

## Post Humanistic Elements in Child Writers: A Brief Analysis of Two Child Writers

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### Abstract

The study of child writers is a recently emerging branch of scholarly study. It is known by the name of 'juvenilia studies' in academia. The works of child writers grant the reader and the critic a privileged access into the thought process of children. This paper does a brief analysis to reveal the post human elements in the thought process of two child writers as revealed through their works.

Opal Whiteley and Kavya Kompella, two child writers, the former speaking to us from the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the latter speaking to us in the 21<sup>st</sup>, have as the common thread of their works, the blurring of boundaries between the human and the non-human. Whiteley's work is a semi-fictional diary titled *The Story of Opal: The Journal of An Understanding Heart* where she recounts her days in an Oregon lumber camp - her days at school, the journeys she makes to her school, her home and other places near the settlement during the course of which she establishes a deep bond with all the living and nonliving things in and around the woods that surround the settlement. Kompella a nine-year old Indian published 110-pages book titled *The Three Adventurers at Fungalore*, which rose to the best-selling list of Amazon, India. The book is about two children, Neel and Nina who are excited to go to their new school, Fungalore, and the adventures that they have there.

**Keywords:** Opal Whiteley, Kavya Kompella, juvenilia, posthumanism

### Introduction

The relationship of humans with animals and other non-human entities have been a subject of discussions, ever since it has been understood that our faulty and at-times-egotistical perspective of placing ourselves in the world around us is the reason for the ever-worsening

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ecological imbalance in the natural world. Such discussions have often made us aware of the need to recast and redefine these relationships on a philosophical level. Environmentalists and other theorists have understood that, anthropocentrism is the bedrock that operates under the rhetoric of civilizational progress and economic development. Such a philosophy puts humans above and before all others. The Cartesian idea of the delineation between a thinking mind and a subservient body in humans further validated the idea of superiority of human-beings as opposed to animals that cannot think self-consciously about themselves and act according to these thoughts. When we say that egocentric humans have been responsible for the creation of ecological imbalance in the natural world, we mostly mean the adult male human. In other words, patriarchy along with ‘aetonormativity’(a term coined by Maria Nikolajeva in 2010 to denote the assumption that adult behavior is normative while childish behavior is deviant)<sup>1</sup> are the controlling ideologies behind an anthropocentric perspective. The indifference and, often, arrogance of governments and corporations, at whose helm mostly sit adult males, are responsible for the precipitation of this crisis.

The search for alternatives to this Western originated idea of anthropocentrism has led ecocritics to look at different cultures and ideologies. They have looked at indigenous non-industrial cultures and other subsets within humans that have their own way of engaging with the world around them. Such a study helps to break the anthropocentric grand narratives of progress, reason and mind-body dualism. Feminism has been identified as a complementary aspect of ecocentrism since patriarchy is the ideology that oppresses both women and nature. Since the earth itself is often compared to a mother that nurtures those depending upon it and sacrifices itself for the pleasure of others, ecofeminists argue that the feminine way of living is the answer to our ecological crisis. But this paper presents a hitherto under-explored alternate perspective of looking at human-non-human relationships- that of the child’s.

### **Children and the Non-Human**

We have known for some time that children are, more often than not, involved in a web of relationships with the animals and other non-living entities that they have come into contact with, in a way similar to their human relationships. But only a few scholarly explorations are done in this area, most possibly because it is often seen by adults as trivial and essentially childish. The few investigations in this area are mostly focused on understanding the import of such relationships in the psycho-social development of children into adults and the valuable interpersonal skills that they are likely to imbibe from these relationships.

In the light of the ecological crisis that we are currently mired in, an examination of the child - non-human relationship might yield some benefits in terms of providing an alternate perspective of viewing the world around us while at the same time being a part of it. It might also

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1. For more information on the term, see Nikolajeva.

help us in rethinking about the versions of posthumanism/s that involve the magnification/continuation of humanistic traits and extension of human/human-created authority. Here, I argue, the child's view presents us with a more organic and 'naturalistic' version of posthumanist thought. The writings of children sometimes known as 'juvenilia'-for a lack of better word that includes those who did not grow up to be authors- presents us with the possibility of a paradigm that treats beings other than ourselves, in a way distinct from what adults might do.

