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# Navakanta Barua's Posthuman Wonderland in Siyali Palegoi Ratanpur

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## Abstract

In the wake of the emerging body of scholarship on Posthumanism and Animality studies, the borderline between the human and the 'non-human' has been 'thoroughly breached'. Interestingly, one of the key areas where the boundaries between the human and the animal are problematized is the field of children's literature. Children's literature has the potential to radically challenge the anthropocentric worldview of Man as an 'exceptional' being by deploying a playful, but subversive logic. The paper attempts to examine how Navakanta Barua deploys nonsense and fantasy in his novella, *Siyali Palegoi Ratanpur* to challenge this very prospect of human supremacy as opposed to the non-human 'other'. The paper also seeks to examine how the fantastic encounters between Barua's child-protagonist and the mysterious non-human entities challenge the centrality and superiority of the 'human', and, in doing so, how the text draws attention to the complexities of our lived relations with non-human others.

**Keywords:** Posthumanism, Non-human, Animality, Children's Literature.

## Introduction: The Posthumanist Turn

One of the crucial 'boundary breakdowns', which Donna Haraway (1985) mentions in her significant manifesto, *A Cyborg Manifesto*, is the borderline between humans and animals. As Haraway (1985) proposes, "by the late twentieth century in United States scientific culture, the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached (p. 68). Haraway's path-breaking *Manifesto* opens up new avenues to revisit humanity's relationships with non-human 'other' as it undercuts the long-established, 'absolutist' discourse of humanism. For a long time, the Biblical discourse of the 'origin myths' has legitimized the human-animal divide. Citing William Henderson, Tom Tyler (2020), in *The Palgrave Handbook of Animals and Literature* emphasizes how human exceptionalism had its roots in the Biblical teachings. To put in Henderson's words,

"Biblical teaching is [...] *anthropocentric*, so far as the world is concerned, the true centre of it being, not earth so much as man. The sun, physical centre of the system as he may be, shines for our sakes: the moon walks the night in our interest: the stars are there for our use. From the Biblical point of view, everything turns round the earth as the habitation of human *spirit*" (Tyler, 2020, p. 17).

This anthropocentric world-view was further aggravated by the "enlightenment trajectory of humanist essentialism" (Huggan, Tiffin, 2010, p. 151) which naturalizes man as the measure of all things. However, in the wake of the emerging body of scholarships on posthumanism and animal studies, the central position of man as an 'exceptional' being is often questioned. Posthumanism, as a philosophical stance, therefore, attempts to unseat the supreme position of man. This view of Posthumanism is highlighted by Neil Badmington (2012) in his entry on "posthumanism" in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Science*:

Posthumanism, by way of contrast, emerges from a recognition that "Man" is not the privileged and protected center, because humans are no longer – and perhaps never were – utterly distinct from animals, machines, and other forms of the "inhuman"; are the products of historical and cultural differences that invalidate any appeal to a universal, transhistorical human essence; are constituted as subjects by a linguistic system that pre-exists and transcends them; and are unable to direct the course of world history towards a uniquely human goal. In short, posthumanism arises from the theoretical and practical inadequacy – or even impossibility – of humanism (p. 374).

Posthumanism, as a philosophical inquiry, thus, to put in the words of Hayles (1999) "evokes the exhilarating prospect of getting out of some of the old boxes and opening up new ways of thinking about what being human means" (p. 285). However, Hayles also warns that the radical ways of thinking about humanity can be as much 'frightening as liberating' (p.285). Posthumanist discourse in this regard can be broadly classified into two parts: transhumanism or 'an intensification of humanism' (Wolfe, 2009, p. xv) and critical posthumanism. While the above strand of posthumanism is concerned with the 'techno-modifications' of the human, critical posthumanism attempts to examine humans "as an instantiation of a network of connections, exchanges, linkages and crossings with all forms of life" (Nayar, 2013, p. 5). One of the key formulations of critical posthumanism is destabilizing speciesist humanism or what Haraway (1985) points to as the 'human/animal divide'. The need to examine posthumanism from a 'companion species' (Haraway, 2008) framework instead of a technological approach is urged by critics like Zoe Jacques (2015) who states that "posthumanism requires neither the robots nor machines of recent history, but philosophers, writers, and thinkers who are willing to question what it means to be humans and how humans should relate to the wider world" (p. 6).

