

The Posthuman Transformation: A Contemporary Study of *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*

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Abstract— This paper examines the animal world portrayed in *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* (1906-7) by Selma Lagerlof, by transforming the protagonist's human body into a posthuman figure, arguing about Nils' reduction from a grown-up human to an elf-sized being, who travels across Sweden among geese. Post-humanism is a theoretical framework that questions classical humanism while highlighting human limitations. Following Rosi Braidotti's idea of "post-humanism" in her book called *The Posthuman* (2013), this paper attempts to show how Nils' posthuman body allows him to enter into the animal world, which questions the absurd assumption of humans to be superior. Through Nils' transformation, his adoption of animal language, and his becoming a part of a non-human community, the paper demonstrates how the book destabilizes the human/animal binary and creates a different world where animals are neither considered to be marginalized, nor excluded, nor different from the human world. By situating the children's narrative into a contemporary posthuman reading, the paper offers relational, non-hierarchical, and more ethical possibilities. Ultimately, by showing the limitations of conventional humanity, or a human, characterized by traditional definition, which defines the lines between humans and animals, the paper criticizes anthropocentric view, not only to blur the lines between human and animals, but also to create an appropriate channel, which does not only reframes human identity, but it also brings light to a world where human, animals, and nature can co-exist together.



Keywords— Posthuman, Transformation, Human, Animal, Identity, Anthropocentric, Limitations.

I. INTRODUCTION

Braidotti begins her book, *The Posthuman* (2013), with: "At the start of it all there is He: the classical ideal of 'Man', formulated first by Protagoras as 'the measure of all things'. (13) The classical definition of 'man' is something which becomes a measurement criterion for all. However, as contemporary times are marked by flexibility and fluidity, such a rigid definition of 'man' is not any functional entity. European enlightenment establishes 'human' in the higher pedestal, and anything other than 'human' is placed in the category of "other." The European, classical, and humanistic ideals have defined themselves in opposition to what is been marginalized, sexualized, and naturalized. It is much similar with the idea of 'Great Chain of Being,' a medieval Islamic and a medieval Christian thought, which considers God at the

top of the structure, and other angels, animals, plants are placed below God. When it comes to the culture of humanity, humans assume holding the superior position like God. However, the contemporary issues are subject to get represented by something which is more flexible in nature, and this delves to the subject matter of this paper *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* (1906-7) by Selma Lagerlof.

The Wonderful Adventures of Nils is a Swedish fictional work by Swedish writer Selma Lagerlof. Lagerlof is known to be the first woman to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. The text is published in two parts, respectively, in 1906 and 1907, and it is first published in English as *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* (1907), and *The Further Adventures of Nils* (1911). Commissioned in 1906 by the Swedish Elementary School Teachers'

Association as a geography text for primary schools, this text aims to foster national identity. Although its main object is to make the children aware of their nation, however, Selma's use of anthropomorphism in the text has taken a different turn. Selma spent three years studying animal and bird lives before writing the book, which makes sense for her using fantastical elements in the book. The protagonist of the book named Nils Holgersson, a mischievous boy who loves tormenting animals. It talks about Nils' journey of flying over Sweden with a flock of geese, and how Nils gets to view the country from a different perspective, and ends up transforming himself into an enlightened being. Nils' transformation begins with his encounter with an elf, and as he captures the elf, it results into shrinking of his physical size. His adventure begins with a gander, through whom he joins a flock of wild geese on their migration across Sweden. As he travels by being a part of the animal world, he gets introduced to the world of "others," and to the absurdity of human world, which causes his transition from a selfish boy to someone who is caring and gentle towards other animals.

By highlighting human limitations, this paper attempts to draw the posthuman figure of Nils, which not only questions human hegemony but also presents a different world to the readers. As the target consumers for this book are children, Selma writes the book using her artistic creativity, employing tools such as anthropomorphism, which is the act of characterizing non-human entities with human qualities. Characterizing animals with human characteristics may raise ethical questions; however, it attempts to reduce the fixed boundaries between humans and animals. Reducing Nils from his bodily superior position to a posthuman figure, does not only provide him the agency to become a part of the ecological world, but it is Nils' posthuman figure through which the readers get aware of the power structure. This is done by using Rosi Braidotti's idea of post-humanism, through which the paper attempts to blur the differences between human and animals. Thus, while deconstructing the traditional definition of 'human', Nils' posthuman figure invites the possibilities of animals having 'human' like cultural, ethical, and communal values. This does not only help the children to resonate with the animal world, but it also helps the adults to escape the hypocritical human world, and to enter into a more meaningful world, where every species are interconnected and interrelated, rather considering animals as the 'other'.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study examines Selma Lagerlof's *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* (1906-7) through the lens

of posthumanism, while applying Rosi Braidotti's idea of post-humanism from her famous book called *The Posthuman* (2013). Posthumanism is a critical theory that is a response to the limitations of anthropocentrism. This positions humans as superior, while separating other species in a marginalized category. In her book, Braidotti ignores classical humanism, which marks "man" as white, masculine, and able-bodied. As Braidotti points out in her book: "The human is a normative convention, which does not make it inherently negative, just highly regulatory and hence instrumental to practices of exclusion and discrimination" (26), while keeping this in mind, it can be said that Nils' transformation does not place him in a hierarchical position, but replaces animals from the category of 'others' to an environment where their connection with other species is emphasized.

