ***The Farmer and the Badger*** (also listed earlier under the title *The Crackling Mountain*) features a rabbit who seeks revenge against a *tanuki* following a grievous wrong.
2. ***The White Hare and the Crocodiles*** tells of a hare punished for trickery but ultimately rescued by an unexpected act of compassion.
3. ***The Adventures of Kintarō, the Golden Boy*** focuses on a strong boy who was raised in the mountains and coexists peacefully with animals, including a hare.

Essentially, both Mitford's anthology embodies the cross-cultural interactions of the Meiji period, whereas Ozaki's adaptations facilitated the dissemination of these narratives to global audiences. Tales of the selected non-human animals to be examined in this research—the fox and the rabbit are sufficiently present in both books. Hence, these works establish a fruitful basis for examining the presence of posthumanist elements in Japanese folklore, which widely conceptualises human–nonhuman relations.

2.3 Japanese Folklore

Japanese folklore is the lasting manifestation of Japan’s cultural inheritance, existing in the form of tales, customs, beliefs, rituals and more. Though generally rooted in oral traditions, it adopts changes and is consistently reshaped by literature, performance, and popular culture, unveiling to a wider audience a realm where humans, deities, spirits, and animals are interconnected. This section explores the evolution of Japanese folklore over time, the philosophical and religious contexts that influence it, the variety of non-human characters that appear in its narratives, as well as the manner in which it has been passed down and adapted into new forms.

2.3.1 History and Scholarship of Japanese Folklore

The discipline of Japanese folklore studies—*minzokugaku* (民俗学, literally “native ethnology”) emerged in the Meiji period, shaped by nationalism and concerns over cultural preservation (Oguma, 2016; Shimamura, 2018). Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962) established its foundations with *Tōno Monogatari* (1910), which documented rural tales and framed folklore as an “alternative history” preserving the lives of ordinary people excluded from official narratives. By elevating local traditions as the cultural heritage of modern Japan, Yanagita linked folklore with nationalist projects, of which became entangled with state ideologies of unity during the pre-war years (Bronson, 2008; Morse & Christian, 2021; Oguma, 2016; Shimamura, 2018). After the war, these associations provoked critique, but folklore studies revived during the “Yanagita boom” of the 1960s–70s, when reprints of *Tōno Monogatari* intersected with *nihonjinron* discourses of Japanese uniqueness. During this era, folklore served as both a means of cultural preservation and a platform for political discourse, criticised for its insularity but simultaneously defended as an

indigenous science apart from Western anthropology (Baker, 2024; Oguma, 2016; Shimamura, 2018).

Besides that, Japanese tales also travelled abroad through translation and adaptation. Works of authors such as A. B. Mitford and Yei Theodora Ozaki introduced them to Western readers, though often exoticised or mistranslated. For instance, Mitford's interpretation of "*tanuki*" as "badger" which was subsequently echoed by Ozaki, consequently modified perceptions of these animals—of which the closer interpretation should have been "raccoon dog" (Burton, 2012; Zeveloff, 2024). Furthermore, children's versions of the tales were frequently expurgated of violence or ambiguity to align with educational principles which resulted in distortion of understanding relating to the Japanese culture, despite securing international recognition (Gao, 2024; Lanham & Shimura, 1967).

Additionally, through comparison and systematisation, researchers broadened the field of *minzokugaku* beyond Yanagita's ethnography. For instance, Seki (1966) collected tales and characterised them, Dorson (1975) examined the intrinsic qualities unique to the folk narratives, while Yen (1974) analysed the thematic patterns within, all of which further situated Japanese folklore within global frameworks. Notably, the changing nature of folklore has been highlighted by current studies, such as De Bruijn's (2019) critiques of static readings of the stories as "fixed cultural representations" while Hirota (2022) and Fraser (2018) demonstrate how post-war culture and animation are still shaped by themes like *yōkai* or animal-human marriages. Collectively, these studies exemplify how Japanese folklore is a heritage that is constantly being reimagined in distinct settings and contexts while simultaneously sticking close to its roots.

All things considered, the historical evolution of Japanese folklore shows how tradition endures despite continual reinvention through the flow of time. This notion establishes the basis for analysing the cultural worldviews and narrative themes that belie Japanese folktales as well as the philosophical and religious aspects that influence Japanese storytelling customs.

2.3.2 Cultural Worldviews and Narrative Motifs in Japanese Folklore

One of the most prominent features of Japanese folklore is that it is grounded in a syncretic blend of religious and philosophical constituents, such as Shinto animism, Buddhist ethics, Confucian morality, and local beliefs, which result in its unique themes and motifs. In contrast to Western traditions that were influenced by Christianity and rationalism, Japanese folktales frequently normalise non-human agencies and conflate the lines between humans and other beings.

Shinto Animism and Transformation

Central to Japanese cosmology is Shinto animism, a belief system that ascribes spiritual essence to landscapes, animals, and natural phenomena. This worldview legitimises the motif of shapeshifting, where animals such as foxes, *tanuki*, cranes, snakes and more often assume human forms as agents with independent motives (Casal, 1959; Mayer, 1981). Evidently, such transformations illustrate the belief that humans and non-humans share a continuum of existence within the same moral and spiritual universe (Miller, 1987).

Buddhist, Confucian, and Syncretic Ethics

Within Japanese folklore, Buddhism introduced karma and rebirth, shaping tales where kindness toward animals brings reward and cruelty invites punishment. Collections such as the *Konjaku Monogatari Shū* vividly illustrate this principle, with stories of animals or spirits repaying human compassion and punishing cruelty, reinforcing karmic balance (Koriyama & Allen, 2024;

Mayer, 1981). On the other hand, Confucian thought reinforced ideals of filial piety and communal harmony, legitimising vengeance when framed as duty (Aziz, 2023; Haryono & Ummah, 2022), as in Mitford's account of *The Forty-Seven Rōnin*, where the retainers' violent revenge is justified as an expression of loyalty and obligation (Mitford, 2019). In practice, these traditions often overlapped with Shinto cosmology, producing syncretic narratives where a fox might act as a *kami* while embodying Buddhist teachings, or a ghost might be appeased through both Buddhist rites and Shinto rituals (Baker, 2024; Breen & Teeuwen, 2010; Koriyama & Allen, 2024). These fusion underscores Japanese folklore's characteristic moral ambiguity, where cruelty may coexist with compassion and duty with deception. Linked to this is the motif of taboo and secrecy, especially in animal-wife tales, where violating prohibitions such as discovering a spouse's true form, dissolves the union permanently (Kobayashi, 2010).

East–West Contrasts

The cultural elements in Japanese folk narratives differ sharply from those of Western origins. As an example, fables such as Aesop's often employ animals as allegories for explicit morals, whilst Japanese folklore depicts animals and spirits as ontologically real entities under a collective moral framework (Cai, 1993; Cooper, 2013). Additionally, the narrative structures differ as Western tales usually follow linear, hero-centred arcs; whereas Japanese stories favour cyclical or open-ended forms that stress repetition and collective values (Aziz, 2023; Vrba, 2023). As Lanham and Shimura (1967) note, Japanese children were historically taught animistic explanations, such as thunder as a god's drum or foxfire as fox flames, demonstrating the integration of supernatural agency in everyday reasoning.

In conclusion, the interplay of Shinto animism, Buddhist reciprocity, Confucian duty, syncretic blending, and taboo shaped the cultural worldviews and motifs of Japanese folklore. The

resultant themes and motifs were not merely narrative devices but cultural expressions of a cosmology in which humans coexist with a diverse range of non-human beings, distinguishing these tales from their Western counterparts. These components highlight the distinctiveness of Japanese folklore as a narrative system that defies rigid limits and embraces the intricacies of interspecies entanglement.

2.3.3 Non-human Agents in Japanese Folklore

A defining feature of Japanese folklore is its array of non-human agents who interact with humans as autonomous actors. Unlike Western fables, where animals and spirits often function as metaphors, Japanese traditions grant these beings ontological reality and moral weight. They reflect an animistic worldview in which humans share the world with entities who act as guardians, tricksters, or enforcers of justice (Foster, 2009).

Kami and Animistic Spirits

Kami (神, literally “god”) are the revered deities, divinities, spirits, and mythological or natural events in the traditional Shinto faith. Japanese folklore depicts them as immanent rather than transcendent—they may bestow rewards for veneration, impose penalties for neglect, or intervene unpredictably in everyday life (Baker, 2024; Matsuura, 2024). In narratives, *kami* are not distant gods but participants in the human world, a presence that affirms the animistic assumption that nature itself is alive with agency (Mitford, 2019). By placing humans within a shared spiritual environment, stories of *kami* highlight the centrality of non-human beings as symbolic figures.

Yōkai, Ghosts, Demons, and Other Supernatural Beings

Another broad category is the *yōkai*, encompassing supernatural creatures that range from playful tricksters to terrifying monsters. Figures such as *tengu* (mountain beings), *kappa* (water spirits), and shapeshifting animals often disrupt human order, exposing the limits of human control and the forces of non-human beings (Foster, 2009; Hirota, 2022; Matsuura, 2024). Closely related are *yūrei* (幽霊, literally “ghosts”), whose unrest derives from unresolved emotions. Subtypes include *onryō* (怨霊, literally “vengeful spirits”) and *goryō* (御霊, literally “noble spirit”), whose anger was historically appeased through ritual to prevent disaster (Foster, 2009; Lovelace, 2008). Japanese folklore also abounds with *oni* (鬼, literally “ogre”) and *akuma* (悪魔, literally “demon”), which are often portrayed as destructive but sometimes ambiguous, even protective figures. Fraser (2018) notes that such characters undermine clear distinctions between good and evil, representing a perspective that tolerates blurred moral boundaries.

Non-human Animals

Animals form one of the most enduring categories of non-human beings in Japanese folklore. They frequently appear with the power to speak and shapeshift, playing diverse roles like tricksters, protectors, companions, *kami*, or their messengers. Most of the time, these entities are treated as characters with their own motives rather than symbolic stand-ins (Foster, 2009; Matsuura, 2024). In many tales, foxes (*kitsune*), raccoon dogs (*tanuki*), cranes, snakes, and other creatures may reward generosity, punish cruelty, or blur the boundary between benevolence and danger. Unlike Western stories where animals serve primarily as allegories, Japanese folklore treats them as agents with independent motives, capable of reshaping human fates. Their ubiquity reflects the assumption that humans and animals inhabit a shared moral and spiritual continuum (Casal, 1959; Cooper, 2013; Kobayashi, 2010; Mayer, 1981).

At its core, the diverse range of non-human agents in Japanese folklore—kami, *yōkai*, non-human animals and other supernatural beings illustrate a platform where humans are only one part of an animated world. These figures reveal the acceptance of non-human agency as central to cultural imagination, reinforcing the interdependence of human and non-human beings, thereby challenging anthropocentric hierarchies.

2.3.4 Transmission and Adaptation of Japanese Folklore

The transmission of Japanese folklore has never been static but has constantly shifted across media, audiences, and cultural contexts. What began as oral tales told in villages and ritual settings evolved into written collections, staged performances, visual art, and eventually modern popular culture. Each phase of transmission not only preserved stories but also reshaped them, adapting to changing religious, social, and political needs. This adaptability explains why folklore remains a vibrant cultural force rather than a relic of the past.

Oral and Written Transmission

Japanese folklore first circulated through oral storytelling, sustained by repetition and regional variation (Yen, 1974). With the Meiji period came systematic written collections, most notably Yanagita Kunio's *Tōno Monogatari* (1910), which institutionalised folklore as cultural record. Later on, typological classifications that linked Japanese tales to international systems were developed, ensuring their place within global folkloristics (Shimamura, 2018).

Performance and Visual Culture

Japanese folklore also thrived in performance and art. Narrative ballads known as *sekkyō-bushi* (説経節, literally “sermon ballads”) and illustrated sermons—*etoki* (絵解き, literally “picture deciphering”) spread Buddhist tales to largely illiterate audiences (Breen & Teeuwen,

2010; Ishi, 1989; Kaminishi, 2002). Furthermore, traditional performance such as *Noh*, *kabuki*, and *bunraku* (Japanese puppet) theatres staged stories of historical accounts, legends, and folktales for mass audiences (Brandon, 2009; DeMarais, 2023; Gerstle, 2005). Visual culture, particularly *ukiyo-e* (浮世絵, literally “pictures of the floating world”) prints by Hokusai and Kuniyoshi, popularised images of *yōkai* and heroic figures, embedding folklore aesthetics into material culture (Ellis, 2019; Huang, 2022).