### **Children's Literature and the animal-human boundary.**

One of the key spaces where the boundaries between the human and the animal are often problematized is the realm of children's fantasy. Mice being adopted as a little brother (Stuart Little), animals seeking advice from human doctors (Doctor Dolittle), cats wearing hats (The Cat in the Hat), monsters trying to graduate from university (Monsters University), all of these seemingly impossible tasks, however, operate "beyond the limitations of ontology" (Jacques, 2015, p. 3). In other words, children's fantasy has the potential to radically destabilize hierarchies of being, which might seem unfeasible in a realistic setting. Zoe Jacques, in this regard, offers interesting insights into children's fiction by examining the genre from a Posthumanist lens. As Jacques (2018) maintains, "by imagining 'being' as operating beyond bodily or environmental constraint, children's fiction, in its attempt to address young readers, can offer sophisticated interventions into debates about what it means to be human or non-human and offer ethical imaginings of a

'posthuman; world" (p. 5). A similar view is echoed by Amy Ratelle (2015) as she argues that "literature geared toward a child audience reflects and contributes to the cultural tensions created by the oscillation between upholding and undermining the divisions between the human and the animals" (p. 4). Ratelle's book thus takes a posthumanist stand to examining animals as subjects, and the ways in which children's literature and culture "present the boundary between humans and animals, as, at best permeable and in a state of continual flux" (Ratelle, 2015, p. 4). The blurring of boundaries between humans and animals is, however, more permissible in children's fantasy as opposed to realistic fiction about animals. Realistic fiction about animals often highlights the heroic sacrifices, sufferings, and pain of animals, thereby relegating animals as mere objects of human sympathy. Realistic fiction in this regard generates what Sumana Roy (2020) terms 'public guilt'. As Roy notes in her article "Guilt Lit", "we are living in the age of public guilt. So, the literature we consume bears its own 'privilege footprints'. We now approach literature with the expectation that we will feel guilty, will be reminded of our privilege (Roy, 2020). Fantasy works about animals, on the other hand, give voice to animals. Fantasy books about animals provide space for imagining the inner lives of animals and, it endows animals "with language capabilities to express their thoughts and feelings" (Elick, 2015, p. 6). Instead of focusing on the utilitarian or tokenistic approach, modern children's fantasy novels, in the words of Catherine Elick, "run counter to works of animal realism by overwriting animals' vulnerabilities and instead showing them capable of unbalancing human hierarchies and enjoying equitable relationships with people" (2015, p. 6). However, this 'equitable relationship' is further enhanced through the use of anthropomorphism in children's literature. Having said that, it cannot be denied that anthropomorphism for a long time has been instrumental in disseminating 'human values' to children. As Catherine Elick (2015) opines, "modern fantasy espouses anthropomorphism for the very purpose of combating the anthropocentrism that subscribes to a utilitarian scale of value for animals and sees them merely as signifiers of humanity's maturity or tests of human morality, not agents in their own right" (p. 6) Thus, keeping Elick's statement in view, it can be possibly argued that anthropomorphism may not necessarily be anthropocentric. On the other hand, it can be a liberating aspect when viewed from the perspective of animal studies.

Drawing on the insightful concepts of 'posthumanism' and 'animality studies' the present paper attempts to examine how anthropomorphism in select Assamese children's fantasy combats what Cary Wolf (2003) terms "the institution of speciesism". (p. 7).

