The Violence of the *Anthropos*: A Decolonial-Disanthropocentric Reading of Nonhuman Agency in Literary Texts

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ABSTRACT

My article investigates the decolonising potential of disanthropocentrism in Paolo Bacigalupi's novel *The Windup Girl*. It foregrounds the idea that anthropocentric violence entails alienating and silencing the nonhuman, an act in which many literary texts have also been complicit. Utilising ideas provided by Donna Haraway, Walter Mignolo, Bruno Latour and Karen Barad etc., my paper deconstructs the concept of the *anthropos* by focalising the re-'configurations' of the material syntax of the world and their semiotic potential. In challenging the essentialised notion of the *anthropos*, I argue that the semiotic agentic materiality of nonhuman phenomena does not only resist biocolonialism, it also re-thinks the human and nonhuman as storied bodies that illustrate a non-hierarchical being-in-the-world in terms of material existence. In this context, my reading of Paolo Bacigalupi's novel *The Windup Girl* presents the decolonising potential of the material-semiotic agency of nonhuman matter, as it re-'configures' the idea of the 'human' in a manner that does not reinstall anthropocentric exclusivity but initiates a reorientation of the praxis of living wherein humans and nonhumans collectively formulate a non-hierarchical communal aggregate.

Keywords: Anthropocentrism, nonhuman agency, matter, semiotic agency

Introduction

In this paper, my argument focalises the violence of the *anthropos*, i.e. the human, in terms of its silencing of nonhuman enunciations and consolidating anthropocentrism. The violence of the *anthropos* refers to the unconcern for the sustenance of nonhuman phenomena in a drastically degraded environment and a reckless tampering with their constituent units in the Anthropocene.[1] It involves ignoring their material articulations as humans impose their own will on them in order to further their own human-centric interests in an epoch in which the human has left an indelible imprint on the environment. In this paper, my focus is on the complicity of human narratives in subalternising the material semiotics of nonhuman phenomena within which a human being is enmeshed, and on its extended ramifications both within and outside the category of the *anthropos*. Since the idea of violence enlists the notion of silencing and alienating "phenomena" (Barad 56), anthropocentric violence has not only ignored the material enunciations of matter, it has also preempted a meaningful translation across human and nonhuman boundaries. Literary texts have been complicit in this subalternisation of the nonhuman. Even a cursory glance at many canonical texts indicates that the lenses which filter nonhuman experiences and perceptions are mostly anthropocentric. Even where texts proclaim an affiliation with nature, as in William Wordsworth's poetry, as well as in animal stories including *Black Beauty, Watership Down, The Call of the Wild* etc., or even in works that proclaim an alienation from the nonhuman world such as those of Robert Frost and Thomas Hardy, the perceptions are filtered through an anthropocentric lens. Therefore, the silencing of the nonhuman via literature has always been a tool for centralising the human, thereby accounting for the violence of the *anthropos*.

Taking this complicity between literary texts and anthropocentric violence as a starting point, my paper engages in a re-reading of nonhuman agency and articulation as depicted in literary texts to propose a form of disanthropocentric translation across human and nonhuman boundaries. Via a disanthropocentric reading I imply a mode of reading that decentralises the human in terms of its engagement with various nonhuman entities and presents it as a "companion species" (*Staying with the Trouble* 4) while taking into account nonhuman agency. What underlines this reading is the idea that if narratives have been used to place nonhuman agency and enunciation within a mute alterity, then narratives can also be used as a site where this alterity and silence may be contested. However,

[1] The Anthropocene is a term coined by Eugene Stoermer and Paul Crutzen in the 1980s. It refers to the epoch marked by climate change and saw the *anthropos*, i.e. the human, rise as a manifest geological force.

my analysis further explores the decolonial possibilities of a disanthropocentric reading of nonhuman material agency as depicted in Paolo Bacigalupi's *TheWindup Girl*, and it invites ways of thinking about a material being-in-the-world that decolonises human and nonhuman enmeshments. By decolonial I do not imply a de-westernisation of epistemology, rather the recognition of a "polycentric" rather than an anthropocentric "world order" (Mignolo xv) in which both humans and nonhumans participate via a transcorporeal exchange, consequently making it not just a political or epistemological subject, but a material one as well. Decolonial thinking encourages non-hierarchical thinking across borders in order to reverse the impact of the colonial legacy in the human and nonhuman spheres. I argue that these borders can be between the human and the nonhuman, with the human standing as the colonizer of the colonised nonhuman. Through their transcorporeal exchanges, humans and nonhumans collectively undo the nature/ culture split which has been the legacy of most colonial ventures over the last few centuries, thereby opening up avenues for engaging in a decolonial mode of thinking.

