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## Abstract

The purpose of this research paper is to explore anthropocentrism in Michael Bond's *The Tales of Olga da Polga*. The journey of an anthropomorphized central character, Olga, when she moves from a pet shop to Sawdust family, the unbelievable self-created adventurous stories and attempts to sustain her usual sangfroid, form the narrative of the book. These events show how human beings are connected to their environment. The theoretical framework that is applied to analyze the text is ecocriticism which highlights the relationship between man and his environment. The focus of this research paper, in particular, is to trace anthropocentric features in the text. Anthropocentrism is the belief that human beings are the only significant entity among other creatures of the world. The paper introduces the text and the author. It then presents the description of the theoretical framework and how it has evolved. It also gives an overview to children's literature and how animals are significant in helping children understand the underlying meaning of human existence. The paper explains the term 'anthropocentrism' in detail and how it intersects with the ecological lineage. It ends by evaluating the relationship between man and his environment in accordance with the text. This work aims to show how human being's mindless urban and industrial enterprises have destroyed most of the natural world around them.

**Keywords:** ecocriticism, anthropocentrism, human being, environment

## 1. Introduction

*The Tales of Olga da Polga* (1971) is a book from the *Olga da Polga* series written by Michael Bond and illustrated by Catherine Rayner. Thomas Michael Bond was a British author who was born in 1926 in Newbury and grew up in Reading, England. He began writing in 1947 while serving with the army in Egypt. Bond's first children's book *A Bear Called Paddington* appeared in 1958 and was publically well acclaimed. He gave up his job as a BBC television cameraman so that he could concentrate on writing. *Olga da Polga* series was produced as a result of his inspiration of his daughter, Karen's guinea-pig. Michael Bond was awarded the OBE in 1997 for his services to children's literature.

Catherine Rayner illustrated the book in 2011. The watercolor illustrations have made the text more appealing and expository. The blend of black, white and brown rosettes of Olga make her attractively different from other animals. The adventurous journeys of Olga are illustrated in a whimsical way. The illustrations give vivid pictures of the text so that children can enjoy reading the book and understand it easily.

*Olga* is a little guinea pig with intrinsic adventurous qualities. In each chapter Olga sets out on a journey of exhilaration differently infiltrating the implicit philosophical notion of the writer that life is all about exploring new things. With the help of an animal narration (a female guinea pig), the author intends to inform children that the technological advancement and industrial headway upon which human beings consider themselves elevated are perilous achievements for our environment and surrounding. This research paper aims to highlight anthropocentric notions in correspondence with non-humans. This study elucidates how human activities have affected the natural world. This irreversible demolition of the environment has contributed to the destruction of landscape not only for human beings but also for animals and plants. Therefore, Todd A. Borlik (2010) in his book *Ecocriticism and Early Modern English Literature: Green Pastures* mentions anti-anthropocentric statement as "Human flourishing is predicated on ecological stability, while the natural world is revealed to possess purposes aloof from human interest" (7).

## 2. Literature Review

Human beings are surrounded by living and non-living things which constitute plants, animals, micro-organisms and inorganic matter. The union of these biotic and abiotic factors makes their environment. Literature aims to inform and educate human beings. Not only does it talk about human relationship with other human beings and with his society but also forms a link between man and his environment. Derek Gladwin in his article "Ecocriticism" (2017) defines the term ecocriticism in these words: "Ecocriticism is a broad way for literary and cultural scholars to investigate the global ecological crisis through the intersection of literature, culture and the physical environment." The impact of human activities on the environment is the actual concern of ecocritical study. Michael Branch in his essay, "Ecocriticism: The Nature of Nature in Literary Theory and Practice" (1994) informs that the term "Ecocriticism" was coined by William Rueckert in 1978 in his article "Literature and Ecology." Primarily, there was less ecological approach to literature, but, in the 1940's, during the last third of the twentieth century, 'the environment' became the front-page news. We also know that "As the prospect of a sooner-or-later apocalypse by unintended environmental disaster came to seem likelier than apocalypse by deliberate nuclear *machismo*, public concern about the state and fate of 'the environment' took increasing hold, initially in the West but now worldwide" (Buell, 2015, p. 4). The outcome of scientific progress that includes industrial revolution, nuclear power reaction, deforestation, and pollution had put theorists in great apprehension.

From then onwards, environmental concern has become a chief leitmotif in literary as well as political discourses. Cheryll Glotfelty in his book *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996) informs us: In 1992, at the annual meeting of the Western Literature Association, a new Association for the study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) was formed, with Scott Slovic elected as the first president. ASLE's mission was: "to promote the exchange of ideas and information pertaining to literature that considers the relationship between human beings and the natural world. (xviii).