### **'Animality' in Assamese fantasy literature for children.**

As in most cultures across the world, talking animals have always been a part of Assamese literature and culture. The *Omolageet*, (lullabies) which enriched the treasure house of Assamese children's literature features animal characters with extraordinary facilities. For instance, 'moruwa phool' (imaginary flower) blooms on the head of the fox, cranes offer 'white dots' to children on their way to the assembly, the moon provides a needle to the child to stitch bags, the sparrow cuts betelnut in the wedding ceremony of the tail-less vixen, etc. All these fantastic tasks, obviously unreal to the adult mind, enliven the child's mind with curiosity and imagination. The fantastic elements, however, pervade not only oral tales and stories but are very much a part of the works of later writers of children's literature. Apart from Lakshminath Bezbaroa, various writers such as Navakanta Barua, Atul Chandra Hazarika, Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi, Toshoprabha Kalita, and Gagan Chandra Adhikary have used mysterious animals in their works to intrigue the imagination of the

readers. Strikingly, the animal characters of the afore-mentioned writers do not act as mediators or substitutes for/of human beings; they are subjects in their own rights. Their works highlight the significance of the inter-species bond, which is particularly relevant in the present times of massive, ecologically disruptive, change. In this regard, it is imperative to mention Navakanta Barua whose eco-centric vision is discernible not only in his poems but also in other writings meant for children. The present paper attempts to analyse Barua's novella *Siyali Palegoi Ratanpur* through a posthumanist lens, in order to see how he challenges a humanist framework and draws attention to the need for a 'companion species' framework.

### **Navakanta Barua's Eco-centric vision**

In the Preface to his novella, *Siyali Palegoi Ratanpur*, Navakanta Barua acknowledges how he was inspired by Lewis Carroll and Sukumar Rai to produce a similar 'moral free' book for children. As Barua notes, "as you grow up and read the stories of Lewis Carroll and Sukumar Rai, you will find certain similarities between their works and mine. Perhaps, those are the best works anyone could ever read... On the one side are those writers, and, you (children) are on the other side. What lies between the two extremes are my 'creations'" (Adhikari, p. 118). Redressing the problems of didactics, Barua further asserts that, "the stories of Brother Grimm are wonderful – just like Grandma's tales; the moral values of Panchatantra and Aesop are also invaluable, but somehow you (children) do not appear to be there. In fact, we (adults) do not have the right to impose our inflexible judgments on children" (Adhikari, 2003, 118). The *Preface* clarifies the point that Navakanta Barua was influenced by the nonsense genre of literary tradition, and particularly by the works of Carroll for its subversive potential. As Linda M Shires (1988) suggests, "fantasy, nonsense and parody each question the status of the real in a different, and differently disturbing way, pushing language and meaning toward dangerous limits of dissolution... however, what is at stake- whether in the unreal of fantasy, or the non-real of nonsense – is ourselves" (p. 267-268). Extending Shires' remark a little further, from 'ourselves' to 'ourselves' – as superior human beings, it can be argued that Navakanta Barua deploys nonsense and fantasy in his novella, *Siyali Palegoi Ratanpur* to challenge this very prospect of human supremacy as opposed to animal inferiority. Barua's interest in animal rights and animal welfare is evident in his poems, articles, and other works, where he talks about the estranged relationship between humans and animals. One such poem is "*Dekhiyapotia Baghor Gaan*" (The Leopard's song) where the Leopard questions the unjust killings of animals by humans, and requests human beings to restore their rightful home — the forest to it:

*Haw maw khau*

*Moitu manuh nakhau*

*Prokritiye dise muk poxu aaroniyir*

*Taakey khai jibon kotau* (Adhikar, p. 245).

Haw mau khau

I don't need to eat humans

Nature provides me with beasts from the forest,

Whom I relish and cling to life (End note).