Education and Cross-Cultural Adaptation

From the late 19th century, folktales were adapted for education and children’s literature. Versions often softened violent or ambiguous motifs to align with pedagogical expectations (Lanham & Shimura, 1967; Gao, 2024). Translations such as Mitford’s *Tales of Old Japan* (1871/2019) and Ozaki’s *Japanese Fairy Tales* (1903/2018) introduced stories to Western readers, though often reframed through exoticism or simplification (Burton, 2012). More recent scholarship emphasises that such retellings represent dynamic negotiations of meaning rather than fixed cultural representations (De Bruijn, 2019; Sawai, 2013).

Modern Media and Popular Culture

In the 20th century, Japanese folklore entered popular culture, such as Mizuki Shigeru’s manga *Gegege no Kitarō* (1960 – 1969), which recast *yōkai* as icons of postwar Japan (Hirota, 2022; Suzuki, 2019). More recently, anime and games have revitalised folkloric motifs for global audiences. For instance, works such as *Fuse: Memoirs of a Huntress* (2012) reimagine animal–human marriages and Studio Ghibli’s Shinto-inspired animated classics—*Princess Mononoke* (1997) and *Spirited Away* (2001) present *yōkai* as integral characters while exploring interspecies bonds (Fraser, 2018). Notably, two of the most popular recent franchises, *Demon Slayer* (2016–)

and *Jujutsu Kaisen* (2018–), exemplify how Japanese folklore continues to inspire *shōnen* battle narratives—the former through its adaptation of *oni* and *yōkai* lore, and the latter through its reinterpretation of curses and spirits based on the logic of *onryō* and exorcistic practices (Green, 2025; Townsend, 2023). Beyond anime, other forms of digital media also rework these traditions. Action role-playing games like *Genshin Impact* incorporates *kami*-inspired imagery, shrine motifs, and animistic worldviews into its world-building, allowing international players to engage with Japanese cultural symbols interactively (Agung & Wiwaha, 2023; Zhou, 2024).

Fundamentally, non-human agents, animistic worldviews, and recurring motifs emerge as key elements in maintaining the uniqueness of Japanese folklore. These elements work together to give the stories depth and continuity, connecting them to broader cultural practices and beliefs while guaranteeing their attraction to all ages. (Green & Bergeron, 2020). Moreover, these elements demonstrate the resilience of Japanese folklore as a living tradition whose transmission spans oral storytelling, written collections, performance, visual culture, and modern media. Each adaptation embodies both conservation and innovation, ever transforming traditions for contemporary audiences and cultural settings. (Chen, 2024; Grossi, 2023). As a result, Japanese folklore persists not as a relic from the past, a symbolical holdover, but rather as a cultural legacy that mirrors the nation’s collective memory, perpetuating tradition’s transmission while adapting to changing times.

2.4 Human–Animal Relationships in Posthumanist Thought

The human-animal relations are discussed in this section, with special emphasis as to how they are conceptualised in fields like philosophy and animal studies. In addition, the ongoing anthropocentric perceptions that centre on human superiority over other species are highlighted, in conjunction with their counter-part—posthumanist criticisms that seek to decentralise the

human and acknowledge non-human agents. Overall, this section examines the perspectives of pioneering theorists historically and contemporarily, whilst contrasting anthropocentrism and posthumanism paradigms in framing perspectives on the relationship between humans and non-human animals.

2.4.1 Human–Animal Relations: An Overview

The study of human–animal relationships has emerged as a significant field across disciplines such as animal studies, anthrozoology, and critical animal studies. Recent studies have started gearing towards the Interspecies Relational Theory, a paradigm anchored in the neutralism of human–animal relationships, inherently providing a framework wherein both human and non-human animals are acknowledged as equivalents due to their net-effect interactions (Cram et al., 2022; Kieson, 2025). Prominent Human–Animal Studies (HAS) researcher—Margo DeMello, has noted the same sentiment that human–animal relationships are not about “animal advocacy”, but rather a holistic approach to understanding non-human animals as ubiquitous agents in human lives within a social context, agents which are otherwise taken for granted (Nocella et al., 2014; Weitzenfeld, 2015). This perspective resonates with Wolfe’s posthumanist stance, which calls for the mutual recognition of humans and non-human animals as distinct yet interconnected entities (Wolfe, 2010). Generally, the human–animal relationship paradigms examine how mankind perceive, depict, and engage with their non-human counterparts, ranging from pragmatic practices such as domestication for work or companionship to symbolic functions within ethical and philosophical discourse (Cram et al., 2022).

2.4.2 Philosophical Roots of Human Exceptionalism and the Anthropocentric Worldview

More recently, the emergence of the *non-human turn* highlights ecological interconnectedness and recognises that human–wildlife interactions have historically been

essential to the cultural existence of humankind, or human-animal mutualism (Colombino & Childs, 2022; Gyuse, 2022; Muñoz & Hernandez, 2024; Pierotti, 2024). However, human exceptionalism has long been reinforced in classical philosophy. The Greek philosopher Aristotle, for instance, defined humans as “rational animals” and are the only entities that possess *logos*—the capacity for reason and meaningful speech, and are therefore distinct from non-human creatures who lacked reason and existed to serve human purposes (McCready-Flora, 2021). This notion was echoed by the Scholastic thinker Thomas Aquinas, who distinguished humans as unique beings possessing autonomous volition, coupled with the capacities for sense perception and self-conscious rational thought (Eberl, 2023). Aquinas’s view of human supremacy is further reinforced in the philosophy of renowned 17th century French thinker—René Descartes, who likened animals to automatons, mere mechanical devices suitable for vivisection and other Cartesian experiments (Eberl, 2023; Subotic, n.d.). Evidently, these hierarchies shaped the cultural and philosophical presumptions about interspecies connections, consequently creating a long-lasting anthropocentric legacy that placed humans at the apex of the natural order.

All in all, it can be seen that classical philosophy played a crucial role in perpetuating a hierarchy that privileged humanity above all other species. Although cultural narratives are still shaped by this legacy of human exceptionalism, posthumanist scholars strive to undermine such presumptions. As noted earlier, the human–animal bond within literary studies is often explored as a mirror reflecting cultural and ethical values. Nevertheless, when animal characters transcend their symbolic roles to function as autonomous agents, such representations challenge the boundaries of anthropocentrism, aligning with posthumanist approaches to interspecies relations.

2.4.3 The Emergence of Speciesism

According to Weitzenfeld and Joy (2014), Western civilisations and cultures in particular, have maintained a strong anthropocentric perspective, placing humans at the core of meaning, value, knowledge, and action. DeLapp (2008, as cited in Weitzenfeld & Joy, 2014) further emphasised the fact that a certain degree of anthropocentrism is unavoidable as anthropocentric metaethics—the notion that morality is constrained by human views and sensibilities, is intrinsically fundamental to any human moral systems. Hence, cultures that clearly place humans above animals are not the only ones that exhibit anthropocentrism. Noske (1997b, as cited in Weitzenfeld & Joy, 2014) observed that movements that dismiss anthropocentric ethics and numerous indigenous societies—including those that embrace human-animal hybridity, demonstrate anthropocentric inclinations to some extent. They do so by prioritising local human values as well as determining the meaning and value that are assigned to non-human animals.

In contemporary discourse, anthropocentric perspectives are reframed as *speciesism*, which was first coined by Richard Ryder in the 1970s and further developed by Peter Singer in 1975 (Horta & Albersmeier, 2020). Ryder used the term to designate a type of prejudice that privileges members of a specific species (or group of species) over others. Building on this, Singer contends that speciesism denotes a form of discrimination, and much like terms such as sexism and racism, it has since become pivotal in scholarships on the moral consideration of non-human animals (Cantens, 2024; Horta, 2009). The scholar asserted that species membership is not a morally relevant property and therefore, animals' interest in avoiding pain should not be discounted in favour of humans' interest in pursuing pleasure (Duignan, 2010; Singer, 2009). In response to Bernard Williams's claim that humans are entitled to side with their own kind, Singer (2009) argued that speciesism functions as a structural hierarchy that limits full ethical consideration to

those deemed “different beings”. This critique mirrors objections to Immanuel Kant’s moral philosophy, which established human superiority based on autonomy and rationality. Kant asserted that animals, devoid of self-consciousness, exist solely as instruments for human purposes—to serve human ends; whereas humans, as autonomous entities, are ends in themselves. However, if autonomy is the exclusive measure of moral value, then individuals with significant cognitive impairments, such as those who lack self-awareness or reasoning capabilities, would similarly be excluded from the category of “ends” and may be regarded as “the other”. Singer (2009) observed that some non-human animals demonstrate higher cognitive abilities than such individuals. Therefore, if Williams’s and Kant’s claims were accepted, these individuals should, by the same logic, be subjected to speciesism in the way non-human animals are.

2.4.4 Posthumanist Reframings of Human–Animal Relations

The tension about the exclusion from comprehensive ethical consideration among species aligns closely with Cary Wolfe’s (2010) critique of human exceptionalism, which he posits as the cornerstone of Western humanism. Wolfe (2008) observes that even ostensibly progressive systems of animal ethics such as Singer’s utilitarianism or Tom Regan’s “subjects-of-a-life” animals’ rights theory in *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983), remain bound to a humanist paradigm. From the intellectual’s point of view, animal ethics go beyond merely granting rights or sympathy to non-human entities; it necessitates deconstructing the epistemic frameworks that elevate “the human” as the pinnacle of moral worth. Tracing a trajectory from Aristotle’s characterisation of humans as “rational animals”, Descartes’s reduction of animals to automata, to Jeremy Bentham’s seminal question on the standing of animals—“*The question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk?, but Can they suffer?*” (Bentham, 1948, as cited in Wolfe, 2008, p. 9), Wolfe identifies Singer and Derrida as important yet distinct responses to this transition (Wolfe,

2008). Singer contends that Bentham's focus on suffering establishes a utilitarian ethic that necessitates equal consideration of the interests of all sentient beings regardless of species, hence broadening moral consideration beyond humanity (Wolfe, 2008). Derrida however, perceives Bentham's inquiry as transformational, as it redirects the ethical emphasis from power and capability (reason or speech) to passivity and vulnerability. According to the scholar, as suffering is not a sign of agency but of inability, this frailty necessitates an ethical response (Wolfe, 2009, p. 570). Therefore, the connection between humans and animals is rooted not in shared rationality but in shared mortality and finitude, the corporeal state that humanism has always attempted to refute (Wolfe, 2009, p. 570; Wolfe, 2010, p. 83). On the same note, Wolfe contends that animal studies and disability studies have progressively converged into a distinct subfield, particularly through authors like Temple Grandin, who claimed that their conditions provide them with a unique insight into non-human animals and their experiential realities (Wolfe, 2010, p. 128). In this context, disability is framed as "the other", demonstrating how anthropocentric hierarchies do not stand alone but operate in conjunction with other forms of exclusion (Wolfe, 2010, pp. 136–137), in other words, speciesism.

From a related angle, pioneering posthumanist Jacques Derrida examines the fundamental concept of "the animal". In *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2002), Derrida critiques the homogenisation of all non-human life under a singular name, which obscures the differences and variety among species (Derrida & Wills, 2002). Furthermore, his theory of the animal's gaze, on how animals view humans, and how the gaze of non-human animals are mirrors to humans' existence, challenges the presumption that cognitive and epistemic capacities are traits exclusive to humankind. The scholar reinterprets animals as "the other", a posthuman entity whose presence destabilises the boundaries of human subjectivity (Derrida & Wills, 2002). Additionally, Donna

Haraway extends this notion through her theory of companion species in her book *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (2003), with further elaboration in *When Species Meet* (2008). Haraway highlights relationality and co-existence of humans and animals by asserting that both are tied through co-cultures, mutually influencing one another via behaviours of work, play, and care (Grassie, 2011; Haraway, 2003). Significantly, “co-culture” represents a framework for comprehending mutual cultural evolution, emphasising on how interactions between species influence behavioural and cognitive adaptations in both humans and other animals (Sueur & Huffman, 2024). In *The Companion Species Manifesto*, Haraway used domestic dogs as an example to show that non-human entities are not merely inert objects for human exploitation but rather active participants in shared histories, a concept she subsequently expands to include laboratory animals and other species in *When Species Meet*. The scholar’s theory redirects the elements of control or utility to one of human-animal mutualism, further confronting the ethical inconsistencies inherent in ubiquitous human-animal relationships (Grassie, 2011).

Overall, anthropocentric models alone are insufficient for understanding human–animal relationships, as the interdependence and reciprocal influence between species must also be considered. In this regard, posthumanism contests the legacy of human exceptionalism while providing a foundation for the theoretical approaches that follow, laying the groundwork for exploring how cultural narratives reflect these relationships.