At this point, it is important to unpack the complexities inherent in the idea of the *anthropos*. In this argument, the term '*anthropos*' negotiates the diverse and divergent connotations assigned to it in posthuman and decolonial discourses. Based on Rosi Braidotti's argument, I primarily use the term *anthropos* synonymously with human. Her argument posits the "*anthropos*" in terms of its "species specificity", which has recentralised its position as "the representative of a hierarchical, hegemonic and generally violent species" (65; italics in original). This violent species has subalternised the nonhuman entities which frame the world's ecological matrix. That does not mean that I am unaware of the colonial connotations of this term. While the *anthropos* stands for the human species in general, in Eurocentric colonial discourse, it takes on added connotations. According to Walter de Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, in this discourse, the *anthropos* stands for the lesser category of humans, inferior to the *humanitas*. The *humanitas* was a category created to self-define Europeans in terms of intellectual superiority and their physical prowess in commandeering the resources of the environment (Mignolo & Walsh 153). Aware of these complexities, in my argument I primarily consider the *anthropos* in terms of the human species, which is inherently heterogeneous, and not an essentialist category owing to its ingrained socio-economic and political hierarchies. I argue that despite this inherent diversity, in the Anthropocene, a major proportion of the *anthropos* has been culpable for turning a deaf ear to the material-semiotic iterations of the

world. As the *anthropos* ignores these enunciations and continues to relentlessly exploit nonhuman phenomena, a disanthropocentric rethinking of the human is necessary in order to disassemble its privileged exclusivity in opposition to the nonhuman.

This disanthropocentric reading of nonhuman agency is additionally necessitated by the fact that while the *anthropos* has never really been exclusive, the interfaces between the human mind and nanobots and gene editing etc. are further complicating contemporary human and nonhuman enmeshments and increasing the possibility of an enhanced human race. Furthermore, the creation of androids is already auguring the dawn of a *Blade Runner* society, with the rise of nonhumans who replicate enhanced human characteristics. This may very well lead to the implosion of the categories of humans and nonhumans as both cross the boundary between them, thereby becoming posthumans, i.e. creatures coming 'after' what is generally labelled as human. The posthuman is thus placed at the boundary between the human and the nonhuman, the normative and the anormative, thereby providing a space to engage in border thinking which is pivotal in decolonial theorisation. It is for this reason that my argument takes on board Paolo Bacigalupi's novel *The Windup Girl*. This work portrays an artificially manufactured android called Emiko and stresses the continuation of colonial modes of exploitation, even in a posthuman world, thus providing me with a site for a cumulative disanthropocentric re-reading of nonhuman agency and its decolonising potential.

My argument interweaves tenets provided by Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, Walter Mignolo, Elizabeth de Loghrey etc. and enacts border thinking as required by the decolonial thrust of the current project. While I concede that most of the theorists included here are Euro-centric, this does not mean that I am not aware of non-western approaches towards human and nonhuman relations as propounded by thinkers like Zoe Todd and Juanita Sundberg etc., who self-identify as "Indigenous thinkers" (Todd 10). I understand that the posthumanities have re-centralised western humanism while ignoring the efforts of non-western theorists and activists (Todd 9; Sundberg 34) and that the nature/culture split is not a universal fact; however, since the novel under analysis deals with futuristic forms of colonisation that reinforce the nature/culture split, I have, therefore, had to engage with Euro-centric schools of thought regarding this issue.

Decoloniality and Disanthopocentrism: Writing a New Story

The reason why I have proposed a nexus between decolonisation and disanthropocentrism concerns the "mute poeitics" (*Staying with the Trouble* 7)

of nonhuman phenomena that radically undermine the nature-culture binary. Here, the word phenomena does not suggest an entity that has fixed contours; rather, it connotes an entity with a processual ontology that manifests itself its entanglements with other material phenomena (Barad 33). These entanglements interface with diverse material assemblages, thereby establishing the material syntax of the world which has dynamic semiotic potential. The world is not silent, rather it speaks in a material language regardless of whether the *anthropos* pays heed to it or not. This material semiosis of the world is key to developing a "disanthropocentric" approach (Cohen 9) towards reading nonhuman agency in literary texts. This act of reading need not be centred within a human line of sight, it is based on an awareness of the world as an endless textual interplay, endowed with stories (Bartosch 157; Phillips and Sullivan 5) which require an interplay of hermeneutic practices. This hermeneutic play, based on the recognition of the intimacy between the human and the nonhuman, establishes the basis for a disanthropocentric reading of the material world that makes the human *logos* just one component among numerous material semiotic *logoi* that lie outside the human circumference.