In another poem, *Goror Gaan* (The Rhinoceros's Song), the Rhino poses a similar question to humanity through its song:

Mur kopalot edale xing  
 Tumaluke bula sorgo!  
 Seiyai je mathun prokritiye diya  
 Aatmoroikhar astro !  
 Tat jadu ni oouxod ni  
 Nai bhut kheda montra  
 Anebur misa kothat kiyonu  
 Nakhisa jivan mur! (Adhikari, p. 250)

Navakanta Barua, through the voice of the Rhinoceros, poignantly tells human beings how they are poached for the single horn they possess. The Rhino explains through its song that its horn does not have any medicinal value, nor does it possess any supernatural power. It is merely an instrument of self-defence, bestowed by nature to the animal. Human beings, therefore should not kill it for their selfish motives. Barua's deep concern for animals and the environment finds expression in his works such as *Hey Aranya hey Mahanagar*, *Kramasha Eti Xadhukatha*, *Eyat Nodi Asil*, etc. apart from the children's poems discussed above. However, in his nonsense fiction, *Siyali Palegoi Ratanpur*, Barua seeks to erase the boundaries between humans and animals by deploying a playful but subversive logic.

The discussion on the theoretical aspects of posthumanism and animality studies makes it understandable that the 'animal', for a long time, has occupied a peripheral position as opposed to its counterpart – the human. As Derrida (2008) notes in his essay "The Animal That Therefore I am", "the animal is a word, it is an appellation that men have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to another living creature" (p. 392). However, despite the linguistic complexities involved, the word 'animal', according to Erica Fudge (2002) has some transformative power, insofar as it draws attention to the complexities of our lived relations with non-human others. In the light of Fudge's remark, this paper seeks to explore how the fantastic encounters between the child-protagonist Joon and the mysterious animals challenge the centrality and superiority of the 'human'.

### **Powerful or Vulnerable?**

One of the prime reasons for human beings to justify their domination over 'animals' is 'rationality', 'intellectual power', and/or physical strength. In Navakanta Barua's *Siyali Palegoi Ratanpur*, however, the child protagonist in his fantastic journey, encounters 'strange creatures' – beasts, birds, talking-roads, moon, etc, who challenge those very notions of human authority/power. As the story begins the child protagonist embarks on his journey to *Ratanpur*, the fictional place he comes across in his grandmother's tales. The very fact that Joon wants to visit a fictional place sets the fantastic tone of the story. At the very outset, Joon encounters a crossroad where ten intersecting roads beckon him. Strangely enough, all the roads can talk multiple languages, and they all lure Joon, each outdoing the other in enticing him. By giving

voice to inanimate objects as roads, Navakanta Barua does something more than an anthropomorphic appropriation: he challenges the very premise based upon which humanity has always denied subjecthood to 'animals' - the ability to speak (Derrida, 2008, p. 379). The superior position of humans is further challenged as the story progresses. Upon taking a least travelled road, Joon encounters a kite, which was carrying a bamboo net (*saloni*), with two wrestlers on it. As there was no audience to watch their game, the wrestlers come across a fisher-woman, who promises a *chonda* fish to the one who loses the game. Soon after the wrestlers were carried off by the kite, Joon was also taken off by the same kite, and he could see that the wrestlers were not wrestling, as the game was designed to have no winners. In the hope of getting a *chonda* fish, each of the wrestlers gets up, pretends to fight, and falls. Finding the whole situation very absurd, Joon reminds them that they were far away from getting any reward since they were already being carried off by a kite. The wrestlers, then, tell Joon that it is not any ordinary kite, but must be a Brahminy Kite (*Ganga Siloni*), and, terrified, both of them jump off the bamboo. Generally, wrestlers are known for their physical strength and agility. However, the fact that these two wrestlers were carried off by a bird undermines the superiority of human beings as physically powerful over vulnerable beings. Furthermore, upon realizing that they were in the grasp of a bird, the wrestlers assumed the bird to be an extraordinary one, and, terrified, they jumped off the flying *saloni* in the sky. What is interesting in the above episode is the fact that more than Joon, it is the wrestlers who were terrified of the bird. It was only after the wrestlers jumped off the net, that Joon was actually scared of the bird. The kite, though a bird, is projected as much more powerful than the strongest human beings. It is not just Joon – a child, who was scared of a 'tiny' bird. But, in Navakanta Barua's wonderland, even the strongest humans, such as the wrestlers are rendered powerless against vulnerable animals.