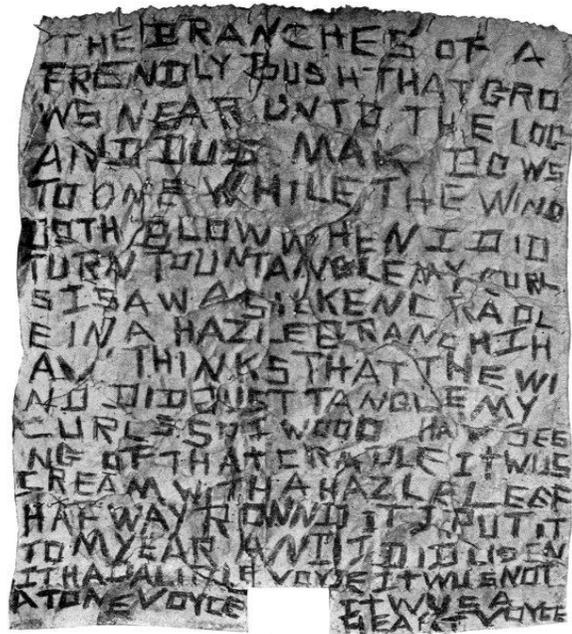
Zoe Jacques' *Children's Literature and the Posthuman: Animal, Environment, Cyborg* sees children's literature as brimming with posthumanist potential. She argues that both posthuman scholarship and children's literary studies share a concern with margins, absolutes and defining lines that even functions at a linguistic level. She sees childhood as offering a useful rejection of hierarchical separation and boundaries and not yet fully inscribed by humanist agendas and more akin to the sorts of flexibilities in which posthumanism finds pleasure. She goes on to illustrate that children's literature enables one to connect with the agencies and voices of various others which she believes is powerful route to upsetting human dominion, even when emerging unwittingly; it blurs the boundaries between the human and the non-human as, indeed, between the adult and the child. This observation applies to the writings of children as well, even more so, since the works of adults marketed as children's literature often involves an attempt to reassert the boundaries after breaking them down.

This relatively unexplored area of child writings not only offer an opportunity to look at child-nonhuman relationships afresh, but also provides some thought on deconstructing ideas and customs accepted as commonplace or even natural in humanist thought. The very nature of child writing hinges on the idea of lack of perfection of craft and lack of development, which are so essential to a work of adult literature. It subverts rules of composition, parodies them, and uses them to impart a hint of irony and sarcasm when speaking about the adult world.

### **Opal Whiteley and Life in a Lumber Camp**

Opal Whiteley was a nineteenth century child writer from Oregon, whose observations and insights in her fictionalized diary, titled *The Story of Opal: The Journal of an Understanding Heart*, warrants discussion from an post-humanist perspective owing to the ways in which she portrays those elements on the periphery of the society. While doing so, she deconstructs humanist concepts such as time, ownership and reason and paves way for an alternate understanding of reality. Although the readers of that period liked to think Opal as an epitome of the Romantic unspoiled child, an analysis of her work reveals that she is not fully free of adult influence nor is she presenting a utopian world where nature is put above the individual.

Presenting her thoughts in a disconnected, disjointed manner closely resembling the stream-of-consciousness technique, the diary of Opal disregards the arbitrary grammatical, morphological rules of language and rejects humanist ideas of perfection in expression and thought. Although she was considered to be an Other and was denied agency, her ingeniousness in using the limited resources available to her, can be seen in the way in which her diary was written. (see fig.1).



