



## Representation of Nature in Italo Calvino's short story "Mushrooms in the City"

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He noticed something unusual near the stop, in the sterile, encrusted strip of the earth (1).

So says Calvino in the story entitled "Mushrooms in the City". The protagonist Marcovaldo has just left his home for work one morning as an unskilled labourer when his skilled eyes notice the landscape with some unusual natural growth in the usual, familiar space. This familiar space was an industrialized Italian city that under the newfound economic system transmuted into a metropolitan space. The phrase "noticed something unusual" makes the representation of Nature<sup>1</sup> travel from the outer landscape of this industrial city to the inner landscape of his mind, affecting and eliciting major issues of concern around Oikos<sup>2</sup>.

Calvino provides his protagonist with eco-awareness, the quality of "seeing" unusual things, and the moment of seeing follows the reproduction of smaller and larger patterns of Nature amid city life. The narrator here uses "mushrooms" as a narrative stratagem to highlight the game of survival in the representation of landscape. The story depicts landscape as an experimental space to bring out the deeply embedded experience which has been placed and replaced under the adaptation procedure in the newly formed metropolis. The conflict between Marcovaldo's experience of the natural subjective space and the modern capitalist state's attempt to regulate the experience is ubiquitous in Calvino's short stories. This conflict, however, makes conspicuous Marcovaldo's imaginative and creative power to transcend efforts put by the capitalist world to control the lives of the city dwellers.

Calvino maps the geographical/outer landscape and the social/inner landscape conditioned by ethical values, in unique ways that resist other efforts which can deny the status of the subject to Nature. The narrator's description of the natural world assigns to it indomitable power and works against the capitalist state's efforts to produce mechanical lives, spaces or organise perfect structures. Mushrooms here make a virtue of being seen, by evolving in particular fissures, to warn the subjects of the city that they are unpleasant and poisonous, thereby deconstructing the organisation imposed by the capitalist world.

The geography of their sprouting becomes very relevant in the story as the cracks in the floor become symbolic of the modern and postmodern human mind-set and appetite. The cracks

<sup>1</sup> The choice of the female pronoun for Nature with a capital 'N' has been influenced by Carolyn Merchant's essay, "Nature as Female", plus Nature represented in the story here, communicates with the humans in various forms which provide her with personified abilities

<sup>2</sup> The word has its roots in the ancient Greek culture and in this paper it refers to the inhabited house, and the surroundings.

represent the loss of the living system that supports us, which leads one to the tragedy of modern life where one has the appetite but no digestion. Literature here takes a mimetic role when it represents the aspects of real-world stylized ideology away from transparency, and the responsive environment as a full-fledged subject. The geography of the place where the mushrooms sprang up becomes the landscape of memory, ancestry and death as the unusual growth astounds Marcovaldo who hitherto did not see the wilderness in that region, which was at walking distance from his place.

This amazement gives Marcovaldo his kind of mind comprising of the inner and the outer landscapes. The glimpse of the mushrooms supplies his existential dilemma with a new ray of hope and expectation and occupies his mind to later turn it absent in the thoughts of the silent mushroom. On the one hand, he is bewildered by the sight of the silent mushrooms while, on the other, he subconsciously decides to “own” the wild by keeping it a secret even from his own kids, whom he considers capable of spreading the birth of the wild in the city. The idea of taming the wild comes from America’s vision which made the wilderness of the old world look decidedly tame, but Nature has got no control limits and this is made apparent by Calvino.

Marcovaldo who tries to control the limits of the natural somehow becomes the perpetrator of the individual exploitation of the natural subject. Ownership leads to control and decree while the unowned natural subject here makes apparent the desire to over-exploit nature, fear and jealousy in the hearts of the city dwellers. Hence, the subjective element in Nature makes its own conditions and turns the recourse to Nature into a challenge. The recovery of the premodern natural wild in the modern world with its own terms and conditions comes with fatal repercussions visible by the end of the story. The paradigm shift from the appreciation of natural beauty as a subject to the idea of ownership reveals everything that is wrong with the modern world.

Calvino’s work appeared when the modernist movement was at its height, and literary writers were recording the rise of capitalism as a dominant, social and economic force. In his work Nature is not marginalized, rather she empowers the status of individual who comes into contact with her, and this empowerment is associated with the experience of Marcovaldo. But does he realise this empowerment? Throughout his short stories, Calvino shows an interest in the effects of experience one encounters when one comes into contact with the subjective element of Nature and its workings. Hence, the mushrooms that perfected this technique help the reader re-experience and re-visualise country in the city in one’s imagination thereby eliciting the drama of settling effect in the modern city by replacing it with eco-consciousness in the citizens, and generating fluidity of space that accommodates Nature on her terms and conditions. The element makes the experienter travel through modernised space, and feel the presence of lost Nature.