### **Erudite 'animals, dumb-headed humans**

So far as rationality or 'intellectual power' is concerned, the novella presents events that challenge this assumption. The right of animals to knowledge and erudition becomes key to unsettling the human-animal divide. In one instance, Joon encounters an ant with a waistcoat, like the rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*. Interestingly enough, the ant has knowledge of geography, and its rather obscure questions frustrate Joon:

Do you know that the earth is round?

Yes, it moves around the sun.

And?

And it moves on its axis?

What is the axis?

As if I don't know, it means the spinal cord.

Does the earth have a vertebral cord?

It is visible on the map, not in reality.

Very good! Ten out of ten (Adhikari, 2003, p.127).

The above conversation highlights how Joon was being tested and evaluated by the ant. Joon's position as a superior human being with regard to knowledge is constantly undermined through his conversations with the ant. At times, Joon finds it so annoying that he vents his anger by saying that: "you don't act too smart like my teacher Nityananda sir. You are being too arrogant" (Adhikari, 2003, p. 126). Joon's act of comparing the ant with authoritarian figures like elders equates the child/adult binary with the animal/human binary. Joon is wary of authoritarian figures like his teacher who always questions the children and imposes his authority upon them. The ant's rather intelligent questions pose a similar threat to Joon's sense of stability as a human. The fact that an insect of the smallest kind could know so much more is very disturbing to him. However, as the story unfolds, Joon's attempt to re-instate his superior position is further undermined through his conversation with other animals. His exchange with the stork is one such instance where Joon's presumed rationality is challenged through the bird's rather 'absurd' statements. The fact that Barua imbues nonhuman creatures with more rationality is evident, as Joon assumes that the bird is familiar with all locations and places. Joon's conversation with the stork leaves him in a state of utter perplexity as he couldn't make sense of the bird's 'irrational' statements:

Let's sleep, okay! Sleep off! The fox has to catch its prey.

No... I am not at all sleepy, I won't sleep.

*Ai o deh!* Don't worry! Everything will be alright! Let us share the sleep.

Can anyone share sleep? ...

Who says no? You don't know anything (Adhikari, 2003, p. 131).

The Stork's remark utterly frustrates and annoys Joon as he feels dumb-headed. Interestingly, the stork doesn't just make some blind statements but goes further to elucidate how sleep can be shared with proper examples from mathematics (*bhognasor anko*). Although the stork does not produce any 'reasoned argument' from Joon's perspective, it seems perfectly rational when seen in terms of the logic which Navakanta Barua sets up in the story. What appears absurd to Joon, is 'rationality' as and when it is expressed through the voice of the stork. In another instance, when Joon meets an old man and his dog from an old tale, the anthropocentric distinction of man as the sole possessor of language is subverted. It becomes evident as the dog assumes Joon to be a gorilla and asks him, "Gorilla, Gorilla, where is your tail?" (Adhikari, 2003, p. 138). Joon's angry and fearful response to the dog that "I am not a Gorilla, and I do not have a tail either" (138) shows his anxiety and frustration for being ridiculed by a 'nonhuman other'. The dog, then, offers a handkerchief to Joon with the picture of a Gorilla and asks him if Joon is not a gorilla. To this Joon replies rather bluntly, "this is not a mirror, but a handkerchief, and, I am not a Gorilla" (Adhikari, 2003, p.139). The dog's assumption seems incorrect to Joon from an anthropocentric viewpoint, which considers human language as one of the necessary means to access 'reality.' However, by giving room to a multiplicity of voices (languages) such as that of the ant, the stork, the dog, and other 'fantastical creatures' in the story, Barua attempts to upset the presumed rationality of human beings in the text.