In engaging in this theoretical project, I am acutely aware of the hindrances that frame it. I understand that colonisation was predicated on the "decoupling of nature and history" (DeLoughrey and Handley 4), which has remained a potent tool for not only the imperial suppression of many local histories but also a means of exploiting colonised lands at the expense of the indigenous inhabitants, thereby inducing major cultural and geological shifts. For instance, the "ecologically induced genocide" (Crook and Short 299) initiated by the European colonisation of the Americas led to a debilitating socio-economic fallout for indigenous peoples. In many other colonies, biopiracy and bioprospecting have, historically, been complicit in patenting and mining indigenous resources, a practice that still continues through numerous western biotech companies (Mgbeoji 13). This aptly illustrates how European colonisation operated not only via the alienation of nature but also through its dehumanising of some humans, citing their supposed cultural or intellectual primitiveness as an excuse for such discriminatory interventions. While the European enlightenment ethos operated along the lines that 'all humans are equal', in its colonial adventure, it adopted the axiom that 'all humans are equal, but some humans are more equal than others'. Additionally, the semiotics of power, whether imperial, neocolonial or capitalist etc., has always had an impact on the material syntax of the world. Alterations, such as changes to topography and infrastructure, are inscribed on a landscape

even as the socio-political and cultural patterns of the inhabitants shift when imbricated in the *logos* of a dominant power apparatus. This argument echoes Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley's stance that although imperial language (or any other dominant or oppressive power structure) distorts the material articulations of the world, ecology lies outside human political and historical discourses (4-5). The material world is like a textual hard drive on which multiple histories are inscribed. On this hard drive, while some deleted histories may be recovered, other may not. DeLoughrey and Handley further argue that as languages change, their engagement with a landscape can recuperate, albeit partially, its voice and lost history (7). In light of this stance, I argue that this engagement via language operates on the boundaries of inscription and deletion, the human and the nonhuman, as well as across various semiotic registers. Amidst this chorus of voices, the human itself is a compendium of multiple nonhuman phenomena, i.e. an *umwelt*. This transcorporeal notion of the *anthropos* initiates a disanthropocentric reading of the human because the human and the nonhuman stand co-constitutively in a radical immanence. It is this transcorporeal osmosis across multiple material and human modes of expression that further provides me with the groove to connect the de-anthropologisation of the human with the decolonial idea of border thinking, as propounded by Mignolo, because it links with "an epistemology emerging from the places and bodies left out of the line" (92). What Mignolo suggests here is that epistemology is connected with various excluded materialities and embodied forms. These entanglements require not only thinking across national and global histories but also in terms of geological histories of human and nonhuman intimacies. This understanding opens the way to re-read history as a new story which brings Mignolo in alignment with Donna Haraway, who argues that everything is bound in a dense knot wherein boundaries implode. Stories and the material world are also knotted together and materiality itself is "a knot of the textual, technical, mythic/ oneiric, organic, political, and economic" ("A Cat's Cradle" 63) that encourages border thinking wherein universal categorisations stand disbanded. A disanthropocentric reading of the human finds an ally in decolonialism, since both theoretical frameworks disband the supremacy of any embodied form or epistemology via border thinking. This border thinking views all bodies as "storied bodies" (Phillips and Sullivan 5) and the world as a "mélange of stories" that are geological, biological, physical and cosmic etc. (Oppermann 57). Material stories and human destinies do not operate in isolation; they operate as "string figures" (*Staying with the Trouble* 2) that loop and whirl across multiple material and discursive levels, telling stories

together. Developing Oppermann's thesis further, I argue that, in togetherness, this idea of storied bodies can undo the decoupling of nature and history that outlined the colonial venture and initiate a decolonial reading of bodies in terms of human and nonhuman enmeshments.

Cli-Fi and Sci-Fi: Thinking beyond the *Anthropos*

One may, at this stage, rightly question why I have opted to re-think the idea of storied bodies through literary narratives, specifically climate and science fictions with posthuman themes, when this investigation can be conducted within the domain of the sciences. The rationale for choosing cli-fi and sci-fi stems from Bruno Latour's notion that narrative sciences and semiotics grant greater freedom to engage in enquiries regarding "figuration", as they depict how various actors "*do* things" (54-55; italics in original). He adds that owing to their "*pliability and range*", fictional works enable literary theorists to understand the world (Latour 55; italics mine) outside the "scientistic superego" (Guattari 36) as they experiment with multidisciplinary ideas and induce diffractions in the way we perceive the world. The necessity to engage with literary texts is further substantiated by Hubert Zapf, when he states that literature is "a self-reflexive staging and aesthetic transformation of those processes of emergence and creativity that characterise the sphere of material nature itself" (51). Literature establishes the interconnectedness between "natural and cultural forms of creativity" (Zapf 51). Highlighting these interconnections, these works themselves operate as string figures, also abbreviated to SF. Haraway's idea of SF also stands for a number of interwoven notions, i.e. science fiction, speculative fact, string figures etc., all strung together to correspondingly formulate various figurations of the world and how they are read (*Staying with the Trouble* 10). The *anthropos* too is interwoven within these string figures. As the interconnecting knots between the human and the nonhuman change, new con-'figurations' of the world are created, a reading of which is invited by sci-fi and cli-fi. Movies, TV series and works of fiction such as *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* by Philip K. Dick, *The Bionic Woman*, HBO's *Westworld*, Richard Morgan's *Altered Carbon*, the Netflix series *Black Mirror* etc. are just a few of the more popular depictions of such ongoing co-constitutive con-'figurations' of the *anthropos* and nonhuman entities in a posthuman world. The posthuman therefore provides a site for re-positing the *anthropos* as a string figure impearled in an onto-epistemologically malleable world.