Until the second half of the eighteenth century, literature was supposed to be a communal domain. There was no polarity between

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adults and young readers. By the 1850's, the concept of young and adult readers appeared. Philippe Aries in his book, *Centuries of Childhood* (1962) states, "In the Middle Ages, at the beginning of modern times, and for a long time after that in the lower class, children were mixed with adults" (p. 411).

It was education that drew the boundary between children and adults. On the same page of his book, Aries (1962) further explains, "The age groups of Neolithic times, the Hellenistic *paideia*, presupposed a difference and a tradition between the world of children and that of the adults, a transition made by means of an initiation or an education" (p. 411). The involvement of children in the contemporaneous muddle of social and ecological tangles and their anticipated role to deal with them propped them up to important positions in literature. While commenting on children's role in society, Deborah Cogan Thacker in his book, *Introducing Children's Literature: From Romanticism to Postmodernism* (2002) writes, "By engaging with the condition of children in contemporary society, many writers make playful use of postmodern strategies that place children as readers in a powerful position (p. 142).

In addition to the psychological enlightenment of adult readers, writers felt the need to nourish the psyche of children as well to enhance their sense of perception to comprehend this ever-changing world. Peter Hunt mentions about children's literature in his book *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* (2004), "the term is far from simple: Children's Literature is (among many other things) a body of texts (in the widest sense of the world), an academic discipline, an educational and social tool, an international business and a cultural phenomenon" (xviii). The concern of these works is to instruct or entertain children. Their profound reflection of the outside world makes them sentient of the realistic world which is highlighted by Piaget Jean in his book *The Child's Conception of the World* (1929) as: The child, like the uncultured adults, appears exclusively concerned with things...his earliest interests, his first games, his drawings are all concerned solely with the imitation of what is. In short, the child's thought has every appearance of being exclusively realistic. (p. 33)

It is assumed that after the age of 12, a child can apprehend all that he is told. So, literature can act as a catalyst to enhance the ability of the child's developing mind. Feroza Jussawalla in her article "An Introduction to Children's Literature by Peter Hunt; Behold the Child: American Children and Their Books 1621-1922 by Gillian Avery" substantiates the argument by arguing that: "the Sleeping Beauty has been saved by the prince, her mother-in-law is exposed as one of 'the race' of Ogresses. Fear of the difference of strangers, of other races, of 'castrating females' is communicated thoroughly by early children's literature... children's literature perpetuates racism and the sense of racial 'otherness'." Considering the area of concern of this research paper, the integration of environmental consciousness in children is consequential.

Children take an uncommon interest in animals. Animals are anthropomorphized to enchant children and to develop their perception. The first major children's writer of the eighteenth century to use animals in her work was Mrs. Trimmer. He was concerned with the moral and psychological development of children. As an editor of an influential journal, *The Guardian of Education*, she was committed to enlightening children and animals, she believes, do grab children's attention. Peter Hunt (2004) writes: The animal story has not, however, always been the preserve of the nursery. Indeed, like the fairy tale, it was an adult genre that gradually entered the children's domain when the boundaries between literature for children and literature for adults were being redrawn. There is a long cross-cultural tradition of anthropomorphic animal stories, or 'beast-fables', in which animals are given human speech and reason, that stretches back in Greece at least to that legendary figure, Aesop *Panchatantra*. Fable uses animals as metaphors in order to teach lessons about moral and social behavior. In the stories attributed to Aesop, for example, various ideas about industry, perseverance, gratitude, moderation and prudence are being taught. (p. 428)

Animals have become an important entity in literature since they have become victims of human beings. Since the onset of modernity, the biotic world has been divided into two extremes: human beings on one side while plants and animals on the other. Rob Boddice in his book, *Anthropocentrism\_ Humans, Animals, Environments* (2011) pointed out that "anthropocentrism is expressed as a charge of human chauvinism, or as acknowledgement of human ontological boundaries. It is in tension with nature, the environment and non-human animals" (p. 1). The epistemological scrutiny somehow equates human-animal status but the ontological actuality of humans has impelled them to consider themselves pivotal.

The etymological description of the word 'anthropo' is given by Boria Sax in an essay "epistemological and ontological investigation" explains that Adam, the name of the first man according to the Bible, may come from the Hebrew '*adamah*', meaning soil. In English, the word 'human' is also associated with soil because the word 'human' comes from Latin via the French which means 'earth'. The word used for human beings in the Greek language is '*anthropos*' and it has close etymological association with the Indo-European term '*andh*' meaning bloom. The word bloom suggests a thing which sprouts out of the ground reflecting that humanity is an analogue to the earth and its certain creatures, plants and animals as well. This equipoised reliance of the natural world has become exceedingly vulnerable due to repercussions of modernity.