**Fig.1.** A specimen page from Opal's original diary written on a paper bag. Source: [http://www.gutenberg.org/files/43818/43818-h/43818-h.htm#photo\\_p013-h](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/43818/43818-h/43818-h.htm#photo_p013-h)

Opal's diary recounts her days in an Oregon lumber camp between the sixth and seventh years of her life- her days at school, the journeys she makes to her school, her home and other places near the settlement during the course of which she establishes a deep bond with all the living and nonliving things in and around the woods that surround the settlement. She gives these animals, birds, flowers and trees, names borrowed from classical mythology, literature and politics thus subverting the adult norm of naming only their pets. For example, she names her favourite mouse as Felix Mendelssohn, a crow as Lars Porsena of Clusium, a pet pig as Peter Paul Rubens and her favourite tree, which gives her comfort in times of distress, as Michael Raphael. The characters that populate Opal's elaborate network of interspecies connections, however, are not pets per-se since they are every bit as involved in her life as a human-being would. The diary itself is a result of an effort to resist the arbitrary customs and

compulsions of an anthropocentric world that puts humans and their work above everything else and sees everything else as utilities.

Opal's distinctive way of thinking about the arbitrariness of human constructs such as time, language and concept of land-ownership presents the child-to adopt Wordsworth- as the 'best Philosopher' capable of deconstructing structures.

It belongs to a big man that lives in a big house, but it is our lane more than it is his lane, because he doesn't know the grass and flowers that grow there, and the birds that nest there, and the lizards that run along the fence, and the caterpillars and beetles that go walking along the roads made by the wagon wheels. And he doesn't stop to talk to the trees that grow all along the lane (ch. 3).

Although she questions the egotistical, anthropocentric concept of ownership, she doesn't scrap the concept; instead, she reworks it to include all those who are truly involved in a web of life that depends on the place for its survival. The concept that had a human at its centre has now been reconfigured to have no centrality at all. It should be pointed out that in the process of this reconfiguration she doesn't lose her own identity, rather she simply acknowledges the fact that every creature- living or non-living- is implicated in the web of life. Unlike some nature lovers who associate forests as primitive places suitable for animals and cities and towns as places suitable for human life, Opal's perspective doesn't separate animals from humans, rather she advocates the idea of the web of life.

Although Opal has a close relationship with the animals and other non-human entities in her life she is also intertwined with aspects of human civilization. The very fact that she writes a diary, a narrative created out of the happenings around her, proves that she isn't the stereotypical savage-child that we often read in literature created by adults, but a child with a deep knowledge of human history and the characters that populate it, capable of recording her own life as she sees fit.

Another way in which Opal questions the arbitrariness and constructedness of the human world is by perceiving everything directly and literally, refusing to think through things the way adults would deem natural and even necessary. For example, when Opal's mother gets enraged at losing ten minutes of her time, Opal starts searching for the lost time under cupboards, beds, and drawers (Whiteley ch. 5). This instance, for an adult will mean that Opal hasn't developed the ability to understand metaphors and theoretical constructs; but it opens up the possibility for a deconstructive analysis of time and the way in which humans become slaves to artificial constructs. This is another example where the child's perspective brings down a humanist conception that has been accepted as natural and as having a role in structuring their activities.

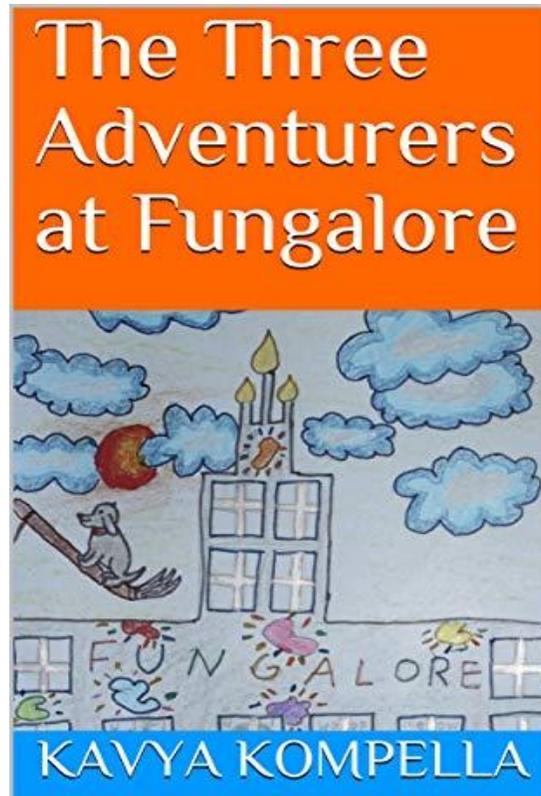
Another excellent example of her intuitive understanding of the nature around her—whether sentient or non-sentient—is the observations she makes while planting potatoes. For an average adult growing food is a mechanical activity, but for Opal it is imbued with a sense of interconnectedness with nature. Although she might not be as learned as an average adult, she seems to understand that everything non-human is integral to our existence.