At this point some might contest that this democratising disanthropocentric approach that strings the *anthropos* with nonhuman phenomena could provide grounds for exonerating man as the primary damage-inducer in the Anthropocene.

My contestation of this critique is that the deconstruction of the *anthropos* does not exculpate it, rather it opens a means of embedding it amidst "heterogeneous partners … in relational material-semiotic worlding" (*Staying with the Trouble* 13). Establishing this non-hierarchical figuration could have a domino effect that brings down binaries both intrinsic and extraneous to the *anthropos*. It is this interwoven worlding that establishes the thematic substratum of Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl*. Via the idea of nonhuman material agency, the novel foregrounds the precariousness of man-made hierarchies and invites ways to think about decolonising possibilities in a disanthropocentric scenario.

The Windup Girl depicts a 20-second century Bangkok, after an event called the Contraction which witnessed the radical collapse of the petro-economic world order. In doing so, the text raises pivotal questions not only about the human impact on the environment but also on how nonhuman phenomena do things that undermine anthropocentrism. It suggests a future where biocolonialism continues with the colonial and neocolonial legacies of contemporary times. Therefore, the novel's depiction of the posthuman in the form of a windup girl called Emiko raises questions as to what constitutes the *anthropos* in its depiction of "New People" (Bacigalupi 34), like Emiko, who have been created synthetically to serve the human race as servants, soldiers and courtesans. It is the depiction of these "New People" and the genetically modified foods that are created in this 20-second century world that provides grounds for exploring how decoloniality and disanthropocentrism may be linked. These New People operate on kinetic energy stored in "kink springs" (Bacigalupi 6) implanted in their joints. Treated contemptuously as inferiors and non-humans by unaltered humans, they are at times subjected to bestiality. By displaying such inhuman conduct, Bacigalupi's novel reiterates the need to question what it means to be human in terms of the nonhuman Other that is operating as a human substitute. Post-Contraction Bangkok is thus a futuristic depiction of an uncanny valley where the humanness of the human becomes problematic as the human and its nonhuman Other are strung together in a complicated "intimacy" (Morton 132). While some might deride the genres of biopunk, sci-fi and cli-fi as a whole for their imaginative flight, this novel is prescient in its depiction of the outcome of a global ecological holocaust and the plethoric growth of genetically modified edible plants. Cli-fi and sci-fi's "disanthropocentric" tilt necessitates "an ecological project of thinking beyond anthropocentricity" (Cohen 9), thereby producing a new compendium of stories.

Storied Bodies: Undoing the Violence of the *Anthropos*

As human and nonhuman phenomena mutually interact regardless of any human-centred intentionality, they collectively produce new stories. Set in a dystopian future, Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* depicts these material narratives enunciated by variously classified nonhuman phenomena, i.e. the New People and algal baths which are taken as a new source of energy in the absence of petrol. The novel does not merely present the intentional violence perpetrated by the *anthropos* on nonhuman phenomena, such as the physical exploitation and abuse of Emiko, but also the extinction and mutation of the genetic codes of plants and animals that materially and economically impair human society.

Twenty-second century Bangkok is drastically threatened by rising sea waters that are flushed out by huge machines running on kink springs. In a post-Contraction world where there is a dearth of energy, Western societies mine the natural genetic code of plants to generate as many joules of energy as possible. It is a future where Western bio-colonisation penetrates the deepest recesses of nonhuman matter and agency. Genetic calorie companies like AgriGen, PURcal and SOYPro mine the gene pool of organic nature to compensate for the decline in massive energy sources through operatives called "Generippers" (Bacigalupi 7) like Anderson *Sama*. Their aim is to gain access to the concealed stock of genetically undefiled seeds whose "biosemiotic deep structure" (Zapf 53) remains unaltered and undefiled by human intervention. People like Anderson seek a disease-resistant genetic code that could increase their chances of survival in a world marked by increasing ecological precariousness (Bacigalupi 82-83).

In this world of cut-throat competition, algae are experimentally harvested as sources of alternative energy. However, as the experiment goes haywire, not only do the algal baths putrefy, their radically altered "biogrammar" (*Simians, Cyborgs and Women* 74) unleashes a pestilence which claims lives through both death and economic deceleration, thus retaliating against invasively violent human genetic intervention (Bacigalupi 154). These mutant, virulent blooms of algae reflect a restructured material syntax that reacts against human intervention at the genetic level. As humans insert their own hegemonic material grammar within the biogrammar of nonhuman phenomena, the altered material syntax mutates out of control in the form of a plague, consuming human life regardless of rank, race, gender or class.