The secular notion of humankind has thwarted Biblical or mythical illustration of the expression 'human'. However, in modern times, another locution 'humanism' has intruded the essence of ontological notion of human and human-centeredness. In an essay, "The Making of The Human: Anthropocentrism in Modern Social Thought" (2011), Richie Nimmo writes "that anthropocentrism already foregrounds its negative aspects- it is human-centered, it neglects the significance of non-humans; whereas humanism better describes the spirit of the things in its positive, affirmative aspect- it champions humanity" (p. 60). But the question here arises that if humanism is an emblem of humanity and not of human-centered approach, then the very term 'humanism' becomes verbal irony as it accommodates only human expression. 'Humanism', therefore, creates a distinction between humanity and its 'other', which ultimately are non-humans.

In *The Tales of Olga da Polga* (1971) a highly anthropomorphized guinea pig, Olga, meticulously shows the relationship between humans and animals. Michael Bond has portrayed Olga as a prototype of an animal community. Her representation as a daring and an adventurous creature reckons significance of the animal kingdom. It is described in the text as, "With a head full of stories and a nose for adventure, Olga the Polga is also quite a handful. And when she moves into the Sawdust family's garden. Life for Noel, Pangio and Graham suddenly becomes much more exciting" (Bond, 1971, p.151).

From an anthropocentric perspective, despite the unusual traits of Olga, her exaggerated storytelling techniques attempt to frame

explanations of her apparently narcissist deception. Švehláková, Markéta, a Czech author, in his thesis, entitled “The tales of Olga da Polga: transition and stylistic analysis of five chapters of Michael Bonds novel” (2017) writes,

Olga is very boastful and self-important, and she likes to make up tales about herself and about guinea pigs. Despite her size, she often teases Karen’s cat and other family pets and gets them in trouble on many occasions. Paradoxically, the humans think that she is the only well-behaved animal in the family and so does Olga. (p. 8)

The tender-hearted, English-speaking Paddington Bear intends to assist in the service of humanity and has proved useful in domestic subjugation. Bond himself proposes the purpose of its creation in his essay, “... with his strong sense of right and wrong and a built-in feeling for justice, he is representing us, not against the forces of evil- that would be putting it too strong- but against the strange rules and regulations and behavior patterns with which we poor humans saddle ourselves” (1980). Bond wrote *A Bear Called Paddington* in 1958 and has posited social concerns. While *Olga da Polga* was written in 1971 and it seems that till then Bond’s vision has broadened from particular to universal complications. Olga shows two sharp contrasts from Paddington Bear: she is reluctant to meet humans and she can’t speak with them. It manifests the divergence of Bond’s human-centered writing to anti-anthropocentric subject matter. *Bulletin of the Center for Children Books* (1973) highlights the difference between the two anthropomorphized characters as, “Olga is a guinea-pig who thinks like a human being, and who talks to other animals, but who, unlike Paddington 2, does not communicate with people” (p. 38). The disinclination of Olga towards humans adds importance to the parts of flora and fauna. The intent of this research paper runs parallel to the theme of the book. In the subsequent thirteen chapters, it aims to highlight the harm caused by humans to animals and the environment.

### 3. Research Methodology

This research paper aims to examine the relationship between man and his environment in the light of ‘Anthropocentrism’. Anthropocentrism is an environmental philosophy which has its roots in Ancient Greek. This is qualitative research based on hermeneutics. The paper analyzes the text with respect to the harm brought about by the humans to their natural environment.

### 4. Discussion

Nik Taylor (2011) in his essay, “Anthropomorphism and the Animal Subject” has used the term Anthro-po-interpretivism for a different way of ‘seeing animals’ (p. 265). He further adds, “anthropomorphism is unavoidable given that *humans* interpret the natural world and other animals (and indeed other humans) through their own embodied materiality” (p. 266). In the *Tales of Olga da Polga* (1971), Olga’s character possesses human instincts for she is very boastful and confident. Olga’s slant for other animals and her belief in her invincible victory reflects the very role of humans among other living beings. She claims, “I mean they might just as well hand out the prize straight away and let everyone else go home. It would save all this mucking about” (Bond, 1971, p.76). Olga’s conviction that no other animal could win a prize is actually man’s credo that no living thing other than man could have the purpose of existence more important than humans and it is evident when Bond composes, “... for it never crossed Olga’s mind for a second that she wouldn’t win a prize” (p. 74). The author tries to predict that this very sense of ‘human chauvinism’ is perhaps because of being the crown of creation and the most significant and supreme entity of the universe. When Olga says, “I am not saying I wasn’t helped by all the brushing I had. Credit where credit’s due. But breeding always tells. It’s bound to show through in the end” (p. 78). This human supremacy in environmental ethics sets the foundation for anthropomorphic study of this novel.