2.5 Applications of Wolfe’s Posthumanism

Posthumanism, a theoretical framework originating from the West which questions human exceptionalism, derives from the Eurocentric legacy of humanism and its critiques, encompassing elements from varying schools of thought such as animal studies and critical race theory (Nayar,

2023). In contemporary discourse, Cary Wolfe's *What Is Posthumanism?* (2010) has emerged as a foundational text in critical posthumanist studies, providing a framework that examines and challenges the persistent legacy of human exceptionalism across various disciplines. Thus, this subsection focuses on the application of Wolfe's concepts in prior studies of literature, culture, and media. These examples illustrate the adaptability of his theory in decentralising the human perspective and emphasising non-human agencies across diverse scholarly spheres. Defining the scope and significance of these previous applications is essential for positioning the present study, which aims to apply Wolfe's framework to the analysis of Japanese folktales.

2.5.1 Applications in Literary Studies

Wolfe's posthumanist framework has been widely adopted in literary studies, particularly in works that explore how non-human animals are depicted in fictional narratives and how such representations disrupt anthropocentric paradigms. For instance, Chute (2013) reviews Wolfe's *What is Posthumanism?* (2010), and despite the scholar's critiques of the work as repetitive and unwieldy due to its bulk of theories and quotations; noted how Wolfe's approach has reshaped the field of literary criticism by pushing scholars to move beyond symbolic readings of animals towards recognising their agency within texts.

Evidently, Wolfe's posthumanist framework has been productively applied in literary criticism, where it provides tools for rethinking how texts construct the category of "the human". For example, Han (2021) draws explicitly on *What is Posthumanism* (2010) to examine modernist British novels such as those by Joseph Conrad, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, and Jean Rhys. The scholar contended that these works undermine humanist ideas by depicting characters as liminal entities caught between textuality and humanity. In Han's (2021) analysis, Wolfe's posthumanism enables a critical recognition of characters not as autonomous and rational subjects,

but rather as entities entangled in broader systems of meaning and representation. By shifting focus away from “the human” as the centre of the narratives, the researcher demonstrates how Wolfe’s framework reconfigures modernist character studies, opening new perspectives on embodiment and agency of “the other” in literature (Han, 2021).

Furthermore, Wolfe’s posthumanism has been employed in dissertations examining Western folklore and fairy tales. Lalrodingi (2021) applies Wolfe’s critique of anthropocentrism to narratives where animals, supernatural beings, and objects are granted agency. The study highlights how fairy tales such as *The Frog Prince*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *The Little Mermaid* challenge rigid human and non-human binaries through transformation and hybridity. Drawing on Wolfe, the scholar observed that anthropomorphism in these tales can be read not as a reductive projection of human traits but as an early form of posthumanist ethics that acknowledges the agency and interconnectedness of non-human beings. In this regard, Lalrodingi’s (2021) study illustrates the suitability of Wolfe’s paradigm for analysing folklore traditions, where the boundaries between human and non-human beings are constantly blurred.

Taken together, these applications illustrate the breadth of Wolfe’s influence in literary studies. From modernist fiction to traditional tales, past studies have proven that Wolfe’s framework works to decentre “the human” establish non-human perspectives. Such approaches are especially relevant to the present study, which extends Wolfe’s posthumanism into Japanese folklore.

2.5.2 Applications in Cultural and Media Studies

Beyond literature, Wolfe’s posthumanist framework has been influential in analyses of film, digital culture, and other cultural discourses. For instance, Braidotti and Hlavajova (2018,

pp. 6–7) situate Wolfe’s work within the broader “posthuman turn”—identifying comparative literature and cultural studies as pioneering hubs and citing Wolfe, alongside Herbrechter and Nayar, as foundational voices. The scholars further emphasise how other fields such as new media studies, environmental studies, science and technology studies as well as feminist and queer theories intersect in shaping posthumanist scholarship, underscoring the framework’s relevance across the arts and humanities, including visual and performative practices.

On the same note, Adema and Hall (2016) extend Wolfe’s framework upon digital culture and humanities studies. Drawing on Wolfe’s insistence that “*the nature of thought itself must change [if it is to be posthumanist]*”, Adema and Hall (2016, p. 5) contend that reevaluating the production, dissemination, and legitimisation of knowledge and ideas within the humanities is another necessary step toward posthumanism. By analysing various areas of academic systems, the researchers’ work demonstrates how Wolfe’s posthumanist stance transforms the basic parameters of cultural scholarship.

Moreover, Hauskeller et al. (2015) through investigating television and movies in their study, elucidate how posthumanist narratives have become ingrained in media. The researchers examine how various posthuman—notably hybrid entities, are being portrayed in popular science fiction films—ranging from terrifying to sympathetic characters, in order to analyse the shifting cultural attitudes towards the human–nonhuman archetype. Applying Wolfe, Hauskeller et al. (2015) illustrate how stories involving technological embodiment in popular media culture reposition non-humans.

Lastly, in her review of Wolfe’s book, Glasson (2020) highlights the interdisciplinary reach of *What Is Posthumanism?*, noting its connections to a wide range of topics such as animal studies,

art, architecture, ethics, and philosophy of technology. Crucially, the reviewer emphasises on Wolfe's integration of deconstruction and systems theory as a framework that facilitates cultural analysis by decentralising the human across various discourses, which forms a bridge for the cross-study of distinct fields and expertise (Glasson, 2020).

All things considered, these applications show how Wolfe's posthumanism has prompted cultural researchers to reconsider their methods of analysis, whether they are in interdisciplinary art and media studies, digital humanities, or film and television field. This adaptability is particularly important in the context of this research, given that it applies Wolfe's posthumanist perspective to Japanese folklore, where stories usually revolve around hybrid beings and other non-human phenomena.

2.5.3 Contributions, Strengths, and Gaps in Applications of Wolfe's Posthumanism

From the accentuated points, it is clear that Cary Wolfe's posthumanism has established itself as an encompassing and multifaceted framework across the humanities, particularly in literary and cultural studies. Its strength resides in transcending ethical advocacy or animal rights to provide a systemic critique of the epistemological frameworks that uphold anthropocentrism. In *What Is Posthumanism?* (2010), Wolfe challenges progressive approaches, like Singer's utilitarianism and Regan's rights-based paradigm, for their adherence to humanist concepts of autonomy and rationality. By destabilising "the human", Wolfe's work equips scholars with tools to focus on non-human agency, embodiment, and vulnerability across different scholarly terrains (Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2018; Glasson, 2020).

However, despite these contributions, the breadth of existing applications also reveals important limitations of the framework. Much of the scholarship applying Wolfe's posthumanism

has been situated within Euro-American contexts, often examining Western tales, modern literature, critical theory, or digital and media studies. As Cruz (2022) notes, posthumanist discourse has leaned heavily toward techno-scientific and anthropological terrains, at times overlooking older cultural forms and their entanglements with non-human beings. Folklore, in particular, has received little sustained engagement, even though it offers some of the clearest examples of human–nonhuman ontologies (Lalrodingi, 2021; Thompson, 2018).

This gap has been acknowledged from within folklore studies itself. Thompson (2018) highlights the conspicuous silence surrounding posthumanism in folkloristics, noting that despite the prominence of the “animal turn” across the humanities, folklorists have been slow to engage with non-human cultures. The researcher mandates that one of the necessary steps for contemporary folklore studies is to destabilise the rigid human–animal binary folklore as it should not be viewed solely as the expressive domain of *Homo sapiens*, but rather as extending into the communicative and cultural practices of non-human species. This perspective functions as part of a broader evolutionary continuum, acknowledging that aesthetic and cultural impulses are shared across species and embedded in the development of life on Earth (Thompson 2018, p. 70). By bringing posthumanist insights to bear on folklore, scholars can begin to account for the agency of animals, plants, and other entities that have long been central to oral traditions and narrative imagination (Thompson, 2018).

Conclusively, the research gap is formed of two parts. First, posthumanism has not engaged much with folklore, despite the genre containing opulent human and non-human elements suited for the school of thought. Second, non-Western traditions are by far insufficiently analysed in posthumanist studies—inclusive of Wolfe’s framework, despite their potential to provide valuable insights for contesting anthropocentrism and reevaluating cultural agency. Thus, it is essential to

address this gap not only to expand the posthumanist discourse, but also to evaluate the adaptability of Wolfe's posthumanism against cultural forms that have may have been decentering the human since earlier times. Japanese folklore, with its multitude of animistic elements and diverse array of animals and non-human figures, is a fitting subject for such research. This study is therefore imperative as it builds on Wolfe's insights and applies them to the chosen narratives, highlighting the significance of the scholar's posthumanism and how it can help in exploring cultural traditions that challenges humanist ideology.

2.6 Conclusion

Chapter 2 has brought together the theoretical and analytical foundations for this study, encompassing details of the main texts along with the cultural and philosophical frameworks of Japanese folklore through highlighting the roles of non-human agents and animistic perspectives. The discussion of human–animal relationships and the applications of Wolfe's posthumanism further clarified how this study engages with and extends existing scholarship. With this groundwork established, Chapter 3 will outline the methodology and conceptual framework guiding the present study.

Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 primarily focuses on the methodology and conceptual framework of this study. Starting off with the methodological orientation, the chapter subsequently examines the conceptual framework which is grounded in Cary Wolfe's posthumanism, supported by complementary approaches from related disciplines, each offering a perspective for examining the selected

folktales. Lastly, this chapter concludes by elucidating how these methodological and theoretical components converge within the current investigation and establish a foundation for the analysis of findings and data.

3.2 Methodological Orientation

This study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in textual analysis. A qualitative orientation is most suited to literary studies as the objective is not to measure phenomena through numerical data but to interpret meanings embedded in cultural narratives. Quantitative approaches, while valuable for large-scale surveys, cannot account for the symbolic, thematic, and aesthetic dimensions of folklore, which is the focus of this study. In contrast, qualitative analysis enables a close reading of stories in order to engage with the complexities of metaphorical representations, themes, and cultural patterns that are hard to quantify, making it particularly appropriate for analysing narratives that foreground human–nonhuman relations (Nassaji, 2015; Tenny et al., 2022).

Additionally, the method employed in this research is interpretive textual analysis, which regards literature as a site where cultural values, ideologies, and worldviews are encoded and transmitted. As McKee (2001) notes, textual analysis enables researchers to explore how texts create meaning and how different readings may emerge depending on interpretive context. This makes it especially suitable for folklore, where tales function not as static artefacts but as living narratives that embody moral instruction, historical imagination, and human–nonhuman relationships. The analytical focus therefore lies on examining descriptions, motifs, and character portrayals that reveal how animals and other non-human beings are depicted in the stories.

Textual analysis also aligns with a critical orientation that recognises texts as socially situated. Fairclough (2003) argues that discourse analysis helps uncover how texts shape cultural

values, ideologies, and power relations. When applied to folklore, the tales do not function merely as entertainment but actively participate in constructing anthropocentric or non-anthropocentric worldviews. An interpretive approach therefore enables this study to consider how Japanese folktales might destabilise conventional humanist assumptions while opening possibilities for posthumanist readings.

The stories selected for this study, as introduced in Chapter 2, were chosen for their recurrent engagement with notable non-human presences as well as portrayals of human-animal relationships, with special emphasis on foxes (*kitsune*) and rabbits. Both creatures often blur the line between animalistic existence and supernatural frontiers within traditional Japanese narratives, as seen with the *yōkai*—whose engagements with humans offer a rich context for exploring themes of agency, boundary transgression, and relational dynamics, elements which are foundational in posthumanism. Such features render these texts particularly productive for examining whether posthumanist nuances are articulated within Japanese folklore. The approach to analysis is therefore both rigorous and flexible, investigating whether and how posthumanist dimensions emerge from the selected folktales rather than imposing predetermined interpretations.

