

Contesting the ‘Human’: The Anti-Anthropocentric Dictums in Italo Calvino’s *The Cosmicomics*

Sambit Panigrahi
Ravenshaw University

Abstract

Eminent Italian writer Italo Calvino’s illustrious work The Cosmicomics is a fictional demonstrator of the notion of anthropomorphism that the writer has admittedly used as a narrative device in the mentioned work. Calvino has made the theoretical illustrations of the above-mentioned notion in his illustrious critical treatise The Literature Machine. His attack against ‘anthropocentrism’ or a human-centered worldview is evident in this work and what he promotes instead is rather an anthropomorphic worldview where the longstanding conceptual boundary between the ‘human’ and the ‘non-human’ disappears and the non-human entities of the world are attributed with human qualities. In this theoretical pretext, the present article intends to examine how Calvino in this mentioned work creates a ‘boundary-less’ world where the human becomes the non-human and vice-versa in a scenario where the traditional human subject is thoroughly de-centered.

Key words: Anthropocentrism, anthropomorphism, postmodernity

Famous Italian author Italo Calvino is one of the celebrated precursors of postmodernity. His omnibus collection of science fiction stories *The Cosmicomics* is an exemplary exposition of what Mark McGurl would call “the post-human comedy” (533)—a catchphrase which truly epitomizes the anti-humanist spirit of postmodernism. A compendium of such post-human fables, Calvino’s *The Cosmicomics* exemplifies the limits of anthropocentrism in terms of its ability to comprehend, explain and conceptualize the world where the ‘human,’ in Calvino’s parlance, is no more than an infinitesimally small element of Nature, and nothing else. Anthropocentrism’s narcissistic assertion of human exclusivity in a universe whose biotic community includes both the ‘human’ and the ‘non-human,’ is mocked and dismantled by Calvino’s inception and celebration of the notion of ‘anthropomorphism’ in the said novel.

Perhaps, it hardly needs mentioning that in an anthropocentric worldview, the ‘human’ is attributed with an exclusive identity that distinguishable from the ‘non-human’ which is presumably bereft of definitive human features. Calvino, as it looks, is radically opposed to such a weltanschauung for in many of his novels he attributes the inanimate objects with ‘humanness’: it is doubtlessly a purposeful narrative ploy on the writer’s part to establish fictionalized illustrations of his own celebrated idea of anti-anthropocentrism.

What Calvino promotes instead is, as has been mentioned earlier, anthropomorphism—a concept that he systematically demonstrates in his theoretical treatise *The Literature Machine*. Anthropomorphism (which etymologically means attribution of human qualities to non-human objects and hence, contests the notion of the exclusively ‘human’) is the radical opposite of anthropocentrism, a thoroughgoing human-centered worldview that Calvino has unequivocally challenged and interrogated in many of his writings—both fictional and critical. The writer is emphatically guided, as per his own admissions, by “a positive delirium of anthropomorphism” (Calvino, *The Literature Machine* 34)—a notion that demurs, subverts and dismantles the hubris of ‘anthropocentrism.’ It does so by attributing human qualities to ‘non-human’ objects and thereby displacing the ‘human’ from its self-assumed authorial position in the universal scheme of things. For as per Calvino’s own pronouncements, an anthropomorphic vision of the world would be “a way of putting the laziest, most obvious, and most vainglorious image of man to the test: by multiplying his eyes and his nose in every direction until he no longer knows who he is” (*Machine* 34).

An omnibus collection of his science-fiction stories, his *The Cosmicomics* is chock-a-block with characters showcasing anti-human traits while contrarily, the non-human entities of Nature are attributed with human attributes and qualities. The present article, while being an exclusive illustrator of the above theme in the said book, intends to highlight Calvino’s creation of a ‘boundary-less,’ ‘non-hierarchical’ world where the cloistered conceptual domains

of the 'human' and the 'non-human' merge and interpenetrate in a way that the idea of human exclusivity remains no more tenable.

The Chapter "The Distance of the Moon" proves to be a thorough explication of the above theme. Through what looks like an amusing love triangle involving Qfwfq's deaf cousin, Mrs Vhd Vhd and the moon, Calvino introduces his anthropomorphic agenda by endowing the 'non-human' moon with human attributes. Mrs Vhd Vhd who is in love with Qfwfq's deaf cousin discovers that the latter loves only the moon, not her for which she willfully merges with this non-human object, the moon: "Because she had finally realized that my cousin loved only the Moon, and the only thing she wanted now was to become the Moon, to be assimilated into the object of that *extrahuman* (emphasis added) love" (Calvino, *The Cosmicomics* 16). Finally, Qfwfq would tell us that Mrs Vhd Vhd has become the Moon:

She was the colour of the Moon . . . I could distinguish the shape of her bosom, her arms, her thighs, just as I remember them now, just as now, when the Moon has become that flat, remote circle, I still look for her as soon as the first silver appears in the sky, and the more it waxes, the more clearly I imagine I can see her, her or something of her, but only her, in a hundred, a thousand different vistas, . . . (Calvino, *Cosmicomics* 18-9).