Bond astutely ridicules human egocentrism when Olga makes up a mind-boggling story how guinea-pigs climbed on each other’s back and reached the moon: Olga took a deep breath and closed her eyes. “It was the year One BD,” she began. “don’t you mean BC?” interrupted Noel.

“I knew what I meant,” said Olga, getting into her stride. “BD stands for Before Dandelions, which was a very, very long time ago.” (p. 135)

Moreover, on Noel’s correction of the word ‘rocket’ which Olga mispronounced as ‘dockets’, she retorts, “there weren’t any R’s either. They hadn’t been invented” (p. 136). This ignorance of Olga is actually man’s incomprehension of the consequences of his discoveries. A colossal number of commodities and artifacts invented by human beings for their convenience have brought oodles of inconvenience to the surrounding living entities.

The story woven by Olga regarding how guinea-pigs lost their tales is conspicuously allegorical. The story is about an irascible old king and his stepdaughter. He was envious of her beauty and never permitted anyone to approach her in case they took her away. Millions of guinea-pigs sacrificed their tales in order to arrange a rope needed by a prince to climb up the tower of the palace as the door of the palace was sealed by the king and the key was thrown far away.

Olga began telling the story: “There was one king who ruled over a kingdom which has only one house with one inhabitant. This king lived with his stepdaughter in a one-roomed castle perched on an enormous rock overlooking the village, and he was known far and wide as the most crotchety and bad-tempered old king there had ever been” (Bond, 1971, p. 39). The king is representative of ‘human beings’ while his stepdaughter stands for ‘non-human living entities’. The character descriptions are given as, “the most beautiful princess in the whole world, as beautiful as he (king) was ugly, and as sweet as he was unkind and selfish” (p. 39). Bond (1971) rightly portrays the king as a synecdoche of human beings because the destruction that *Homo sapiens* have caused to the biotic world is proof of their unkindness. Human beings are oppressors as the king is, while animals and plants are oppressed like princesses in the frame of this self-composed story. The princess’ hope “that one day she would be rescued” (p. 40) exhibits the longing of the organic world that one day human beings would stop killing plants and animals.

There is only “one eagle” (Bond, 1971, p. 40) in the land of Barsance. “Barsance used to be a part of Peru until one night when there was a terrible storm and it broke off” (p. 39), informs Olga. The presence of only one eagle evinces the endangered species in the locale, Peru. The Ministry of the Environment of Peru has provided a considerable list of endangered species in the country. Josie F. Turner (2019), journalist specializing in Animal Welfare, pointed out three endangered species of Aves in her article “Animals in Danger of Extinction in Peru.” Three native birds to Peru: White-winged guan (*Penelope albipennis*), Peruvian plantcutter

(*Phytotoma raimondii*), Marvelous spatuletail (*Loddigesia mirabilis*) are on the verge of extinction. The reasons that came to be known behind these animal desertions are deforestation, hunting, and urban growth. Olga bewails that the imbalance in the ecosystem happens since human beings have intruded on it. She informs, "Peru, was full of guinea pigs at the time for it was before we'd been discovered" (Bond, 1971, p. 42), for when any animal species are discovered by man, they start to contemplate how to bring it to use for themselves. A tremendous headway of science, since the nineteenth century, has put environmentalists under sheer scrutiny. Glen A. Love in his book *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology and the Environment* (2003) tells how science became part of literature:

The new study of literature and nature is connected to the science of ecology—taking from it not only the popular term *ecocriticism* but also the basic premise of the interrelatedness of a human cultural activity like literature and the natural world that encompasses it. Thus ecocritics may have been drawn into the disputes

of the 1980s and 1990s over the authority of science, sometimes called the Science Wars. These controversies have been marked by attacks upon science, or the uses to which science has been put (a different issue) primarily by academics from the humanities and the social sciences. (p. 38)

An expeditious scientific advancement is inversely proportional to organic phenomenon. Such insecurities are evident in Noel's words as he informs, "someone's pulled the plug out of the North Sea. All the water ran away and it tipped the earth over" (Bond, 1971, p. 89). The admonitory deterioration of natural resources has maladjusted raw materials and mineral deposits. Noel continues unveiling human activities in his dialogue with Olga. He says, "... it was dreadful. And it's all because of the humans. They've been taking all these things out of the earth for so many years ... coal and oil... and grass... they've left this great big hole in the middle. That's where it's all gone" (p. 90). Bond denounces that in order to procure other planets and the entire universe, human beings have made their own planet a difficult place to live in. Noel informs Olga who was afraid of the voice of Christmas bangs, "it's probably only the humans going to the moon again. They're always at it" (Bond, 1971, p. 134).