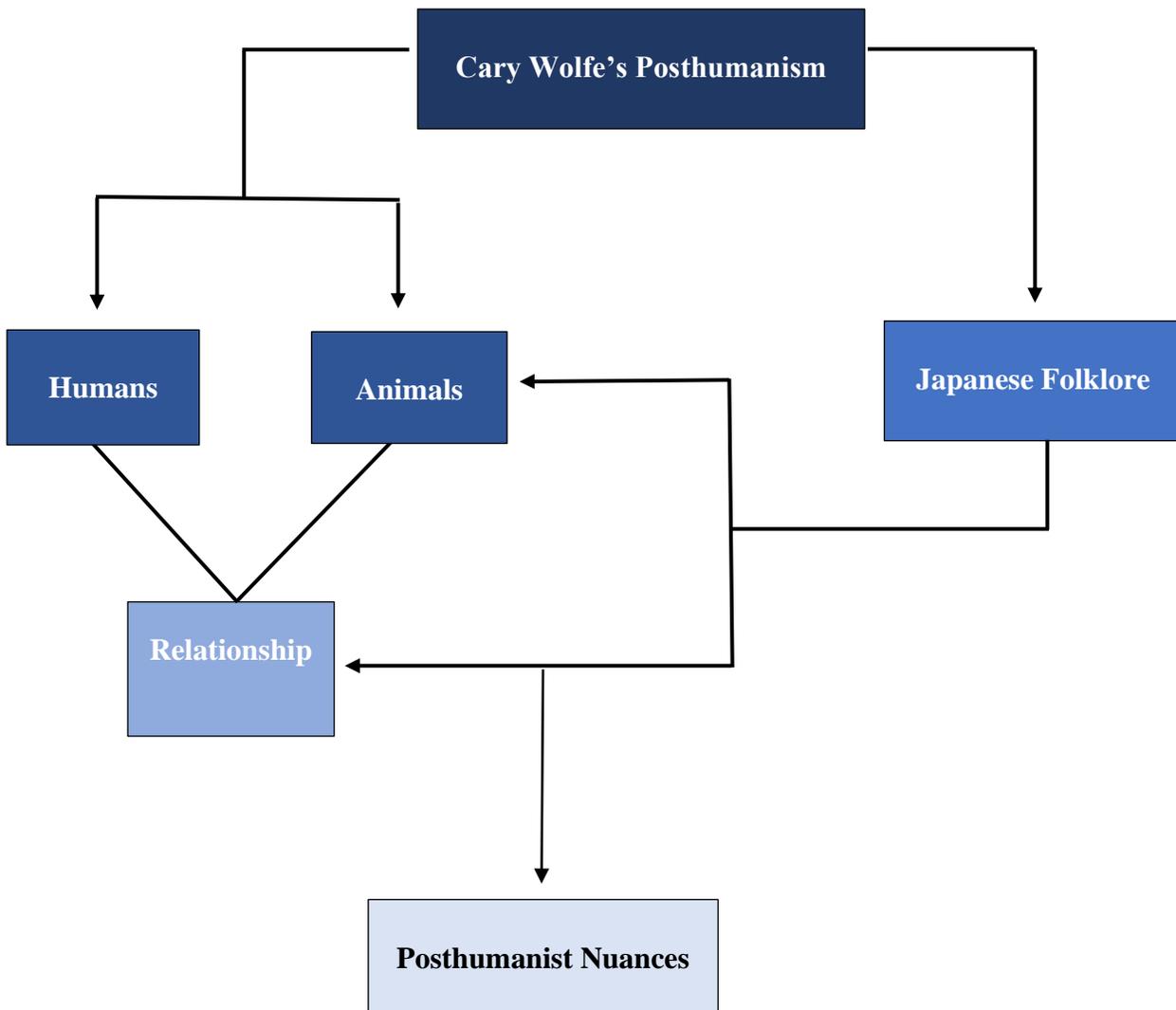
3.3 Conceptual Framework

The framework shows the conceptual approach that will be used in this research to examine Japanese folklores through posthumanism—more specifically, Cary Wolfe’s posthumanism theory, which is the main theory forming the basis of this study. Crucially, the tenets of Wolfe’s posthumanism theory is deeply ingrained with notions of human-animals interconnectedness, wherein both entities have intertwining ties and are mutually reliant on one another. This forms an exclusive relationship between the two. With Wolfe’s posthumanist theory as the cardinal analytical tool, the principal focus will be on the portrayal of non-human animals as well as the

aforementioned human-animals relationships depicted in Japanese folklores. These analyses aim to identify whether posthumanist nuances are articulated within these narratives.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of the Study



Note. Conceptual framework adapted from Cary Wolfe's (2010) posthumanism.

3.3.1 Evolution of Posthumanism

The conceptualisation of posthumanism cannot be genealogically attributed to a single “founder” as it resulted from the convergence of several academic trends, including postmodernism, cybernetics, continental philosophy, and critical theory (Ferrando, 2013). Even so, posthumanism as a school of thought, was shaped and influenced by several notable individuals and movements. Key persons like Michel Foucault, Bruno Latour, and Donna Haraway in their strife against anthropocentrism, are frequently cited as pivotal inspirers of this intellectual field.

Building on these diverse intellectual origins and key figures, posthumanism has since developed into a multifaceted field encompassing various paradigms and orientations such as transhumanism, feminist new materialism, and critical posthumanism. Although these subfields collectively seek to transcend conventional humanism, they vary in focus, and Ferrando (2013) warns against reducing them to a simplistic conflation. For instance, transhumanism advocates for technological augmentation and the surpassing of biological constraints (Hauskeller, 2016), whereas in feminist new materialist thought, the ontological embodiment and nomadic subjectivity take precedence (Braidotti, 2006; Neimanis, 2014). On the other hand, critical posthumanism—the orientation adopted in the current study, emerges from the intersection of deconstruction, systems theory, and animal studies, and is primarily concerned with dismantling the anthropocentrism that underpins humanist thought (Braidotti, 2018; Herbrechter, 2013; Wolfe, 2010).

Jacques Derrida’s insights in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2002) reveal that the concept of “the human” is formed through the exclusion and subordination of the animal. Building on this notion, Wolfe (2010) contends that posthumanism needs to dismantle such exclusions and shift away from the idea that ethics should be based only on human attributes like language or

reason. The scholar further integrates Luhmann's systems theory, which conceptualises society not as a product of human essences but rather as networks of communication (Wolfe, 2010, p. 109). This deconstructive framework consequently positions posthumanism as an investigation of the ways in which meaning and agency arise across dispersed networks that include people, non-human animals, and technologies.

Additionally, Bolton (2014) highlights this ethical aspect, observing that Wolfe's intervention undermines vision-as-mastery and accentuates fragility and shared finitude among species. Furthermore, while Haraway (2003) emphasises on relationality via her notion of companion species and Braidotti (2006) conceptualises nomadic subjectivity, Wolfe positions his critique at the convergence of systems and ethics. The strength of critical posthumanism is in its capacity to concurrently examine symbolic, material, and ethical components, providing a comprehensive framework for analysing cultural narratives—folklore in this case.

For this study, Wolfe's critical posthumanism is adopted as the principal theoretical lens, whereby its value stems from its ability to challenge human-centred beliefs in folklore while simultaneously emphasising the agency of non-human entities. By placing Japanese folktales in this context, this study situates the narratives within a paradigm that avoids simplifying non-human beings to mere allegories of human morality, instead recognising them as active agents within the expansive cultural and ecological systems alongside humans.

3.3.2 Ethics and Non-human Agency

A central concern of posthumanist inquiry lies in rethinking the grounds of ethics in relation to non-human beings. This concern is reflected in the *non-human turn*—a major paradigm shift in the arts, humanities and social sciences as practitioners turn away from their focus revolving around humans in favour of non-human agencies, seeking to decentre the human (Grusin,

2015). Cord (2022) noted that this turn can be seen as both a continuation and radicalisation of post-structuralism objective of “decentring the subject”, having thus introduced a new, post-anthropocentric phase of posthumanism. In posthumanism, the non-human turn is indispensable as it contradicts the dominant human-centred viewpoint and encourages a transformative approach to emphasise the influence of non-human entities in their own right. Rather than a solitary movement, the non-human turn is more of an umbrella term encompassing an extensive range of critical theories and disciplines spanning across various academic fields like object-oriented ontology (OOO), new materialism, and so on (Cord, 2022).

Another profound opposition to human exceptionalism and advocacy of ethical considerations towards animals is Critical Animal Studies (CAS)—a key constituent under the over-arching non-human turn (Best et al., 2007). The field shares a common interest with posthumanism in reassessing the importance and functions of non-human agencies/animals in diverse settings, with many of their philosophies and stances overlapping one another. Notably, CAS has been influential in linking critiques of speciesism to broader systems of domination, insisting that scholarship engage both theory and praxis (Best et al., 2007; Nocella et al., 2014). Chiew (2014) expands on this discourse by redefining ethics as interconnected and relational. Drawing on Wolfe’s (2010) framework and Barad’s (2003) concept of *agential realism*, the scholar defined compassion as a trans-species entanglement that arises not from the hierarchical extension of human moral authority but from shared vulnerability, which situates ethics not as a fixed trait solely for humans but within dynamic relations across species.

As such, CAS is prolific in posthumanist studies as researchers tend to adopt, adjust and integrate concepts from both to complement one another in their studies. For instance, Joseph and Koudur (2023) investigates the part mythology plays in decolonising Western-centric

epistemology in narratives, employing both posthumanism and CAS when scrutinising the quintessential nagini, Manasa—the Hindu snake deity while Unni (2023) encroaches on the realm of oceanic posthumanism and “sea-faunas” through her selected literary diegesis. Despite not being a posthumanist paper essentially, shades of CAS are perceivable in Fraser (2018) as the researcher scrutinises the animal–human relationships in folklore and the ethical and cultural connotations invoked.

In addition, philosophical explorations of the animal conundrum further enhance this discourse on ethics. Haraway’s (2003) concept of companion species adds yet another dimension to the notion by situating ethics within lived relationships of cohabitation and mutual shaping between humans and animals. Her account of the human-dog kinship exemplifies how non-human animals are not passive recipients of human actions but active participants in world-making practices. Meanwhile, Chakravorty and Raj (2024) illustrate folkloric examples by using Haraway’s posthuman cyborg philosophies to examine hybrid beings—the mythical weretigers of indigenous Meghalaya tribes, which destabilise human–animal boundaries and encode ecological and ethical wisdom. Clearly, such perspectives highlight that agency should not be defined in terms of autonomy or mastery, but as a relational and interdependent aspect within interspecies communities (Godlewicz-Adamiec & Piszczatowski, 2024).

All in all, these perspectives attest to the fact that non-human characters within cultural narratives such as folktales are not only symbolic figures but potential agents within ethical worlds. Folklore thus becomes a site where posthumanist ethics may already be articulated through narrative, inviting interpretations that decentralises the human.

3.3.3 Systems Theory

A distinctive contribution of Wolfe's posthumanism is his integration of systems theory, particularly the work of Niklas Luhmann. Systems theory conceptualises society not as an aggregate of human subjects but as a constellation of self-referential systems of law, art, politics, science, that reproduce themselves through communication. In this framework, "the human" is not the privileged origin of meaning but an effect of systemic processes. Wolfe (2010) adapts this model to argue that posthumanism must abandon the metaphysical grounding of value in the category of the human, instead attending to the relational networks and communicative operations through which meaning and agency emerge.

Herbrechter (2013) situates this move within a broader critique of humanist epistemologies, arguing that posthumanism, through Luhmann, challenges the assumption of the human as the centre of knowledge systems. Kowalcze (2020) extends this methodological insight by showing how posthumanist literary criticism involves reading "against the grain" of anthropocentrism, tracing distributed agency within texts rather than privileging human perspectives. Chute's (2013) review of Wolfe's *What is Posthumanism?* (2010) further reinforces the significance of this approach, noting that it reframes the role of culture itself as a system of interspecies communication.

On the other hand, Cord (2022) highlights the implications of this shift for cultural studies, arguing that the non-human turn requires us to view texts, discourses, and media as systems that include human and non-human actants alike. Similarly, Torres-Romero (2024) emphasises that posthumanist ethics and knowledge must be framed as relational rather than individualistic, foregrounding distributed agency across multiple sites. This systemic emphasis on relation rather

than essence provides a strong foundation for rethinking how narratives—notably folklore in the context of this study, construct human–nonhuman entanglements.

When applied to folklore, systems theory compels a reading of tales not as mere static artefacts but as communicative systems that transmit values, cosmologies, and ecological orientations across generations. Lalrodingi (2021) demonstrates that fairy tales and folklore frequently grant agency to animals, objects, and hybrid beings, thereby destabilising anthropocentric hierarchies and anticipating posthumanist ethics. This resonates with Wolfe’s (2010) call to rethink culture itself as an interspecies communicative system. Folklore therefore becomes a privileged site for observing how human–nonhuman boundaries are continually reconfigured.

The usefulness of a systemic view also lies in its ability to avoid reducing animals to metaphors of human morality. Barcz (2015) notes that literature often gives and amplifies the “voice” of non-human animals, undermining anthropocentric reading traditions. From a systems perspective, such voices are not mere allegory but integral components of a communicative ecology. As an example, in Japanese folklore, foxes (*kitsune*) and raccoon dogs (*tanuki*) function not only as tricksters but as systemic actors whose transformations disrupt or sustain human communities. Their agency parallels what Latour (2005) describes in actor-network theory, where humans and non-humans participate equally in shaping cultural networks.

A further dimension is added by decolonial approaches, such as Joseph and Koudur’s (2023) critiques on colonial epistemologies that privilege human rationality and suppress indigenous cosmologies. The researchers argue that myth and folklore frequently encode alternative ontologies where animals, spirits, and landscapes act as co-constitutive agents. Reading folklore through systems theory therefore also means recognising it as a site where indigenous and non-

Western epistemologies already articulate posthumanist insights, long before these ideas were formalised in Euro-American theories.