One must leave an eye on every piece of potato one plants in the ground to grow.... And I did have meditations about what things the eyes of potatoes do see there in the ground. I have thinks they do have seeing of black velvet moles and large earthworms that do get short in a quick way. And potato flowers above the ground do see the doings of the field— and maybe they do look away and see the willows that grow by the singing creek.... Being a potato must be interest— specially the having so many eyes. I have longings for more eyes. There is much to see in this world all about (ch. 22).

### **The Magical Adventures at Fungalore**

One could argue that this is only the example of a single child writer. A century later after Opal wrote her diary, a girl from India named Kavya Kompella published a book on Amazon, titled *The Three Adventurers at Fungalore*, ( see fig. 2. below) in 2020. With a character list-similar to Opal’s diary- at the beginning that names the children, animals, magical characters, teachers and students, this best-selling book narrates the adventures that some kids have while at Fungalore, a boarding school.

Although clearly a work of fantasy, the fantastic blends seamlessly into the realistic in this book. The children seem to accept the magical elements without any qualms. But the most interesting element that pervades the book is the sense of secrecy from the adult world. Everything involving the supernatural takes place without the adult teachers knowing about them. In the first chapter, Neel and Nina’s pet cat Asimoe snuck into their luggage while they were going into a boarding school where some pets are allowed, and some are not. The children at the school, on finding out about Asimoe, decide to break the rule of not keeping a cat and keep it anyway. It is obvious that the adult distinction between different pets doesn’t apply the same way to the children. When imbued with magic the pets start to talk and reason just like them. Also, the presence of the ‘Worgic’(a world of magic) doesn’t seem to bother them.



**Fig.2.** The front cover of Kompella’s book in Amazon-India website illustrated by the author herself. Source: [https://www.amazon.com/Three-Adventurers-at-Fungalore-ebook/ dp/B08CZWQ6J1/ ref=sr\\_1\\_1? dchild=1 &keywords = The + Three+Adventurers+at+Fungalore&qid=1616205936&s=books&sr=1-1](https://www.amazon.com/Three-Adventurers-at-Fungalore-ebook/dp/B08CZWQ6J1/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=The+Three+Adventurers+at+Fungalore&qid=1616205936&s=books&sr=1-1)

In Chapter 8 there is an instance of parents scolding their children who were trying to make friends with eagles. “You are not supposed to make friends with eagles,” scolded their mother. “I will take you away from this school if you start making friends with eagles,” said their father. (47) This shows the boundaries that adults establish with animals and the intolerance that they show if someone else especially their own children try to break them. The adults in Kompella’s book are indifferent to the children and their various activities just as Opal’s parents were indifferent to her.

### Conclusion

Although only two books are analysed here, it is safe to say that children’s writings offer us the possibility of thinking without mental boundaries between the human and the non-human. It also presents the opportunity to think deconstructively about man-made concepts and generalizations that we often take for granted and to be normal. The thought patterns of children present the possibility of a more natural, organic version of posthumanism as opposed to a technological iteration of it. Opal’s and Kompella’s works serve to actualize this naturalistic

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version of post-humanism that can destabilize the deep-seated foundations of humanism which is paving the way to our own extinction.

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