Braidotti begins by rejecting anthropocentric assumptions, while considering that the figure of 'human' is not only a conventional physical description but also about conventional ideologies that establish humans as exceptions. Unlike this, the posthuman is characterized by interconnection among different entities and species, and thus a more synthesized ecological world. In this light, the transition of Nils can be seen, who has lost his authoritarian position by leaving his physical size behind, which helps him become a part of a more broadened ecological world. Braidotti's posthumanism treats the human/animal binary as absurd and not functional in the contemporary world. This theoretical framework allows readers to look at the animal society portrayed in Lagerlof's novel, with their communal, ethical, and 'human' like values, and thus not excluded, or 'different' from humans. By taking this theoretical framework, the paper reads Nils' journey not only as growth, but also a posthuman turn, through which the readers can see themselves as a part of the broader ecological web, rather as superior.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Wonderful Adventures of Nils is been subject to several studies, as the text provides rich scope to read it through different lenses. Bjorn Sundmark has studied the text in "Of Nils and Nation: Selma Lagerlof's *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*" (2011) as a work that helps to create the sense of nation building. "From Schoolbook to Love Story. Selma Lagerlof's *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils Holgersson* and Its TV Adaptation" (2020) by Eva Heggstad analyzes the book's TV adaptation. The book is also been studied by focusing on its relation to space, in "Sami Selves in the Northern Landscape" (2020) by S. Weld. "The Narrative Art of

Selma Lagerlof: Two Problems” (2016) by Erland Lagerroth, Selma Lagerlof, J. Muus, K. Thott focuses on characters and setting of the text. Although studies on this book situate it into different subjects, including children’s literature, geographical educational book, folkloric, fairy-tale elements, however, unlike the existing scholarship, this paper focuses on one of the unexplored sides of this book, which is the study of posthuman. Although the human-animal relation has been studied regarding the book, however while focusing on Selma’s use of anthropomorphism in the book. The posthuman angle is absent in the existing studies, and while offering the book a new theoretical framework, the readers can reconsider the book’s engagement with the broader world.

IV. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The introduction of Nils Holgersson, a fourteen-year-old farm boy, is drawn as someone who is mischievous, lacks empathy, and lacks moral obligations. After a strange encounter with a tomte, a household spirit, a tiny human-like ‘creature’ with supernatural abilities, and Nils’ cruel actions towards the tomte, he is shrunk into the size of an elf. Along with this tragic event, Nils is also gifted with the ability to speak and understand animal languages. In her influential work called *The Posthuman* (2013), RosiBraidotti does not accept the definition of ‘human’ in classical humanism. Here, the physical minimization of Nils’ body reduces him to bodily inferiority, and thus, does not follow the conventional idea of “human.” Thus, this ‘metamorphosis’ is not only a transformation of size, but with Nils’ acquisition of animal language, it is an introduction to a posthuman figure as well, with the help of which the broader world, the existing power hierarchy, and especially the ‘other world’ can be recognized. This process of transformation is also a process of unlearning human hegemony. His transformed tiny size not only takes away the human superiority that Nils has, which allows him to mock and disturb other animals, but it also helps him in understanding the flaws of human world, and the vulnerability of the world of ‘others’. This tragic event causes a disruption of human and animal hierarchy, as all the animals like the cows, the farm cat, who are once subjects to Nils’ mock, now refuses to consider him as their rightful master. Thus, it is not only the use of anthropomorphism that provides rights to animals to make their voices heard by the readers, but it is also through posthumanism that drags Nils from the human ignorance to enlightenment, which allows Nils to understand the real issues regarding animal world. This does not only disfigure the boundaries between humans and animals, but Selma’s use of fantastical elements in the text, and inclusion of various animal characters, helps the

readers understanding the dynamics exist in the ‘other world’, and it also helps in becoming a channel for the adult readers to escape their ‘higher world’, and children to engage with the animal world.