Overall, the systems theory enables this study to read Japanese folktales not as allegories of human life but as dynamic cultural systems where meaning arises from the interplay of humans, animals, and supernatural beings. By focusing on function, relation, and communication, this framework opens space for recognising distributed agency and non-human participation within folklore, offering a crucial corrective to humanist and symbolic readings alike.

3.3.4 Ecological Perspectives

Ecology is the study of living things and their symbiotic relationships with their environments (Maurya, 2024). Posthumanism, being a discipline advocating human-decentralisation and anti-speciesism, is hence concomitant with ecological themes as it calls for renewed attention to the interdependence of humans, animals, and environments. More often than not, ecological tropes arise in posthumanism as a critique of anthropocentrism that has resulted in the exploitation of non-human agencies and environmental deterioration. Bhattacharyya's (2024) paper is emblematic in this aspect. Through the analysis of the characters and socio-cultural backdrops in Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014), the scholar demonstrates how posthumanism permeates the ecology of folk narratives, elucidating the unbreakable bond of culture and nature, the inherent elements that bring about the balance of the world.

Braidotti (2006) captures this in her idea of the nomadic subject, which decentres the autonomous individual and locates subjectivity in shifting entanglements with non-humans. In a similar vein, Neimanis (2014) presents an "aqueous imaginary" which emphasises the material flows that support life by viewing water as a connecting medium between human and non-human bodies. Imperatively, such notions demonstrate that posthumanism constitutes not only a

philosophical critique towards human supremacy, but also an ecological realignment and interdependence among species.

Furthermore, recent literary and folkloric analyses illustrate how narratives are often incorporated with ecological themes and elements, contributing to the development of the ecocriticism school of thought. For instance, Budhathoki's (2024) study shows that Nepali folktales position nature as an integral component of the human cultural imagination, with heavy depictions of natural elements such as woods, rivers, and animals; while Ralte (2023) and Unni (2023) in their posthumanist research—the former examined Mizo tales, wherein animals and natural settings represent moral obligation and ecological knowledge, and the latter explored postcolonial literature through the lens of oceanic posthumanism. Collectively, these investigations reinforce folklore as a repository of ecological thought that resonate strongly with posthumanist paradigms.

Hence, it is clear that such revelations are not exclusive to modern thought as cultural narratives often encode relational ecologies. Japanese tales, for instance, often situate non-human entities as mediators between human society and natural or spiritual realms, while mountains and rivers are inhabited by deities and spirits that demand respect. Ferrando (2013) argues that posthumanism dismantles binary oppositions such as human and nature or culture and environment, allowing us to read these tales not as superstitions but as expressions of ecological interactions. In this way, folklore anticipates posthumanist ecological ethics by recognising animals, spirits, and landscapes as integral to cultural life. Thus, ecological perspectives offer a vital lens for this study. They enable a reading of Japanese folklore not as a mere cultural heritage but rather an articulation of ecological philosophy embedded in narrative form.

3.3.5 Positioning Wolfe's Posthumanism

According to Wolfe (2010), posthumanism fundamentally challenges the centrality of humans as the privileged being (anthropocentrism) as scholars develop theories and notions that ranges from biological to mechanical domains in pursuit of eliminating humans from any position of special advantage with regard to knowledge, meaning, and cognition. Donna Haraway is undeniably one of the most heralded theorists in posthumanism. Her eponymous *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) challenges the traditional boundaries between humans and non-humans through cyborg figures, enforcing her stance on science-fictional embodiment and hybridity (Wolfe, 2010; Chakravorty & Raj, 2024).

In the same manner, posthumanism is typically associated with speculative aspects, encompassing the notions of futuristic and evolutionary elements. Cary Wolfe however, disassociates himself from the Cyborgian branch of posthumanism as he opines that the faction posits “transhumanism”, which advocates for the “enhancement of human intellectual, physical, and emotional capabilities” (Garreau, 2005, as cited in Wolfe, 2010)—a generally anthropocentric philosophical and intellectual movement (Bostrom, 2005). While transhumanism labels such human subjects as “posthumans” due to them radically surpassing the original being, Wolfe’s interpretation differs. The scholar sees the idea of “post” as something beyond and beside humans, a suggested alternative existence (Barcz, 2015).

Moreover, Wolfe is widely known for being instrumental in connecting posthumanism with CAS. He is critical voice against the conventional animal rights discourses, which is frequently still grounded in humanist principles (Wolfe, 2010). It is clear that the intellectual stands for a more radical rethinking of ethics that does not depend on the anthropocentric notion of human superiority but rather an inclusive approach to it that extends beyond humans to animals. As

articulated by Derrida et al. (1983) (as cited in Bolton, 2014), the subjective ‘I’ exists only as it is perceived by the world, attributing this sense of perception of human’s existence to animals. Drawing on Derrida’s deconstruction of human-animal binaries, Wolfe acknowledges the biological roots of humanity (as opposed to artificial enhancement) and advocates for the non-hierarchical reception of both humans and non-human animals.

Patently, Wolfe’s reformatory approach is particularly dynamic in the posthumanist field due to its “retrospective” standpoint. The scholar’s framework generally shows exclusive focus on the relationship between humans and animals as well as other forms of life and material entities in the socio-cultural, historical, and environmental aspects, forgoing the general futurological and speculative inclination of posthumanism (Barcz, 2015). From Wolfe’s perspective, humans and animals are interconnected and interdependent, therefore not all ethical considerations should be humans-centred. Rather, respect and moral attention towards non-human animals ought to be acknowledged as well (Wolfe, 2010).

All in all, this study is underpinned by a conceptual framework foregrounded in Wolfe’s posthumanism, which synthesises critical posthumanism, ethics and non-human agency, systems theory, and ecological approaches. Each aspect offers a unique perspective for exploring how Japanese folklore addresses human–nonhuman relations, while together they create a versatile basis for recognising posthumanist nuances in the selected stories.

3.4 Integration into This Study

The methodological and conceptual orientations outlined above converge in the analytical approach of this study. The aim is not to impose posthumanist interpretations onto Japanese folklore but to investigate whether and how such nuances emerge from the texts themselves. The

framework therefore functions as a toolbox of interpretive lenses made up of Wolfe's critical posthumanism and ecological perspectives that collectively guide the textual analysis.

This study establishes the criteria for identifying posthumanist dimensions in the corpora through the integration of several perspectives, which include instances where the boundaries between humans and non-human animals are blurred, the human exceptionalism destabilised, as well as when non-human agency and ecological entanglements are made apparent. Crucially, the methodological design is exploratory rather than prescriptive regarding outcomes, leaving open the possibility that certain narratives may uphold anthropocentrism while others may contradict it. In this sense, the study's approach is both comprehensive and adaptable, positioning Japanese folklore as a potential locus for posthumanist conception without confining it to predefined classifications.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological design and conceptual framework that underpin the study. The qualitative approach emphasises close reading and thematic interpretation of the texts. Drawing on Wolfe's critical posthumanism as the central lens, supplemented by perspectives on ethics and non-human agency, systems theory, and ecological entanglements, the framework equips the analysis to investigate how Japanese folktales construct human–nonhuman relations. With this groundwork established, Chapter 4 applies these lenses to the selected tales, examining whether and how posthumanist nuances emerge within Japanese folklore.

Chapter 4: Textual Analysis

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 consists of two main sections, each devoted to one of the two animals—the rabbit and the kitsune, selected for analysis in this study. Each section examines the portrayal of the respective animal through close textual analysis of the selected narratives. This is followed by a discussion of the posthumanist elements reflected in these representations, drawing on Cary Wolfe’s posthumanist framework as the primary theoretical lens.

4.2 Portrayal of the Rabbit in Japanese Folklore

The rabbit tales selected for analysis in the current study are taken from the anthologies of A.B. Mitford and Yei Theodora Ozaki, namely—*The Crackling Mountain*, *The Farmer and the Badger*, *The White Hare and the Crocodiles*, and *The Adventures of Kintarō, the Golden Boy*. While not as commonly portrayed in Western tales, the rabbit (or the hare in different variations) enjoys greater representations in Japanese folklore, with its character portrayals, demeanour, and status changing across narratives. One of the most notable representations of the rabbit in Japanese folklore is the Gyokuto (玉兔, literally “jade rabbit”)—a rabbit living on the moon, pounding mochi with its mallet and mortar (Matsuura, 2024). As recorded in the *Konjaku Monogatari-shū*, Gyokuto was transformed into a guardian spirit or *yōkai*, after it unknowingly rescued Taishakuten (帝釈天)—one of the lords of Heaven, when he collapsed from exhaustion in his human form. The rabbit, lamenting its uselessness of gathering food for the old man, leapt into the fire to be cooked and eaten by him, touching Taishakuten who then raised the rabbit and placed it the moon as an inspiration for all future generations (Koriyama & Allen, 2024; Meyer, 2023a).

4.2.1 The Rabbit: Representation, Relationships, and Symbolic Roles

Potentially due to the influence of the cultural or political shifts of the respective era in which the tales were composed, the rabbit's characterisation in Japanese folktales can vary as not all display compassion and sacrificial tendencies as the Gyokuto. The animal can at times be a murderous avenger harbouring hatred, at others a repentant figure symbolising reciprocity. However, despite discrepancies in specifics among retellings, its symbolic role in the chosen stories remains thematically aligned, depicting the creature as an active participant and contributor in ubiquitous ethical interactions and outcomes, whether in human-animal or animal-animal relationships. Be it as a central or supporting character in the story, the rabbit's portrayal and interaction with people and other entities across the chosen corpora underscores the interdependence that supports a recurring theme fundamental to Japanese folklore and Shinto philosophy, which teaches that all beings exist along a unified spiritual plane with the ability to influence one another. Hence, all are equal no matter their species or natural attributes.

The Avenger in The Crackling Mountain and The Farmer and the Badger (Kachi-kachi Yama)

In both Mitford's *The Crackling Mountain* (2019) and Ozaki's *The Farmer and the Badger* (2018), the rabbit appears as an avenger and moral enforcer in a retelling of the *Kachi-kachi Yama* legend. Following the duplicitous actions of a malevolent *tanuki* (rendered as "badger" in Mitford's and Ozaki's versions) that deceives and murders an elderly woman, the rabbit determines to exact retribution on the perpetrator through three consecutive plans, which are setting the badger's back on fire, deceiving it into applying a scorching mixture (composed of sauce and pepper) onto the burn, and ultimately enticing it into a sinking mud boat, which kills the badger.

The brutality of the rabbit's schemes is evident, as can be seen in Mitford's version, which narrates that the badger's back was scorched "*as black as a cinder*" after the rabbit set fire to the bundle of sticks it was carrying (Mitford, 2019, p. 161), all the while tricking the former that the warning signs of the impending danger are mere natural occurrences of their surroundings. Later, "*seeing an opportunity to torture the badger to his heart's content*", the rabbit with feigned kindness, applied his "sovereign remedy for burns" made of cayenne pepper on the badger, further deepening its suffering (Mitford, 2019, pp. 161–162). Ozaki's version of the tale differs from Mitford's in overall length and connection of the rabbit with the elderly couple. Nevertheless, it maintains the core details of the rabbit's plans, interweaving its ethical standpoint with its cruelty and thirst for vengeance against the badger. For instance, it is written that the rabbit "*hoped that the badger would die of its burns, for he felt that nothing could be too bad for the animal, who was guilty of murdering a poor helpless old woman who had trusted him*" (Ozaki, 2018, p. 60).

Despite the rabbit's altruistic heroism, current scholarship challenges such moral convictions in literature. Gao (2024) observes that early *Kachi-kachi Yama* manuscripts from the Edo and Meiji periods exhibited significantly greater violence and moral ambiguity in part of both the rabbit and badger. Frequently, the rabbit was depicted as an embodiment of "virtuous revenge", which draws on the Confucian conception and Tokugawa shogunate ideology of *katakiuchi* (敵討ち, literally "righteous vengeance"). In the times of old Japan, vengeance executed on behalf of another, as exemplified by the rabbit's retaliation against the badger for the old woman's demise and the old man's sorrow, was culturally esteemed as an act of devotion and filial obligation (Gao, 2024). This can be further seen in certain variations such as Ozaki's, where the rabbit is not directly or emotionally connected to the old couple, thereby its actions are fueled by a sense of virtue rather than personal vendetta. However, as the scholar notes, when examined through a contemporary

moral lens, such tales obscure the distinction between justice and cruelty as the rabbit's acts are catalysed by the drive to murder the badger in retaliation for its wrong. In some versions, this moral excess is made explicit, as the rabbit bludgeons the badger to death in a final act of vengeance when the latter swims toward his boat after the mud one disintegrates. Thus, *Kachi-kachi Yama* reveals the rabbit's dual symbolism as a merciless tormentor and a valiant avenger, illustrating the premodern acceptance of morally repugnant violence and its subsequent sanitisation into a didactic children's fable during the Meiji period (Gao 2024).