In such a world, the human no longer remains in control as the algal baths enunciate new material meanings that undermine human supremacy. Since enunciation implies both embodied enactment as well as speech (Deleuze and

Guattari 87-88), the mute poetics of the algal baths and their rogue microbes are not articulated in linguistic or logocentric terms, but in the form of a processual embodied enunciation that continues to change the material configuration of the world. This fact is effectively summed up by Gibbons, a cold-hearted genetic scientist in the novel, in the following words:

> That is the nature of our beasts and plagues. They are not dumb machines to be driven about. They have their own needs and hungers. Their own evolutionary demands. They must mutate and adapt, and so you will never be done with me, and when I am gone, what will you do then? We have released demons upon the world, and your walls are only as good as my intellect. Nature has become something new. It is ours now, truly. And if our creation devours us, how poetic will that be?" (Bacigalupi 233)

It is this untamed mute poiesis of nonhuman phenomena, which Gibbons refer to, that counters the human biocolonial agenda through its material enunciation in the form of a disastrous plague. While humans endeavour to tame and regulate its innate potential, these entities mutate out of control. They display an autonomy which resists being bound by human control. They, thus, speak in a material language that exceeds a logocentric, and thereby an anthropocentric, enclosure. Their virulent material enunciations upend their supposed inaudibility. As people in Bangkok die while the plague goes haywire, the economy of the city collapses. The city, which has barely managed to keep itself safe from rising sea levels, is inundated as people cannot contain the virus. Its economic structures collapse while the plague inscribes a new history wherein the human no longer remains dominant. The violence of the *anthropos*, manifested through its interventions in the genetic realm of algal baths, turns on itself as many humans are wiped out in the plague and the flood.

Through their mutant antics, the material phenomena in the novel depict a nonhuman resistance to the politics of colonialism percolating within their materiality. *The Windup Girl's* Bangkok is characterised by racial hierarchies with genetic mining companies controlled by white men who are prospecting for genetic data to ensure the survival of their people in a world where entire cities such as New York, Mumbai and New Orleans have been wiped out due to human-generated ecological disasters (Bacigalupi 9). From a nonhuman perspective, the destruction of all human bodies is kosher, thereby presenting a materially articulated narrative of resistance to human supremacy. In so doing, nonhuman phenomena create new stories through their material actions which no longer centralise the human. In creating a new history, they function as storied bodies via a semiotic agentic materiality. This 'semiotic agentic materiality' of the rogue

algal baths in the novel extracts both semiosis and agency out of anthropocentric confines and transplants it within nonhuman phenomena by articulating semiosis in terms of a mute poetics that strings together humans and nonhumans in mutual recon-'figurations'. Thus, both microscopic and macroscopic nonhuman phenomena defy their violent silencing. As generippers, i.e. genetic scientists, hack the genetic software of genetically untampered plants such as the unique fruit called *ngaw* and toy with "the building blocks of life" while "Reengineering long-extinct DNA to fit post-Contraction circumstances" (Bacigalupi 63), the novel depicts a material world that is undergoing an unprogrammed mutation that aggressively rebuts human exclusivity.

Material Agency: A Decolonial-Disanthropocentric Being

As the world in *The Windup Girl* experiences a radical material mutation, at the beginning, the novel foregrounds its imbrication within the capitalist mode of exploitation still extant in 20-second century Bangkok before it moves in a disanthropocentric direction that challenges the human biocolonial agenda. Since Capitalism focuses on the production of social signs, syntax and subjectivities that impose a sameness on the subjectivities of all those who are embedded within its jurisdiction, the changes in the material world participate in these Capitalist "semiotics of subjectification" (Guattari 47-48). The collaboration between such semiotics of subjectification and material semiotics is evinced in Emiko, the genetically engineered windup girl. She is posthuman as she stands at the boundary between the human and the nonhuman. As the novel depicts nonhuman agency through Emiko, she allows a reformulation of the notion of "being-in-the-world" (Derrida 51). As her body acts on its own accord, outside her training and biogenetic conditioning, she foregrounds the idea that one cannot 'be' in the world without understanding its ongoing material entanglements. She and her body display different degrees of autonomous nonhuman agency. However, she is not the only entity that has undergone genetic alterations. Food items, seeds and animals like Cheshire cats have all crossed the boundaries of the normative, which is a characteristic feature of posthuman embodiment. All these entities act autonomously via their material articulations, thereby accounting for a polycentric world wherein the anthropocentric world order loses its centrality. These entities allow for thinking about decolonial being-in-the-world in terms of non-hierarchical material enmeshments across the human and nonhuman spectrum. Their enactments allow one to think across the borders of the human and nonhuman wherein not only is the fixity of all categories challenged but their hierarchisation also attains a dubious standing.