The value of reason is continuously subverted as the story unfolds. Joon's act of seeking meaning in rationality is constantly undermined through the deployment of nonsense in the text. Upon reaching *Ratanpur*, Joon meets the erudite fox who challenges him through a series of nonsensical



word games. Joon, however, fails repeatedly and is embarrassed by these failures. The fox, by repeatedly testing Joon on the basis of nonsense prosody, not only provides an insight into how things work in the wonderland, but also challenges the humanist notion of language as a marker of 'rationality'. Joon's encounters with these intelligent animals, therefore, challenge humanity's belief in 'rational superiority' and subvert the naturalized assumption of human domination over other animals.

### **Bridging the species divide**

One of the interesting facts about Barua's novella *Siyali Palegoi Ratanpur* is that the child-protagonist, Joon, is accompanied either by some non-human animals or inanimate objects throughout his journey. Joon's fantastic encounters with different creatures, therefore, offer provocative ways to think of Haraway's idea of "companion species" in more compelling ways. There are many instances where the human-animal "intra-action" (Haraway, 2003) finds expression in the novella. Joon's first thought upon seeing the ten talking-cross-roads was to meet the vixen:

Shall I reach Aaita's story's *Ratanpur*?

Sigh! Had I met the vixen, I would have asked her.

One is scared of the vixen only at night, not during days (Adhikari, 2003, p.120).

Joon's statements ostensibly show how the narrative seeks to erase the incommensurable difference between humans and animals by delineating an inter-species relationship. The fact that Joon is not 'scared' and 'apprehensive' of the animals and instead, he seeks guidance and assistance from talking animals, birds, beasts, and inanimate objects highlights the inter-species companionship in the story. When Joon met the ant for the first time, he was responsive to the ant's request to keep his magnifying glass aside:

Please keep that mirror aside, I shall turn deaf.

Why?

When I see you through the glass, your voice also gets magnified along with your body (Adhikari, 2003, p.127).

Joon hurriedly kept his glass apart and responded, "ok! Now, tell me, what were you saying" (p.127)? Joon, by responding to the ant engages in what Donna Haraway terms as *respecere* in a companion species framework. *Respecere*, according to Haraway involves respect. It doesn't simply mean to "look at", but rather "to hold in regard, to respond, to look back reciprocally, to notice, to pay attention, to have courteous regard for, to esteem" (Haraway, 2008, 19). Although Joon projects his human exceptionalism and feels challenged at times, he holds *respecere* for the 'nonhuman other' and, ultimately, he learns to coexist with them. Joon learns a very important lesson from his journey: he is not rationally superior to or exceptional to the 'non-human' animals and objects. By the time he reaches Ratanpur, Joon accepts the fact that the fox, the dog, and other fantastic creatures are far more knowing than him. His communication with the fantastic creatures bridges the species divide as Joon learns to respect other beings as 'fellow creatures'. The portrayal of animal-human relationships not only dismantles the essentialist notion of a

superior human ontology, but the narrative of *Siyali Palegoi Ratanpur* also offers fertile terrain for 'companion-species' framework.

### Conclusion

According to Zoe Jacques (2018), "children's fantasy, in all of its genres, modes, and indeed, historical periods, can be deeply complex in negotiating alternate modes of authority or in destabilizing authority itself" (*Children's Literature and the Posthuman* 239). In view of Jacques' remark, it can be said that Assamese children's literature offers illuminating ways to re-conceptualize humanity's relationship with the non-human world. Navakanta Barua's *Siyali Palegoi Ratanpur*, in this regard, destabilizes human exceptionality through a posthumanist play of rationality and power. The child protagonist, Joon's encounter with fantastical creatures, offers new insights into human-animal studies, and in doing so, the text draws attention to the complexities of our lived relations with non-human others.

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