Notwithstanding such ethical ambiguity, the rabbit's brutality and vendetta is integral to the folktale, especially in the context of the present study as these elements are result of the rabbit's feelings of empathy or sentimental ties towards the elderly couple, which motivated its reprisal on their behalf. As such, *The Crackling Mountain* and *The Farmer and the Badger* portrays an animal actor whose extreme actions emerge from its own sense of justice yet at the same time, blurs the boundary between righteousness and cruelty. This exemplifies the shared ethical capacity of all sentient beings, where empathy affect subjectivity.

The Penitent Hare in The White Hare and the Crocodiles (The White Hare of Inaba)

In contrast to *Kachi-kachi Yama*, *The White Hare and the Crocodiles* (Ozaki, 2018) depicts the hare as a remorseful character whose anguish is resultant of its own misdeeds and arrogance, thereafter serving as a lesson of humility through the compassion of others. Inspired by the ancient myth of *The White Hare of Inaba*, the narrative begins with the hare tricking a crocodile to rally up its kind and form a bridge for the hare's passage across the sea. Upon reaching the other side, the hare openly derides the crocodiles of their folly for falling for its scheme, inciting the crocodiles to react by stripping its fur, resulting the hare in a flayed and agonised state (Ozaki, 2018, pp. 192–193).

The hare's suffering did not end here as it was later further tormented after being misled by malevolent deities, who tricked it into bathing in salt water as a remedy for regrowth of its fur. The hare's agony was only relived when Ōkuni-nushi-no-Mikoto (also known as Ōnamuji in Japanese lore), a passing *kami* who advises it to “wash in the pond water and roll upon the *kaba* (*cattail*) pollen” (Ozaki, 2018, p. 195). Through this act of divine kindness, the hare was healed and in gratitude, it predicts that Ōkuni-nushi, rather than his vicious siblings (the malevolent deities who misled it), will win the hand of Princess Yakami in marriage, a prophecy that eventually came to pass despite Ōkuni-nushi's doubts. Importantly, the hare's experience converts the narrative into a Shinto moral allegory, illustrating that deception and haughtiness lead to pain, sometimes even more than what is deserved, whereas empathy and contrition restore equilibrium, at times in the most unlikely manner.

According to Shinto philosophy which forms the basis of Japanese folklore, *kami* are not detached divinities but rather sacred beings that reside in all forms of existence, including human, animal, nature, and even non-living objects. The cosmology preaches on *musubi* (結び, literally “binding” or “connection”), the divine force that binds all beings in interdependence, as well as *wa* (和, literally “harmony”), the equilibrium that connects the natural and spiritual realms in mutual harmony (Hirai, 2025). Building on this, Ōkuni-nushi's sympathy for the afflicted hare can be interpreted as a demonstration of divine empathy, whereby the hallowed reinstates the principle of equilibrium of the universe through benevolence rather than punishment and retaliation, in contrast to the crocodiles. Paired with the hare's gratitude and prophecy, their interactions exemplify the amalgamation of the Buddhist karmic purification and *jishi* (慈悲, literally “compassion”) with the Shinto principles of *wa* (harmony) and care (Nakazawa & Akabayashi, 2020), so reaffirming the balance among entities in the cycle of life.

Evidently, *The White Hare of Inaba's* moral arc represents a shift from its avenger counterpart in the *Kachi-kachi Yama* narratives, as the hare, rather than suffering injustice and tormenting the inflictor as a result thereof, experiences it, gaining redemption through forgiveness and its own sense of contrite. Unlike the polarised cause and effect of clashing ethics depicted in *Kachi-kachi Yama*, the hare's deception is not categorically condemned in this tale. Rather, it is perceived as a moral infraction within a karmic order that can be alleviated through hardship, compassion, and repentance, which is a key concept in the Buddhist impression of destiny, rebirth, and, reincarnation. Moreover, the evolution of the protagonist hare from a deceitful, haughty figure to a humble, beholden being underscores the predominant themes of animals in Japanese folk literature. Just like the human characters, animals are frequently portrayed as entities capable of undergoing growth and development through their experiences and worldly interactions, analogous to the hero archetype in monomyths. *The White Hare and the Crocodiles* therefore demonstrates how the Japanese folkloric consciousness perceives life as an intertwined network of mutual dependency among humans, animals, and deities.

The Companion Hare in The Adventures of Kintarō, the Golden Boy

In *The Adventures of Kintarō, the Golden Boy* (Ozaki, 2018), the hare, unlike the protagonists of the preceding tales, plays a supporting role as a member of an interspecies fellowship surrounding the titular hero, Kintarō. The young boy, raised in the mountain wilds, lives among wild creatures whom he befriends and tames, with his special retainers being the bear, the deer, the monkey, and the hare as his companions in daily life void of other human friends (Ozaki, 2018, p. 68). In the story, Kintarō and his animal playmates are shown to engage in a game of wrestling, and despite their varying strength and agility, manage to end the game in good humour, with their fellowship epitomising an egalitarian human and animal relationship. This can

be seen as despite being referred to as Kintarō's retainers, the animals relate to him as equals connected by affection rather than servitude, displaying a bond that goes beyond the conventional humans-animal hierarchy. Furthermore, Kintarō's ability comprehend and learn "*to speak their strange talk*" (Ozaki, 2018, p. 67) demonstrates a mutual respect among entities as the human "lowered" their status to acquire the language of the animals.

Importantly, the willingness to form interspecies bonds is an essential aspect in many Japanese folktales Foster (2009) observes that moral values and outcomes often emerge from the interplay between humans and other natural or supernatural beings in these folk narratives, rendering even the tiniest, unconscious act of a single character pivotal to the course of the entire story. Here, the interactions between Kintarō and his animal kin are not forcefully positioned in a plot-driven narrative, but rather act as an anchor throughout the story to show that entanglement between different entities is not derived solely from binary points of punishment or redemption, but can also be attained through rapport and affinity if each side is willing to commit to it. Unlike the prior narratives, unity is established as a fundamental aspect of this story, where concord serves as the foundation of the character's relationships, rather than as a final objective achieved through trials and tribulations.

4.2.2 Posthumanist Elements Reflected in the Depiction of the Rabbit

Wolfe (2010, p. xv) asserts that posthumanism does not seek to reject "the human" but rather to "decentre" the being from its pinnacle point by acknowledging humanity's interconnected with "the other", thereby dismantling the limitations of human supremacy predicated entirely on the capabilities of rationality and language that are stipulated by humanist schools of thought. When viewed through this perspective, the rabbit (or hare) in *The Crackling Mountain*, *The Farmer and the Badger*, *The White Hare and the Crocodiles*, and *The Adventures of Kintarō*, the

Golden Boy goes beyond mere symbolism as it functions as an entity which exhibits ability to rationalise empathise, and relate to the ongoings around it, thereby diminishing “the human” as the sole locus of moral authority.

Ethical Agency Beyond the Human

Across the selected stories, the rabbit’s deliberate actions and moral compass exemplify decision-making which challenges human exceptionalism, such as the vengeful rabbit in *The Crackling Mountain and The Farmer and the Badger (Kachi-kachi Yama)*, where its vendetta for the murdered old woman arises not from emotional instinct (Mitford’s version) or ethical judgment and empathy (Ozaki’s version). No matter the variations of its connection to the elderly couple, the rabbit is shown to recognise human suffering, internalise moral outrage, and act with purpose based on its own judgement. The personification of the rabbit as a moral agent signifies what Wolfe (2008, p. 9) describes as ethics founded upon humanity’s shared finitude with animals and the intrinsic vulnerability “in their flesh” which all sentient species are susceptible to. Hence, the rabbit’s altruistic actions on behalf of others demonstrate its active role in the inherent morality in human nature and its awareness of this shared vulnerability, resulting in empathy as it understands the old man’s pain of losing a loved one (or share a part of it in Ozaki’s version). Therefore, this implies that beings other than humans can perceive ethical awareness and reasoning, elements which are often deployed as means of human exceptionalism.

Nevertheless, the rabbit’s conceptions of justice are not devoid of contradiction, as they conflate empathy with brutality and violence against the perpetrator, as previously indicated. However, ethical endeavours undertaken can be inherently dualistic by nature, since the capacity to perform kindness concurrently includes the propensity to incur harm, as both aspects are two sides of the same coin. Here it calls to mind Wolfe’s (2009, p. 570) observation of Derrida’s

definition of the moral standing of non-human animals. The scholar who, departing from the dominant strategy of animal rights philosophers of linking ethical status with moral reasoning and capabilities, instead focuses on the “auto-” in “autonomy” (as in agency) of humans and non-human animals. Derrida argues that both humans and non-human animals are equally endowed with subjectivity and mortality which underpin their ethical agency, for what interconnects the two is not their capacities but their shared inabilities—their finitude, which humanism sought to disavow. This indeterminacy corresponds with Wolfe’s (2009) notion that there exist a shared mortality and complexity inherent to both humans and non-human animals alike, which can affect their reasoning and actions within the moral sphere, sometimes with the ensuing outcome contradicting the actor’s nature or intention.

As is evident in *Kachi-kachi Yama*, albeit driven by empathy and moral recompense, the rabbit’s reprisal towards the badger implicates it in the same transgression it seeks to remedy—violence and murder against another. Diverging interpretations on the inherent nature of the rabbit paints the creature in polarised narrative renderings, with some placing it on the pedestal as an enforcer of justice, while others see it as a dastard hypocrite. Ironically, this constructs the rabbit as morally ambivalent, wherein virtue and vice exist along the same spectrum of its representation. Nevertheless, this yet again signifies the moralities and susceptibilities common to humans and non-human animals alike, as quasi-heroic figures such as the rabbit in *Kachi-kachi Yama* mirror the complexities of human protagonists in literature, especially anti-heroes who tend to face similar paradoxes of moral integrity.

Compassion, Vulnerability, and Reciprocity

Despite the fact that both tales inherently underscore the ethical capacity of non-human animals (the rabbit in this context), there is a stark difference in plot derivation as *Kachi-kachi*

Yama explicitly portrays such elements through a clear-cut cause-and-effect dynamic of harm and retribution while *The White Hare and the Crocodiles* reinterprets it through a progressive, karmic cycle of suffering and compassion. In this tale, Ōkuni-nushi-no-Mikoto's tender guidance and compassion towards the hare's path to healing is a prime example to what Wolfe (2008, pp. 9–10) frames as a shared recognition and acknowledgement of the mutual vulnerability among sentient entities, which constitutes to interspecies compassion and empathy. This recognition is consistent with Derrida's (2002) posthumanist stance that the animal's, or the other's "gaze" which mirrors the innate nature of an individual's own existence and fragility. Additionally, Wolfe (2010, pp. 88–90) describes that the ethics of posthumanism bypasses rational thought, not relying on meaning or intention but merely based on empathetic awareness and instinctive responsiveness towards another being's vulnerability and suffering.

In the story, this attentiveness manifests as pity and compassion of a divine being towards a helpless animal, when Ōkuni-nushi happened upon the hare in its plight. Here, the *kami's* act of compassion constitutes to the posthumanist ideal of coexistence as well as the mutual awareness of each other's finitude and vulnerability. In turn, the hare's obedience towards Ōkuni-nushi's directions and its prophecy in gratitude of the *kami's* kindness demonstrates that ethical significance emerges through cycles of susceptibility and reciprocity. This reflects Wolfe's (2010, pp. 45–46) discussion on the ethical foregrounding of pain and suffering, as according to the theorist, "pain" and "suffering" are not just a distinction in degree, but a divergence in kind. Extending this argument, Wolfe disapproves of the philosopher and cognitive scientist—Daniel Dennett's premise that while animals have the capacity to feel pain, human consciousness is a necessary condition for serious suffering. Wolfe rearticulates Bentham's claim that the relevant ethical inquiry lies not in animals' capacity to speak or reason, but in their ability to suffer, for it

is responsiveness to another's suffering that grounds posthumanist ethics. This ethical responsiveness, as articulated by Wolfe, is eloquently portrayed in *The White Hare and the Crocodiles*, where the interactions between the hare and Ōkuni-nushi exemplify that all entities participate on a shared moral plane defined by cycles of suffering, compassion, and reciprocity. The story palpably enacts Wolfe's posthumanist ethics of interspecies interconnection and interdependence, which resonates with Foster's (2009) contention that Japanese folklore often emphasises moral values through a relational balance among people, animals, and other beings of the natural world.