The adaption of all these fantastical elements is not only to intrigue the readers, but it also highlights the limitations of human beings. Before his transformation, Nils had no difficulties in roaming within Sweden, and while being in the human form, he was never seen leaving Sweden. This is highlighted with the fact that there is no mention of any places outside Sweden in the text. By being in gooseback, it provides him a different viewpoint from the air, and the visual image of the broadened landscape questions the idea of national borders and capability of human beings. This delves into the fact how humans treat borders as national and political tools, which restrict human mobility. As Braidotti points out in her book, “Once the centrality of anthropos is challenged, a number of boundaries between ‘Man’ and his others go tumbling down, in a cascade effect that opens up unexpected perspectives”. (66) Here in this text, this human rigidity is broken by the posthuman turn, which helps Nils in engaging with the ecological world, creating a different version of the country, which does not fix a nation into any borders, or limits a country into any static object, but transforms it into a narrative with vibrant traits. Thus, his shrunken size causes him going beyond human superiority and his physical existence. Another interesting element to note is that, with his all limitations, the human society accepts Nils to be a part of them; however, in order to become a part of the animal society, he needs to prove himself as useful and trustworthy. His human superiority does not allow him to become a part of the animal society. Thus his posthuman transformation encourages him to adopt certain values, which will help him in becoming an active participant, rather a passive one.

One of the significant episodes in the text is “The Great Crane Dance on Kullaberg.” On this particular day, all the animals in the region gathered at Kullaberg; however, there was one condition: no human beings were allowed to attend the event. However, this time, the rule was broken with the presence of Nils. The animals allowed Nils to attend the event, as with his acts of service, Nils had won their hearts. Animals were prohibited from attacking each other on this day. All assembled at the place where the dance of various animals takes place, and the event is characterized by a great union of various birds and animals. Although performances by animals such as crows, hares, woo-grouse, black grouse, and brown grouse are interesting to watch, the crane dance is the most intriguing performance. Though Lagerlof’s description of the event can be criticized saying that it is anthropocentric, and

animals involving in events like this, is not realistic. However, the paper here criticizes this assumption of animals having celebrations like this is anthropocentric, and through the anthropomorphic turn, Lagerlof creates a world which denies the conventional idea of animals cannot have their own community, with discipline, rules, and regulations. This event is an instance in which animals can have their own independent society, with discipline and relationships among them. It is not only Nils, who witnessed this, but it is the readers as well, who can have a view of this side of the animal world, through the posthuman figure of Nils. This shows the inability of humans to consider animals as a part of the same world; however, this limitation is erased through the construction of Nils' posthuman existence.

Through another example, this point becomes clearer, for instance, when Akka sets strict rules for the whole group, it shows an idea of communal rules, which are important to regulate and manage a group with discipline. This erases the rigid boundaries between humans and animals. Thus, though this anthropomorphic description is fictional, it does not only provide agency to animals, it also helps in showing the possibility of animals having their own individual life, and this is done through Nils' posthuman figure. Although Smirre Fox's hunting wild geese is his survival needs, however, for other species the more important thing is him violating peace, and rules set for the gathering at Kullaberg. Smirre Fox getting punished for his violent acts by other species, does not only show the moral obligation exists in the animal world, but it also shows that animals can operate their own community, with their own sets of conditions, outside the human control. Thus here, Lagerlof provides a separate political and moral autonomy to the animal world through the use of anthropomorphism. This shows the possibility of recognizing animals, and their societal, survival, and moral urges, with the human world. As it is stated by Braidotti, "In my view, posthuman ethics urges us to endure the principle of not-One at the in-depth structures of our subjectivity by acknowledging the ties that bind us to the multiple 'others' in a vital web of complex interrelations". (100)

During the end of this novel, Nil's change of desires is something that challenges the notion of humanity. From being desperate to go home to being willing to be in the world of animals, it shows Nil's journey of awakening. Although it can be considered a 'bildungsroman', unlike a traditional 'bildungsroman', here Nil's growth and his journey to maturity are the result of integrating with the animal world. Some of the values that are considered strictly 'human', ironically, Nil learns them through non-human guidance. Instances of Nil's acts

of service are quite a few in this text, such as helping the exhausted Marten by dragging him to water, helping him collect dry grass and spread it on the ice at Vombs lake for Matren to sleep on, rescuing Sirle Squirrel's wife from humans, and so on. The transition gets more significant, showing how while being human, Nil is never liked by other animals of their farmyard, caused by Nil's cruel behavior towards the animals. However, after becoming a posthuman figure, as Nil learns to help others, he is celebrated by other animals. After rescuing Sirle Squirrel's wife, all the little birds are seen singing on Nil's bravery, showing gratitude through gifting him and carrying him on their backs. By being with Marten, while being a part of his journey, Nil starts loving that life, as Nil is seen admitting, "This is just the life for me" (Lagerlof 62). As Selma writes, "He wasn't afraid of anything – except being sent home". (62), his growing contentment with the outdoor life has made him feel a part of the animal world, as if restoration to the previous human form will mean re-entering the human world again. By showing Nil's change of desire about going home, Selma not only highlights the posthuman figure but also questions the idea of what it means to be human. Nils' statement "I don't want to be human" (Lagerlof 68), along with evoking the idea of Nil's feeling relatable more with the animal world rather than the human world, also becomes a threat to human identity, and this is highlighted through his posthuman form.