As is evident from the above quote, the Moon is anthropomorphized in the form of Mrs Vhd Vhd through the latter's willful transfiguration into the former; it is a fascinating example of an attempt, on Calvino's part, to effectuate an anthropomorphic extension of 'humanness' onto a 'non-human' object, such that the 'non-human' becomes 'human' and the conceptual demarcation between the two is thoroughly dismantled. It is part of the writer's specified agenda to rob the 'human' off his exclusive 'humanness' and to make him/her extensively mixable with the non-human world such that the longstanding anthropocentric hubris of human exclusivity over the former is ridiculed and thwarted. Mrs Vhd Vhd's self-willed transformation into the moon-figure is also a thoroughgoing nullification of the idea that the 'human' possess an identity that is stable, definite, centered and unalterable.

Calvino carries forward his anthropomorphic mission through the human/Nature merger in the Chapter "Without Colours" where Qfwfq's beloved Ayl, bereft of a clearly perceivable identity, makes occasional flickering appearances through Nature, the anthropomorphized sand dune in particular. In the colourless world where everything is grey, Ayl's first appearance is through the dune, with markings of a female shape (Ayl's) on it:

I went into the sandy wasteland: . . . the crests of the dunes seemed the outlines of reclining bodies. There you could almost make out the form of an arm folded over a tender breast, with the palm open under a resting cheek; further on, a young foot with a slender big toe seemed to emerge. . . I realized that, before my eyes, I didn't have a sandy ridge but the object of my pursuit. (Calvino, *Cosmicomics* 51).

Ayl's indistinguishable merger with the sand dune not only indicates towards the anthropomorphic transfiguration of the sand dune into a human shape, but also at her repudiation of a stable, corporeal and unchangeable human identity. Later on, she is also found to be merging with the rising volcanic fire in a scenario where her body parts (like her hair) mingle with the former: "We ran along the crest of the volcanoes. In the noon greyness Ayl's flying hair and the tongues of flame that rose from the craters were mingled in a wan, identical fluttering of wings" (Calvino, *Cosmicomics* 52). Such recurrent instances of the human/Nature merger are again thoroughgoing reiterations, on the writer's part, of his proclaimed agenda of erasing all demarcations that exist, perhaps at least at a conceptual level, between the 'human' and the 'non-human' worlds respectively.

The chapter offers more clues to the readers to experience Ayl's continual escapade from attaining a visible human form in a scenario where even Qfwfq struggles to perceive her presence in his vicinity through an exclusive and identifiable human form. She continues to baffle him by appearing momentarily only in flickers and then disappearing into the world without colours as Qfwfq describes: "Ayl might be the colourless shadow swinging from a branch of the colourless forest . . . A hundred times I thought I glimpsed her and hundred times I thought I lost her again" (Calvino, *Cosmicomics* 54).

In this scenario, Ayl's relentless escapade into a world 'without colours' can possibly be understood as her self-willed renunciation of a coloured human identity that is apparently distinguishable from the so-far colourless visual field of the Earth. In an ultimate act of repudiation of the world of colours and concomitantly, of a human form visually separable from the terra firma, Ayl slips into the colourless, subterranean inner world as Qfwfq describes: "As I had been projected outwards, into the open, Ayl had remained beyond the rock wall, closed in the bowels of the Earth" (Calvino, *Cosmicomics* 59).

Like the two tales analyzed above, the tale "Solar Storm" takes Calvino's anti-human agenda to another level through the corporeal assimilation of Qfwfq's wife Rah into the aerial electromagnetic field (which is now anthropomorphized through Rah's bodily merger into it) created by the solar storm. Qfwfq says:

It was then that I saw her. . . . hanging in the air like a flag unfurling for miles and miles around, her hair flying in the wind, and her whole body flowing like her hair . . . , her loins sickle-shaped like a crescent moon, her breasts like a cloud covering the ship's quarterdeck, and the spirals of her drapery mingling with the smoke from the funnel and with the sky above. (Calvino, *Cosmicomics* 351-2)

This extract, through its interesting delineations of a transmogrified aerial view of Rah visible only to Qfwfq, exemplifies the former's thoroughgoing corporeal integration into the world of the wind, the cloud, the sky and the smoke. And fascinatingly, in response to Qfwfq's inquisitiveness regarding the rationale behind her self-willed concealment in the aerial world, Rah says: "I wanted to see if there was another way of being" (Calvino, *Cosmicomics* 352). It must be noted from the further conversations between the two that like Rah, Qfwfq has also continually defied a definitive human form that could ever have been attributed to him and both of them were all the time "outside all dimensions and forms" (Calvino 353).

Finally, it must be reiterated that Calvino's narrative strategy in *The Cosmicomics* is, as Serenella Iovino puts, "at once anthropomorphic and anti-anthropocentric" (117). His anti-anthropocentric agenda, actualized through his promotion of anthropomorphism, puts us in the threshold of a world that disqualifies all boundaries, particularly that between the 'human' and the 'non-human' Nature. It echoes French postmodernist thinkers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's conjoint declarations in their collaborative project *Anti-Oedipus* that: ". . . man and nature are not like two opposite terms confronting each other . . . rather, they are one and the same essential reality . . ." (4-5). Through his "anthropomorphic mapping of the universe" (Pilz 29), Calvino discards the anthropocentric principles of a human-centered world and instead, comprehends the 'human' as an entity that is thoroughly de-centered, fragmented and dispersed into the non-human world. Such purposeful 'de-centering' of the human subject and its merger with the world of Nature effectuated by Calvino in this book is a succinct negation of the conceptual separation between man and Nature, which according to many environmentalists, is the root cause behind the progressively increasing human exploitation of Nature. So, the mentioned work of Calvino has far-reaching environmental implications, through presently it is beyond the limited scope of this article.

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