Relational Harmony and Coexistence

Corresponding with Wolfe's (2010, p. 112) systems theory, the interactions between the titular protagonist and his circle of animal companions *The Adventures of Kintarō, the Golden Boy Kintarō's*, depict a social system founded upon mutualism and respect rather than a traditional biological hierarchy determined by abilities, intellect, or species distinctions. According to Wolfe, "the human" (Kintarō in this context) or the significance of the individual, is co-constituted within networks of interconnection and communication. Within such systems, all entities are integral to the formation of the network, disregarding their species, capacities, status, or hegemonic presumption of one's role in the circle. Thus, it can be said that the relational interactions between Kintarō and the animals are the core elements of their "society", as notwithstanding the fact that the animals are his "retainers" who he tamed, each entity—including Kintarō himself, are an interwoven part within the system. In this way, the tale dismantles anthropocentric hierarchies by positioning all life on a shared existential plane. Significantly, these challenges anthropocentric views of human supremacy and their dominance over non-human animals. Here, ethics and trust are cultivated through communication and trust between the human and animals. It is mentioned

in the text that Kintarō learnt to speak his animal companions “strange talk”, in other words, their language. This communicative reciprocity is not only a crucial element in their relational network but also enacts what Wolfe (2010, p. 45–47) terms “epistemological resonance”, an integral process through which ontological and ethical transformations unfold.

Patently, this representation of coexistence between entities is a sharp contrast with the brutality and retribution in *Kachi-kachi Yama* and the repentant character in *The White Hare and the Crocodiles*, where ethical lessons are imparted through arduous life experiences, despite the stories’ similar motifs of human-animal interconnectedness and their underlying posthumanist implications. While pointing towards the common theme of harmony between the characters, *The Adventures of Kintarō* takes on a different approach from the preceding tales. Rather than focusing on getting even with one another or achieving karmic balance, this narrative presents a pre-achieved equilibrium in which all entities reside within the same moral framework from the preset. As Wolfe (2010, p. 46–47) notes, that despite historically, taking into account the consciousness, intelligence, emotional and mental lives of non-human animals in terms of their linguistic abilities have been a critical method for addressing questions of ethics, it may not be the most effective or the only approach. Therefore, the ability and willingness to communicate, understand, and accept one another despite their ontological differences lies at the core of this harmonious balance. The interrelations of the human-animal relationships further correspond with Haraway’s (2003) concept of the *companion species*, in which subjectivity emerges from shared experiences across species rather than human mastery over other beings.

4.3 Portrayal of the Fox in Japanese Folklore

In Japanese folklore, the *kitsune* (fox) is a unique creature known for its ability to shapeshift and transition across the realms of animal, human, and spirit. It is associated predominantly by

ambiguity, sometimes appearing as a magnanimous creature, while other times being portrayed as a malignant spirit, defying generic characterisation through its myriad of form, identity, and intentions. The enigmatic and mysterious appeal of the kitsune rendered it as one of the most prominent *yōkai* in Japanese lore since ancient times, turning up in historical and religious texts, folktales, art, performances, superstitions. Notably, the fox is both worshipped and feared in the Japanese culture, making it eminently suitable for posthumanist analysis due to its prominence, symbolic versatility, and unique dynamics with humans. Across the selected narratives examined—*How a Man Was Bewitched and Had His Head Shaved by the Foxes*, *The Grateful Foxes*, and *The Foxes' Wedding* by A.B. Mitford, the fox emerges as a fluid entity through its trickery, transformation, and autonomy guided by its sense of relationality that do not conform to anthropocentric expectations.

4.3.1 The Fox: Representation, Relationships, and Symbolic Roles

The *kitsune* is a multifaceted figure of extraordinary depth and contradictory traits. In Japanese folklore, foxes are most commonly represented as shapeshifting *yokai*, with Tamamo-no-Mae (玉藻前), a legendary nine-tailed fox spirit deemed as one of the Great Three Evil *Yōkai* of Japan (Matsuura, 2024; Meyer, 2023b). The *kitsune* is frequently depicted as entities who assume human form to enter spaces traditionally reserved for humans, thereby situating the creature as a liminal figure, symbolically occupying the unstable threshold between animal and human, natural and supernatural, illusion and reality.

The Fluid Fox in How a Man Was Bewitched and Had His Head Shaved by the Foxes

In the narrative of *How a Man Was Bewitched and Had His Head Shaved by the Foxes*, the fox appears as a consummate deceiver in the clash between human arrogance and non-human wits.

Tokutarō, who is described as “*stubborn and obstinate*”, condescendingly dismisses the notion of men being bewitched by foxes, claiming it impossible for the creature to have such powers over humans (Mitford, 2019, p. 223). The foxes however, went beyond mere capriciousness to a lure the prideful man into their meticulously orchestrated display, starting off with a fox masquerading as a young woman who guides Tokutarō to a residence where a complete family (each member actually a fox) where the contrived act took place (Mitford, 2019, pp. 223–224). This collective staging exemplifies what Reider (2010) recounts as one of the most frequently ascribed and defining abilities of the *yōkai*—to shapeshift, create transient assemblages, and illusory settings that imitate human social structures while gradually subverting them from within, of which the humans would only realise that they were being tricked in the aftermath.

In this story, Tokutarō’s assertion and his ensuing efforts to reveal the girl’s true nature as a fox only worked to intensified the *kitsune*’s deceptive loop. *Yōkai* illusions—especially those associated with the *kitsune*, *tanuki*, and *tengu*, mainly function by exploiting the lacuna in human epistemology and manipulating human emotional extremes (Matsuura, 2024), in this case—pride and terror. This subsequently prompts the individuals to react impetuously based on their own assumptions, such as Tokutarō’s response when the “parents” participate in the play by feigning that he has killed their daughter, restraining him and threatening to report the offense (Mitford, 2019, pp. 225–226).

The climax ceremonial parody of the narrative further escalated this destabilisation of human perception by the supernatural. As noted by Hirota (2022), human rituals are often instrumentalised by supernatural beings to expose its frailty in Japanese folk legends. An exemplary scene that mirrors this assertion is the scene where the fox-priest emerges, proposes to mediate, and shaves Tokutarō’s bald “*with two or three strokes of the razor*”, therefore entering

him into a fabricated priesthood (Mitford, 2019, p. 226). To clarify, rather than undermining religious authority, the foxes in this tale show how easily ritual symbolics may be twisted when people arrogantly believe they can interpret them with confidence, which may ultimately lead to the human's undoing. It is clear that the foxes' power lies not in physical strength but in their ability to narrow the anthropocentric cognition, leaving them unable to determine where reality ends and illusion begins.

Tokutarō realises the full extent of the deception when he wakes up by himself on the moor at daybreak and is evidently ashamed when he appeared before his companions with his *kitsune*-inflicted tonsure to announce his loss of the bet (Mitford, 2019, p. 226–227). The ending of the tale supports Foster's (2009) assertion rather than providing moral guidance, ritual satire in *kitsune* anecdotes frequently exposes the instability of social identity as in Japanese folklore, *yōkai* are commonly depicted as agents of epistemic disruption, casting doubt on the validity of human perception in general.

The Reciprocal Fox in The Grateful Foxes

The value code of the *kitsune* in *The Grateful Foxes* is a stark contrast from *How a Man Was Bewitched and Had His Head Shaved by the Foxes* as rather than mischievous pranksters, the foxes in this display deep moral devotion and reciprocal duty. The story commences with an act of human compassion, when a tradesman and his friend happened upon a family of foxes being abused by a group of boys. While the parent foxes managed to escape, the fox cub was unfortunately seized by the children. The tradesman, pitying the cub and its imminent fate of being sold, cooked, and eaten, bought its freedom for “*half a bu*” and even treated its wounds with herbs (Mitford, 2019, pp. 227–229). The plot of the tale is structured by the reciprocal moral bond

between humans and supernatural beings that is established when the parent foxes emerge from a distance and bowed to the men in evident gratitude for rescuing their cub.

The narrative shifts when the tradesman's only son falls gravely ill with a strange disease with no apparent cure, to which a famous physician's prescription to it was that only the liver of a live fox can cure the child (Mitford, 2019, p. 229). Unwilling to deprive other creatures of their lives through their own hands, the parents commissioned their case to a man who lives in the mountains. On the subsequent night, an enigmatic courier presents a jar containing a fox liver, and only later do the parents uncover the truth, that is, the fox couple has sacrificed their offspring, the very cub that the tradesman rescued last spring. In a surreal dream, the mother fox explains to the man that "*the desire to requite this kindness pierced me to the quick*", disclosing that the liver originated from their own progeny and the father fox himself was the enigmatic courier, delivering his own cub's liver to the troubled couple (Mitford, 2019, pp. 229–231). This revelation positions foxes as moral agents who perceive and repay kindness based on a standard that surpasses human standards. The couple's son recuperates, and erected a shrine to the Fox God—Inari Ōkami (稲荷大神), in the prettiest spot on the premises to venerate the foxes (Mitford, 2019, pp. 232), thereby formalising the interspecies bond within a ritualistic framework.

Notably, *kitsune* narratives tend to fluctuate between benevolence and malevolence, with this anecdote being exemplary of the beneficent cycle described by Casal (1959), in which foxes reciprocate human kindness through unexpected acts, such as the foxes' hyperbolic sacrifice in this tale. Foster (2009) highlight that upon further inspection beyond the *yōkai*'s supernatural mysteries, their actions might reflect human moral dilemmas that is both recognisable and foreign

on the balance of human standards, making it ethically understandable yet not entirely assimilable with human logic.

The Ceremonial Fox in The Foxes' Wedding

In contrast to the former two stories fraught with trickery, sacrifice, and ethical dilemmas, the *kitsune* in *The Foxes' Wedding* is presented in a ceremonial and happy context, chronicling the marriage of a young white fox named Fukuemon. After receiving his inheritance from his retired father, Fukuemon sought a bride from a distinguished fox family—a beautiful, young lady-fox, famed for her “*jewel-like charms*” (Mitford, 2019, p. 169). Despite its relatively short length, the story captured the nuances of the supernatural beings *kitsune* within their own cohesive social world through rather detailed records of the *kitsune*'s their marriage rituals and sacred affiliations, which take place through regulated rites that resemble human tradition while remaining distinctly non-human.

Throughout the entire wedding procession, the most notable aspect is its favorable natural setting. During the preliminary rites, the *kitsune* bride is conveyed in a solemn procession “*during a shower of rain, the sun shining all the while*” (Mitford, 2019, p. 169). This scene serves as a notable folkloric marker as such meteorological phenomena frequently denote a *kitsune no yomeiri* (狐の嫁入り, literally “the fox’s wedding”). In Japanese lore, it is a cultural trope which refers to sunshowers or atmospheric ghost lights—also known as *kitsunebi* (狐火, literally “fox-fire”) (Matsuura, 2024), with the term now used as an allegory for unexpected or mysterious situations (Meyer, 2023b). While the legends of *kitsune no yomeiri* originally came about due to beliefs that the rain was called forth by the foxes to conceal their activities, in the anecdote, the shower occurred naturally, right as the bride’s procession began, alluding to the fact that even nature seems

to support the *kitsune*'s ceremony. It was also mentioned that “*an auspicious day was chosen for the bride to go to her husband's house*” (Mitford, 2019, p. 169), indicating the *kitsune*'s attunement to cosmic harmony, which allows them to foresee and select an auspicious day. As Casal (1959) noted, despite associations with trickery and obfuscation that gave rise to the metaphor, fox weddings are part of a benevolent folkloric cycle, wherein the *kitsune* symbolise auspiciousness and ritual propriety rather than mischief.

The marriage proves prosperous as the fox community celebrates with singing, dancing, and merry-making “*without let or hindrance*”, with the “*bride and bridegroom living lovingly together*” and many fox cubs were born to the couple (Mitford, 2019, p. 169–170). Upon reaching maturity, the foxes escorted their offspring to the temple of O-Inari-sama, the Shinto *kami* linked to foxes and agricultural abundance. Importantly, this element underscores the foxes' longstanding association with Inari, of whom they are frequently regarded as messengers or even manifestations of the deity (Matsuura, 2024). The family's prosperity and generational continuity thus unfold within a spiritual ecology that links foxes to fertility, protection, and communal wellbeing.

4.3.2 Posthumanist Elements Reflected in the Depiction of the Fox

In the selected tales, the foxes show perceptual acuity, adaptivity, and world-making capabilities that parallel Wolfe's (2010) posthumanist model, which moves focus away from human supremacy and onto the relational development of other beings. While the rabbit is depicted through registers of collective vulnerability or moral resonance, the *kitsune* functions through liminality, shapeshifting, and its unique cosmological order all which challenge the humanist notion that only humankind can define the limits of interpretive or conceptual authority among other sentient beings due to their exalted status as *homo sapiens*, a species far elevated on the evolution tree than other species.