At the end of the novel, when Nils runs outside to bid farewell to Akka and the wild flocks, Nils, who becomes a full-grown human again, is left with grief on the ground. While by being a posthuman figure and with the help of non-human company, helps Nils to get connected with the ecological world, his retransformation into human form, separates him from the ecological world. Nils' restoration to human size is not exercising human authority over animals, but taking away his identity from him, which he is provided by the animal world. Throughout the whole text, although Selma tries to teach Nils' character the idea of 'humanity', however, by getting introduced to the absurdity of the idea of humanity through his posthuman form, Nils becomes estranged from the human society. One interesting thing to be highlighted is that the moment Nils regains his human form, his ability to understand animal language is lost. This shows the possibility for a posthuman form to recognize the animal world, which the human form fails to do. This may question the principle of human identity; however, it shows that human identity is subject to constant interaction with their surroundings, and thus, does not remain autonomous or static. As Braidotti says, "What I want to emphasize instead, in a more affirmative vein, is the

priority of the relation and the awareness that one is the effect of irrespressible flows of encounters, interactions, affectivity and desire, which one is not in charge of". (100)

It is important to understand that traditionally human beings are associated with nature; however, in recent times, the human-nature relationship has gone through phases of transition, and the boundaries between human and nature have become starkly visible. In one of the chapters, the land and the creatures on the land are described by the wild geese to Nils. Although Nils perceives it as a "checked cloth," the wild geese then explain the fields, the meadows, Lillgarde, Grainscarce, "Little-to-eat," moneyville, and so on. The constant cackle of the geese, commenting on the land below, calling out to creatures below, not only provides the readers with a beautiful imagination but is also a part of Selma's artistic strategy to draw a picture of the land below through geese, who are a part of nature. Thus, while being a human, Nils fails to enjoy the geographical beauty of the country, and his posthuman figure provides a channel for him, with the help of the anthropomorphic characters, to witness the country through a different lens. Thus, the deconstruction of the rigid human figure helps Nils to engage with nature and become a part of the ecological world.

While this study attempts to minimize the differences between humans and animals, it also shows the difficulties in doing this with a traditional human form, as it is limited in nature, and thus, it is done here by establishing Nils' posthuman figure. When Marten, the gander, is caught by high school students and is close to being eaten, Nils manages to fly away with the gander by using his wit, it emphasizes the binaries between human and posthuman. On one hand, it is shown how animals are subject to domestication, human consumption, and human brutality, and the lines between human and posthuman become more static; on the other hand, Nils, the posthuman, calls and addresses empathy for animals. Jhan Hochman shares his view in an essay called "Green Cultural Studies" (1998), that the environmentalists should represent animals and their rights, as they lack the ability to voice their issues. However, as the postmodern period is characterized by fluidity, the gaps between humans and animals are filled up with contemporary, postmodern creation of posthuman figure.

V. CONCLUSION

Though it may be argued saying it is Lagerlof's use of anthropomorphism that draws attention to the animal world, and the book is written way before posthumanism coming into the discussion, which cannot be a subject to question. However, without an appropriate

channel, neither it is possible for the story's protagonist Nils to understand the broader world, nor for readers. In order to solve this problem, this paper situates a posthuman figure as a medium, which does not only focus on human limitations, but it also focuses on how the animal world is been considered as different, and thus "other". Thus, Nils' diminished physical size is not only his punishment for his cruelty, but it is a deliberate narrative strategy, which in the contemporary times can be studied through the lens of posthumanism. It helps him coming out of the privileged category of "human", encountering the vulnerability of the animal world. The classical concept of 'human' has made the lines between humans and animals as rigid, stagnant, and limited, however, more fluid concepts like post-humanism, which helps in the integration of human and animals, creates voice for the marginalized, and changes the conventional ideas about the world of 'others'. Thus this paper does not only dismantle the classical concept of "human", but it also deconstructs the human/animal binary. In this way, the paper shows how Lagerlof's book has a profound ground for contemporary posthuman reading, and how it plays a significant role in the academic field, while providing a place for the readers, which influences them to understand the absurd power dynamics, derogatory ideas about non-human beings, how the "others" are excluded from the mainstream, and how it is important to value a more balanced world.

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