Although created as a "toy" (Bacigalupi 106), Emiko complicates the difference between the human and the nonhuman on physical and intellectual, as well as moral and ethical, grounds. What is intriguing about her is that she is simultaneously both human and nonhuman, displaying a plural subjectivity. She was not born but synthetically created in a laboratory and nurtured in a crèche. Her interpellation does not merely take place at the mental level, but is ingrained within her genetic code. Functioning like a failsafe, it is her physical body that is designed to resist any instinct to revolt and to comply with human commands in all their grotesque dimensions. Compliance is ingrained in her material being which lies outside her mental control. The text describes this disparate connection between Emiko's mind and her bodily functions which somatically respond to human demands:

> She is trained to be clinical about such things. The crèche in which she was created and trained had no illusions about the many uses a New Person might be put to, even a refined one. New People serve and do not question. She moves toward the stage with the careful steps of a fine courtesan, stylized and deliberate movements, refined over decades to accommodate her genetic heritage, to emphasize her beauty and her difference. (Bacigalupi 36)

Emiko is an eerie depiction of not only the commodification of human bodies and their denigration within contemporary global capitalism, but also the grotesque travesty of human conditioning and biopolitical control. Her nonhuman mechanical body is the site of macabre rituals of objectification which are reminiscent of the ways in which the bodies of women and slaves have been objectified throughout the ages. However, while spectators relish her humiliation at a brothel, readers recoil because there is something eerily and helplessly human about her. Emiko is an ersatz human being, a string figure suspended between the human and the nonhuman. It is in the inhumanity to which she is subjected that she becomes more than human and the humans subjecting her to sexual abuse become less than human. The novel compels the reader to repeatedly question what being human implies as the inhumanity of the human and the humanity of the nonhuman come face to face. This scene is a powerful articulation of the ontological and epistemological displacements that the ideas of the human and the nonhuman undergo in the uncanny valley. This uncanny valley operates as a diffractive space where ontology emerges as "open" and "not yet fully constituted" (Žižek 921). Here, both humans and nonhumans are string figures whose ontology is therefore never complete. As they evolve and change, their malleability "thwarts every ontology" (Žižek 962) and undermines all hierarchies, thereby engaging in border

thinking between the human and the nonhuman. Therefore, Emiko displays a new "figuration" (*Staying with the Trouble* 51; Latour 54) of what it means to be both human and nonhuman, just like the *ngaw* produces new figurations of plant life and the Cheshire new figurations of felines.

As the novel zooms in on these re-'figurations', it highlights how Emiko's life is complicated by her less than "optimal" body (Bacigalupi 188) which is characterised by her "stutter-stop" movements (Bacigalupi 35), her pore-less skin and her body's tendency to unbearably overheat. However, it is her ability to think that tortures her and places a question mark over her nonhuman standing. She wonders what it would be like "if she were a different kind of animal, some mindless furry Cheshire, say, if she would feel cooler. Not because her pores would be larger and more efficient and her skin not so painfully impermeable, but simply because she wouldn't have *to think*" (Bacigalupi 35; italics mine). It is her ability to think which unnerves the human. As the reader shares Emiko's thoughts, they again find themselves in the uncanny valley, eyeing each other across the space of a paradoxical and unbridgeable similarity, thus disrupting the hierarchies between the biological and the synthetic. She embodies the brutal anthropocentric colonisation of the nonhuman; but when they face each other, the boundaries between the colonised and the colonising humans are blurred. For instance, Emiko's physical helplessness mirrors human physical helplessness in the face of relentless diseases like cancer, pulmonary and cardiac diseases etc.

As Emiko yearns to reach her people who reportedly live to the north of Bangkok, one perceives in her a certain subjective self that is associated with the human and not with a man-made nonhuman. For instance, when she finds out that Raleigh, the owner of the brothel where she is deployed, thought of her as disposable "trash" (Bacigalupi 243) and that he had no intention of sending her to her people, the enraged Emiko's material body overrides its genetic and cellular programming as a reaction against the particularly denigrating and excruciating treatment at the hands of Raleigh and his employee, Kannika. As a result, hidden abilities implanted in her genetic code are activated. Her materiality becomes overwhelmingly agentic. Reacting on its own, her body swings beyond her will into action at an incredible speed, which she herself finds alarming. As she ends up killing most of the people in Raleigh's night club, she is startled to see that the humans, whom she had assumed to be of superior physical strength, were moving too slowly, not realising that she herself was now moving at superhuman speed. Her body reacts in a similar unprecedented manner again when she is escaping the armed police sent by the Environment Ministry. The reader beholds this

windup girl, with her stutter-stop motion, suddenly kimbo-slicing through the air. The biological and physical components of her body are no longer mute and passive as they compel Emiko to exceed the restrictive performative accounts of social functionalism that restrain her basic instinct to act. Emiko thus alters the signifying modalities of the ideas of the human and the nonhuman experience. This is because, through her altered materiality, she constitutes new signs which disrupt the ontological enclosures of the human and the nonhuman. Her body acts autonomously, outside her will and even that of her creators. It no longer remains colonised by an anthropocentric programming but operates of its own accord, following its innate desire for self-preservation. Emiko's body makes the human see itself as a collection of agentic nonhumans that are immanent within it and can even exceed human control, thereby challenging the human sense of superiority. The nonhuman no longer functions as an alien Other, but is bound in intimacy with the human, consequently upending the exclusivity of the *anthropos*. Both share an equal citizenship in a world of open ontology wherein different entities display a being-in-the-world in terms of varying modes of material engagements.