The atrocities of the war in the twentieth century have turned the grasslands to a wilderness. In addition, these wars have wiped out not only millions of human beings but also hundreds of animals and plants. The creatures are so overwhelmed by the aftermath of the war that now they always feel vulnerable. Bangs, crashes, hums and pops of celebration seem Olga like "a burst of machine-gun fire" (Bond, 1971, p. 110). Moreover, "she felt sure it was a war and that these were bullets"(p. 111). Human beings have designed guns, rifles, grenades and other weapons for immunity and insurance but unfortunately these human things have done the greatest harm to this world. Henry David Thoreau in his book *Walden* (1854), also depicts his vacillation on the technological development which Leo Marx pointed as: The image of the railway on the shore of the pond figures an ambiguity at the heart of *Walden*. Man-made power, the machine with its fire, smoke and thunder, is juxtaposed to the waters of Walden, remarkable for depth and purity and a matchless, indescribable color ... the contrast embodies both the hope and the fear aroused by the impending climax of America's encounter with wild nature. (p. 251)

Michael Bond's portrayal of 'Elysian Field' intends to fabricate an invigorating unprecedented pastoral canvas. The iridescent imagery augments children's imagination. Bond agrees with Pedro Calderon de la Barca at this point according to whom green is the prime color of the world. "Tress", said Fangio. "bushes, banks, leaves, vegetables, flora and fauna, copses, green meadows, mushrooms, ponds, streams, the springiest tuft you can possibly imagine, puddles, strange insects, pheasant's eggs, hay, straw, molluscs, worms, shady nooks, holes in the ground ..." (Bond, 1971, p. 54). Fangio's word picture of Elysian Field tempted Olga to take a day off because "it had always looked most inviting with shady nooks and branches which waved gently in the breeze as if beckoning any passer-by to pause awhile and sample the delights within" (p. 63). Elysian Field is regarded as 'heaven' and in Christianity, heaven is the garden of Eden.

Garden, once again, is the product of nature and constitutes trees, plants and greenery. Fresh and natural environment accords with tranquility and peace of mind in this time-poor modern world. Analyzing the beguiling beauty of nature, readers are drawn to contemplate how man could possibly desert the spellbinding nature for his comfort and serenity? Olga answers this question by criticizing human beings that they have wiped out forests for commercial purposes when she mentions the purpose of guinea-pigs going to the moon, "they decided one day to go to the moon to see if they could find any grass" (Bond, 1971, p.135).

Industrialization is one of the most important outcomes of modernity. Machines have been designed even for household chores, and manual work has almost come to an end. The graph of natural nutriment consumption has rapidly decreased, and man-made product utilization has reached an alarming level. It is a threat to man's health and the environment. The remains of human consumption are contaminating the environment. Elysian Field, which was once the heaven on the earth is now "nothing more than a rubbish dump, full of old tin cans and soggy bits of cardboard, and smelling strongly of bonfires" (p. 64). The author's intention is to inform readers of how these contaminants are rapidly polluting our environment. Ian L. Pepper, one of the editors of the book *Environmental & Pollution Science* (2006) investigates how these "contaminants can result from water materials produced from the activity of living organisms, especially humans (p. 4). These sensory pollutants as 'rubbish dump', 'cardboards', 'soggy bits' and 'smell of bonfire' denote industrial and municipal waste about which J. F. Artiola in his essay (2006) says, "industrial and municipal solid wastes are created by modern societies as byproducts of mining, industrial production, and the requirements of today's modern consumers" (p. 416). Thus, the alteration of Elysian Field from environmental monument to a wasteland indicates the depletion and degeneration of nature.

## 5. Conclusion

The environmentally oriented conflict between humans and non-humans manifested through anthropomorphic animals helps children recognize their responsibilities as part of this biotic world. Olga, Noel, Graham, and Fangio's outcry for animal justice challenges human centrality to attain animal rights. The troubled boundaries between human-centric acknowledgments and subjective flora and fauna have laid the foundation of environmental apocalypse. The irrevocable catastrophe brought about by scientific and technological uncertainties has put environmental justice in question. This research has attempted to audit environmental holocaust

caused by anthropogenic activities making thus animals the center of attraction (anti-anthropocentrism) and antagonists of anthropocentrism.

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