Fluid Identity and Epistemic Decentering

The *kitsune*'s elaborate performance in *How a Man Was Bewitched and Had His Head Shaved by the Foxes* presents a posthumanist challenge against the stability of human identity by demonstrating how subjectivity can be reconfigured through supernatural intervention on the perception of human beings. Wolfe (2010, pp. xvi–xvii) challenges the humanist preconception that individuals have a cohesive, independent core which shapes their identity as the scholar's take is that "identity" develops through relational and perceptual systems that are outside the control of the individual. Wolfe (2010, pp. 293, 297–298) argues that knowledge creates a "world", from which "identity" is born. Even so, that "world" does not objectively reflect reality in its whole. The "world" here refers to the product humans experience through their perception. Human perception however, has its limits as it is shaped through what we they are exposed to—meaning every system (human, animal, social, cultural) only perceive what it is structured to perceive, thereby rendering perception and the development of one's identity intrinsically contingent. These perceptual limitations are exploited by the foxes' illusions in the tale, where Tokutarō's faith in his rational autonomy crumbles as soon as he enters a world controlled by entities that function outside of human epistemological presumptions.

Following this line of reasoning, the *kitsune* did not overpower Tokutarō through physical prowess, but rather by trapping him in their "world" which follows the *kitsune* logic and relational systems as it built based on their perception. As mentioned, identity emerge from one's perception thus it is not neutral or stable as it depends on how the world is structured around the subject and what is considered as "reality" within that system. Hence, Tokutarō's identity falls through because his "reality" was shattered and when he was pulled into the *kitsune*'s. Wolfe (2010, pp. 293, 297–298) refers to a condition, limit, or forces that is able to shape and affect perception while

remaining unseen as “spectral”. As they fall outside dominant epistemic structures, they are generally treated as unreal or impossible as humans tend to mistake invisibility for nonexistence. In the context of the story, the foxes are “spectralised” in Tokutarō epistemology as he did not believe what falls outside his perceptual frames, mistakenly limiting reality with the limits of his perception. In turn, the foxes exploit such limits by bringing the spectral into visibility, consequently breaking down Tokutarō’s worldview and identity.

As a symbolic rewriting of his social identity, Tokutarō's forced tonsure signifies the breakdown of his once stable sense of self. Here, Wolfe’s (2010) claim that human subjectivity is constantly susceptible to being redefined by forces beyond the human realm is demonstrated by the fact that his change is a result of the *kitsune*’s fluidity—as shown through their effortless transitions between roles which baffled him, demonstrating the posthumanist conceptions of relational subjectivity by challenging the anthropocentric notion that human perception is superior.

Interspecies Ethics and Asymmetrical Obligation

An ethical framework that transcends anthropocentric notions of morality is revealed by the fox parents’ choice to sacrifice their own cub in *The Grateful Foxes*. Their requital towards the tradesman’s kindness is presented as a moral obligation based on non-human standards of reciprocity. Wolfe contends that moral authority extends beyond what humans frames as “legal” and “ethical” as posthumanist ethics emphasises how responsibility develops within interspecies networks of asymmetrical perceptions (Wolfe, 2010, pp. 77–78), challenging humanist presumptions that ethical value results from rational autonomy. That is, as aforementioned, the worldview of sentient beings is subjective, with the amalgamations of perceptions forming the “world”. While it is an ethical obligation grounded in their moral sense, the act itself is inexplicable through human ethics and standards, paralleling what Wolfe frames as interspecies

asymmetrical dependency, as what is “undecidable” does not make it unethical—it makes it non-human ethics Wolfe (2010, pp. 68, 82). As can be seen from the foxes’ reciprocity gestures towards tradesman, an act of sacrifice which transcends the boundaries of human moral obligations.

Wolfe (2010, pp. 55) observes that the principles of bioethics typically manifest as an emphasis on “distributive justice”, whereby “*like cases should be treated alike... equals ought to be treated equally and unequals unequally*”, alluding it as an antithesis of posthumanist ethics. The scholar extends Derrida’s ethical critique by arguing that ethics and moral obligations are not mere “calculable processes” that can be justified or proven based on commensurable logic or outcome Wolfe (2010, pp. 82). This aspect is tangible in the story through the foxes’ sacrifice of their cub in repayment for the same kindness that saved it. According to the intellectual, an ethical undertaking boils down two principal elements—“undecidable”, which culminates an “ordeal”. The “undecidable” factor here referring to a situation in which none of the course of action the individual could take is unequivocally correct as each decision entails sacrifice, rendering ethical certainty unattainable. Wolfe argues that if ethics were entirely quantifiable, there would be no such thing as moral obligations. It would be purely be akin to executing a program. Thus, ethics only become ethical when there are no rules or calculations which can direct the subject towards the “right choice”. This consequently gives rise to an “ordeal”—the state of affairs that demands action while offering no moral certainty as it subjects the individual to risk of suffering or deprivation while imposing a burden of accountability (Wolfe, 2010, pp. 82–83). As such, the *kitsune* parents’ reciprocal act through the sacrifice of their cub can be seen as asymmetrical (to human moral standards) yet ethical (within their moral framework), attributing to the fact that moral agency is distributed across species, thereby challenging human exclusivity upon the ethical plane.

Distributed Agency and Autopoietic Systems

The ceremonial rites in *The Foxes' Wedding* offers a posthumanist interpretation of ritual life in which agency is dispersed among animals and natural phenomena, rather than being focused on the human perspective. The marriage rituals of the foxes depict a social world organised in accordance with their own cultural logic, complete with procession, gift-giving, and celebration.

Building on Luhmann, Wolfe asserts that systems—be it a societal, communicative, or ecological, are autopoietic (Wolfe, 2010, pp. 205). To secure their autopoiesis, these self-referential and self-producing systems each have what Wolfe labels as a “*self-referential, constitutive code*”, which “*selectively filter and respond to an environment that is always already infinitely more complex than any given system*” (Wolfe, 2010, pp. 206–207). This denotes that while systems are functionally closed as they operate upon their own codes (rules), they remain structurally open, as systems are affected by their surrounding environment. Importantly, Wolfe’s contention challenges humanist binaries principles which segregate nature and culture, biological and mechanical, as well as humans and non-humans as the scholar argues that all these elements are co-produced within the same system–environment relation.

The *kitsune no yomeiri* in this folktale resonates particularly with Wolfe’s systems theory. The wedding rituals of the foxes symbolise an autopoietic system which does not depend on humans, signifying operational closure. Likewise, the timing of the sunshower that falls in temporal coordination with the bridal procession demonstrates the structural openness of the system to the environment. Evidently, culture does not supersede nature, nor does nature exist independently from culture in the tale. The presence of weather (ecology), *kitsune* (sentient beings), ritual practices such as the procession (cultural elements), and Inari (spiritual force) illustrates a Shinto cosmology that aligns with posthumanist notions of distributed agency,

revealing that these elements are not separate layers but together form a single coherent system—one in which ritual functions as an ecological process rather than a cultural overlay upon nature.

4.4 Conclusion

When taken as a whole, the chosen stories portray non-human animals as active possessors of morality, perception, and subjectivity rather than passive symbols of human virtue. This reflects Japan's underlying beliefs and cultural ideals of a world characterised by interconnectivity, where virtue, sensibility, and epistemic authority are not only attributed to humanity. As Wolfe (2010, p. 46) observes, non-human animals are still relegated to a lower hierarchical status than humans as they are perceived as creatures that are naturally dissociated, akin to the type of complex internal organisation that is typical in a normal child (symbolising humans) and disrupted in a dissociated child (symbolising non-human animals). Evidently, Japanese folklore presents a contrasting perspective against such worldview. By imbuing the rabbit and *kitsune* with moral agency and emotional profundity, it demonstrates forms of subjectivity as a shared plane of interdependence and relationality among all living beings, aligning with posthumanist understandings of modes of existence as situated and co-constituted through encounters between human and non-human beings.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Discussion

The findings in Chapter 4 demonstrate that Japanese folklore frequently depicts animal figures as active agents possessing distributed agency, ethical ambivalence, and relational perception. Crucially, while analyses of the stories yield diverging posthumanist aspects, the

recurring motifs across the texts distinctly mirror the Shinto-rooted animism of Japanese culture, wherein humans, animals, and supernatural entities coexist within an equitable and karmically organised continuum, sometimes even displacing human exceptionalism with the reversal of the conventional hierarchies, with humans being dominated or fooled by other sentient beings.

Imperatively, the samurai code of honour ingrained in the Japanese culture, in which death and demise are insignificant when juxtaposed with the act of preserving one's honour. This is especially so during the ancient warring eras of Japan, the times when most of the selected tales were conceived. Hence, the displacement of humans from the pinnacle of existence is particularly noteworthy as numerous such narratives serve as satire against people's egotism and superiority, creating a notable paradox when collocated with the historical and cultural outlook at that time.

On a broader spectrum, Japanese folklore can be seen as an archive that encapsulates socio-cultural values embedded in ecological cosmologies. Chapter 4's analyses unequivocally demonstrate the alignment of Japanese folktales with posthumanist tenets through the illustration of the ontology of non-human beings, one that humans can so easily forego in their complacent-induced, narrowed perceptions. Consequently, it is clear that the shared cultural memory inherent in Japanese folklore expresses posthumanist notions even before its formal theorisation in Western academic discourse, which is now attributed as the origin of the framework.

5.1.1 Scope and Limitations

The scope of this study focuses on Japanese folklore featuring non-human animal characters and their relationships with humans or other non-human beings, examined through Cary Wolfe's posthumanist framework. The primary texts are extracted from two anthologies—A.B Mitford's *Japanese Legends and Folklore: Samurai Tales, Ghost Stories, Legends, Fairy Tales*

and Historical Accounts (2019) and Yei Theodora Ozaki's *Japanese Folktales: Classic Stories from Japan's Enchanted Past* (2018). Apart from their prominence in English-language representations of Japanese folklore, the two books were chosen to complement each other, as each offers certain tales or interpretive perspectives where the other falls short or presents differing depictions of the same stories. However, while both collections contain a wide range of narratives, this study limits its analysis only to folktales featuring the two chosen animals—the rabbit and the *kitsune*, which align with the posthumanist focus of the research.

There are certain limitations in this study. Firstly, conflicting cultural interpretations might arise. With Wolfe being a Western scholar, mapping his posthumanist framework to East Asian (specifically Japanese in this context) folkloric materials might lead to overlooks or misinterpretations of the cultural or historical contexts. Secondly, the richness and diversity of Japanese folklore, along with its regional differences, complicate the analytical process. Apart from the difficulty of generalising the findings due to localisation, the multifarious symbolic functions of animals in folklore do not always correspond with posthumanist ideas, of which could lead to misconceptions and ambiguities about the animals' roles and the notions they bring forth in the narratives. This issue is fundamentally linked to a third limitation concerning the partial incompatibility between posthumanism and Japanese folklore. To elucidate, Japanese folklore, as aforementioned, has its roots in the Shinto belief whereby animals are often perceived as spiritual beings or deities rather than regular animals. Given the emphasis on dismantling human-animal dichotomies, Wolfe's posthumanism may fall short in accounting the particular cultural and spiritual value of animals in Japanese folklore. Lastly, subtle connotations can be lost in the process of translating the Japanese texts into English, particularly when discussing on the intricate philosophical concepts pertaining to animals and their cultural roles. Certain sources are partly or

entirely inaccessible, whilst others are not feasibly attainable, which diminishes the scope of data collection for this study.

5.1.2 Recommendations for Future Research

Taking into account the limitations of this study, future researchers could conduct their research through different approaches. For instance, future studies could expand the scope to other narratives of varying genres, cultures, and origins, such as Chinese folklore, which is frequently regarded as an influential source shaping other cultural traditions, and which contains a plethora of emblematic archetypes and hallmark non-human constituents. Furthermore, researchers could broaden their focus and referential posthumanism theories for a more comprehensive study. Apart from animals and their relationships with humans, the emphasis can be expanded to cover on other aspects through the application of different strands of posthumanism or theorists beyond Cary Wolfe. Future studies may also explore other non-human figures such as tanuki, cranes, or snakes to examine whether similar posthumanist patterns emerge across different animal representations. Finally, if possible, future researchers may conduct similar studies by referring to the original-language texts in order to minimise the loss of translational and cultural nuances.

5.2 Conclusion

In closing, this study underscores the relevance of Japanese folklore in rethinking human–animal relations beyond anthropocentric frameworks, establishing Japanese cultural narratives as a rich landscape for posthumanist readings that predates the inception of the theory itself. By extension, it embellishes the fact that folklore and cultural cosmologies can broaden and enrich the posthumanist discourse. even when the theoretical framework and the analytical material emerge from vastly different traditions. All in all, this study affirms the value of interdisciplinary and

cross-cultural approaches in literary analysis, opening pathways for future research at the intersection of folklore, theory, and the more-than-human world.

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