This is further illustrated through the Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) which the people of 20-second century Bangkok rely on for meeting their nutritional and mechanical requirements. The world of genes emerges as the most fecund source for meeting the future nutritional requirements of humans in an ecologically precarious world. While some might deem this to be fanciful, the seed bank hidden by the Thai government is in no way different from the present-day Svalbard Global Seed Vault in the Arctic or the Doomsday Seed Vault funded by Capitalist moguls like the Rockfeller Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, etc. (Engdahl). In a post-apocalyptic scenario, the significance of such a seed vault and the power wielded by its funding agencies and its management, including the Norwegian government, the Global Crop Diversity Trust (GCDT) and the Nordic Genetic Resource Center (NordGen), would be tremendous. *The Windup Girl* clearly presents such a post-apocalyptic world where fictional companies like AgriGen and PurCal (reminiscent of NordGen) are eagerly mining through genetic resources. For them, this seedbank is a potential "gold mine" featuring "Infinite chains of DNA, each with their own potential uses" that could be the key to "extracting answers to their knottiest challenges of survival" (Bacigalupi 82). However, due to human intervention, this gold mine goes rogue as it starts yielding out of control mutant genes of viruses. Matter shows its own agency to suggest more disasters to come and the demise

of old forms of life. Even the holy *bo* tree is susceptible to death, signifying the demise of human beliefs and convictions that have yielded nothing but disaster:

> On one wall, a *bo* tree is painted, the Buddha sitting beneath it as he seeks enlightenment. Suffering. All is suffering…Just another relic of history. The Ministry has artificially preserved a few…All is transient. Even *bo* trees cannot last. (Bacigalupi 159; italics in original)

It is this mercurial materiality that re-historicises nonhuman phenomena by materially rewriting the human present and future. Nonhuman phenomena perform "their own volatile narrative structure … that breaks and sweeps linguistic and national boundaries across multifarious trajectories" (Cohen 158; italics in original). In doing so, the algal baths in *The Windup Girl* ravage the human world as a reaction to violent human biopiracy, thereby re-asserting the sovereign agency of nonhuman phenomena and recuperating the alterity of nature (DeLoughry and Handley 4). The altered material syntax of nonhuman phenomena reflects anthropocentric violence, but it is the same violated syntax that turns on the human, thereby affirming the osmotic proximity between human and nonhuman bodies and also challenging the violence of the *anthropos*. In doing so, these altered phenomena articulate new stories that re-configure the notion of being-in-the world from a material perspective. By reflecting this altered materiality as a mode of resistance to anthropocentric violence, the novel leads to the inference that being-in-the-world is complicit with the idea of being-of-the-world in the material sense, where all human and nonhuman phenomena share an inter-subjective consciousness of varying degrees that rebuts the idea that nonhuman phenomena are passive. This is illustrated through the genetically altered species of cats, ironically termed Cheshire cats,

> Hock Seng has heard that Cheshires were supposedly created by a calorie executive—some PurCal or AgriGen man, most likely—for a daughter's birthday. A party favor for when the little princess turned as old as Lewis Carroll's Alice.
>
> The child guests took their new pets home where they mated with natural felines, and within twenty years, the devil cats were on every continent and *Felis domesticus* was gone from the face of the world, replaced by a genetic string that bred true ninety-eight percent of the time. (Bacigalupi 27; italics in original)

As the genetic code of domestic cats is altered to generate a new breed of predatory scavenging felines, they induce a shift in the food chain, replacing domestic cats with a breed that embodies rapacious desire and an open ontology that resists being controlled or tamed by human design. This open ontology reflects a mode of existence at the borders of the normative and anormative. It foregrounds

a world of many modes of articulation, each engaged in a conversation which brings it in line with a decolonial mode of being which, too, is conversational and thrives in a world where multiple voices abound without centralising any.

However, as the text unveils the agenda of Western biogenetic companies that were engaged in relentless bioprospecting to control Bangkok's resources, it also dismantles the centrality of a normative human body via the idea of open ontology which is the focus of the last scene of *The Windup Girl*. In their efforts to save their seedbank as well as to escape the ravages of the plague unleashed by companies run by white men like Anderson, the Thai government sanctions the flooding of Bangkok. As the kink springs of the water pumps fail to hold back the waters, the material agency of the water enacts a resistance to both political and biocolonial modes of exploitation which centralise the needs of white men like Anderson. Ironically, as people attempt to escape the flood, moving to higher areas, Emiko stays behind not only to nurse Anderson, her saviour, but also to avoid persecution. For her, all biological people are equally cruel regardless of racial differences. Many years earlier, her Japanese owner had abandoned her (Bacigalupi 189), yet he and Anderson had been the only two men who had ever been kind to her. Through her kindness towards Anderson, the text de-essentialises colonisers like Anderson. It humanises them, particularly in its portrayal of Anderson who suffers like the other Thais and Chinese people in Bangkok. The plague remains colour blind as it takes its toll across the racial spectrum. White and non-White men stand equalised as their bodies equally fall prey to the plague. The plague unleashed by the algal baths defies the Euro-American capitalist *logos* which is predicated on the exploitation of its Others, human or otherwise. The material retaliation against this exploitation by the algal baths collapses racial boundaries while extracting the materiality of the world from an externally imposed sense of muteness and passivity. At the conclusion of the novel, the material world speaks whereas the human world is distinctly silenced.

In this soaked up city, a new irruption takes place when the physically challenged creator of windups, i.e. Gibbons, appears on the scene. On seeing Emiko leading a peaceful existence outside the social order, he recognises the evolutionary potential of Emiko and tells her that the New People could be the new human race, further breaching the boundary between the human and the nonhuman. He knows that Nature is a constant evolutionary narrative with people, both Old and New, integrated within its material processes. Being-in the world is also a being-of the world, as he states

> "Nature." He makes a disgusted face. "*We* are nature. Our every tinkering is nature, our every biological striving. We are what we are, and the world is ours. We are its gods." (Bacigalupi 229; italics in original)

The nonhuman Other is thus extracted from its alterity and yet the same Other is autonomous in its ability to go beyond human calculations. The quoted extract suggests that Being, for both humans and nonhumans, is thus to be defined as being-of the material composition of the world. It is a processual, transcorporeal border existence across categories. Not only does Emiko no longer remain confined within the enclosure of the nonhuman, Gibbons' plans for the future already posit her as the New Eve engendering a new race. People might question how an android could conceive since infertility remains one of her material specifications. Gibbons has an answer to that as well, as his futuristic goals aim to subvert the reproductive roles of both male and female bodies:

> He sighs. "I cannot change the mechanics of what you already are. Your ovaries are non-existent. You cannot be made fertile any more than the pores of your skin supplemented."
> Emiko slumps.
> The man laughs. "Don't look so glum! I was never much enamored with a woman's eggs as a source of genetic material anyway." He smiles. "A strand of your hair would do. You cannot be changed, but your children—in genetic terms, if not physical ones—they can be made fertile, a part of the *natural world*."
> Emiko feels her heart pounding. (Bacigalupi 339; italics added)

What Gibbons' claim elucidates is not merely the fact that the posthuman version of the human can create a radically transformed human race, but that the nonhuman could easily transform the very idea of the human, thereby disbanding its exclusivity. It is in this manner that the text holds up Anthropocentric exclusivity to critical scrutiny as nonhuman phenomena, in collaboration with human intentionality, radically alter the biogrammar of life itself. Nonhuman phenomena, through their material semiotic enunciations, do not merely defy the alterity imposed upon them through anthropocentric discourses, but also redefine human embeddedness within the material world. In doing so, while the novel challenges the violent silencing of nonhuman phenomena, it also enables one to re-think the idea of the 'human' in a manner that does not reinstall anthropocentric exclusivity. Some might contest that, through Emiko, the novel alters the definition of the human in substituting her as the New human, thereby re-instating a new form of Anthropocentrism. However, what cannot be refuted is that, in opening up the idea of humanness as an open-ended category, the text presents Anthropocentrism as a malleable category from which the nonhuman cannot be radically excluded. In addition, the novel also revises the term 'natural',

as indicated in Gibbons' claim quoted above. While Nature has traditionally been used in terms of a nature/culture binary, where nature is a conglomerate of all nonhuman phenomena, Gibbons' vision of a natural world is a rewriting of nature where humans, both synthetic and biological, normative and anormative, exist in mutually co-constitutive string figures that thwart fixed ontologies. Nature is no longer opposed to culture but is a material-being-in-the-world, where disanthropocentric translations across human and nonhumans are made possible. This does not only de-anthropologise humans but also undoes the nature/culture split that has been the product of various colonial ventures since the fifteenth century to the contemporary era of bio- and neo-colonialisms. Euro-centric colonial ventures have generally placed nature outside culture. However, the blurring of the boundary between the human and the nonhuman via transcorporeal exchanges and posthuman alterations does not only undo the human/nonhuman binary, but the nature/culture split as well, thereby aligning it with the decolonial project that investigates how the filing away of nature as an excluded category has led to its exploitation due to its transformation into a natural resource and a commodity (Mignolo 12-13). Additionally, decoloniality is also concerned with an "epistemic delinking" (Mignolo 54) with systems of thought that have yielded discrimination and exclusions. Since the disanthropocentric reading of man proclaims the enmeshment of the human and the nonhuman and contests anthropocentric discrimination and exclusions, it too is an act of delinking from the epistemology that has proclaimed the superiority of the human since the Enlightenment, thereby aligning itself with decoloniality. Since epistemic delinking leads to "re-existence", i.e. the sustained effort to reorient our human communal praxis of living" (Mignolo and Walsh 106), a disanthropocentric reading of the human as offered by narratives like *The Windup Girl* proclaims a reorientation of the praxis of living wherein humans and nonhumans collectively formulate a non-hierarchical and inclusive communal aggregate.

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