In this context, it becomes vital to understand the role of mushrooms and their function within the larger modern and postmodern life. Mushrooms make their place in the mind of city dwellers as an inhuman element, whose absence is habitually presumed. That is why the sense of mushrooms in the present makes its mark on Marcovaldo’s memory forever. For example, Marcovaldo says “in a week’s time we will be eating mushrooms, that’s a promise” (2). On the smaller pattern, the mushrooms represent an enchanted epiphany<sup>3</sup>, the one Dana Phillips talks about in his essay “Expostulations and replies”, and an imaginary site that connects to nostalgia due to its conversion and reduction on the larger mechanistic pattern into utility from the natural. Hence such growth of wilderness in the city astonishes Marcovaldo, but due to lack of experience, and inculcation of capitalist cultural ideology in real life he fails to understand that the main essence of such wilderness lies in its inclusion into the city, and not in its consumption.

<sup>3</sup> The word *epiphany* derives from the Greek word *epiphaneia* ‘appearance’.

This interactivity between inclusion and consumption, between landscape and mind, includes all thinking things which later give rise to new inflexions associated with the mushrooms. Here his mind passively receives the wilderness whereas the modern landscape exposes the political workings of the world and its pettiness. Here, Calvino overturns the common idea of wilderness as submissive and disrupts the typical objective associations of Nature by the modern world. The narrow idea that wilderness can be tamed brings forth such repercussions by the end of the story which appears avoidable. The sentence “so that discovery which had promptly filled his heart with universal love, now made him wildly possessive, surrounded him with jealous and distrusting fear” (2-3), draws attention to the issues of hysteria and ownership, along with self-sufficiency taught by fascist food politics. He fails to recognise his moment of contact with the mushrooms as the conflation of one living body with another living wild body. He fails to see the natural creation as a creation with its own intrinsic value, not just any prefabrication for human use and sets a boundary between the manmade and the natural.

In Calvino’s fiction experience, subjectivity and contact become a source of power for Nature, which eventually gives power to the individual, who experiences Nature internally as well as externally. His fiction helps constitute one’s sense of Self in Nature and becomes a means of resisting homogenization by hierarchical environmental structure, structure which strangulates the very pulse of the organic landscape and Nature that breathe life into this illusionary structure.

In the story, “spring” season in the commencement distinguishes between the sensitive Nature receptive souls, that receive the unusual gifts of Nature which come in the form of winds from far away, the wild regions, and the mechanistic urban souls that see the pollens from other lands as mere Other<sup>4</sup>. The mushrooms as subjects make themselves visible only to Marcovaldo who fits into the former category of aforementioned people, though tainted by the workings of the modern capital world to some degree, and arrest his gaze despite the presence of the mechanical outer landscape. He recognises the wild subject within the objective world and other aspects of this wild subject, for instance, “the yellowing of a leaf, a feather trapped by a roof tile, a wormhole in the plank, a fig peal squashed on the sidewalk” (1). Hence, this ecology makes him ponder over the changes of season, the transient nature of his existence, and its woes. The natural subject, ecology heightens Marcovaldo’s senses who can feel the romantic affiliations with Nature in the capitalist mechanical world.

The rhetoric of representation raises various concerns relevant to ecology, binaries of objectivity, subjectivity, anthropocentrism, and flora/fauna centrism. This representation rises from experience which is involuntary at first but turns voluntary, just to make sense of the natural world and its workings in the modern world. Representation here is a product of a conscious and aesthetic act, a pursuit to construct the subjective identity of Nature. Mushrooms have been represented as independent entities, and Calvino gives meaning to this independence by erasing the degree of predictability in the mushrooms as edible stuff and raises the question of authenticity in the wilderness. This subjective aspect of the mushrooms due to which mushrooms made themselves available at a particular fissure in the city engenders the desire for contact in Marcovaldo, who dragged this desire to the issue of ownership of the wild. He notices the local Nature in the city in the form of mushrooms but later their absence is superseded by their disturbing presence at that place, and in order to check the reality of this wilderness he finds it necessary to own and consume it.

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<sup>4</sup> According to Edward Said, the Other is everything that lies outside of the self and is strange. In ecocriticism the process of Othering makes the humans deprive the nonhumans and the natural environment of their intrinsic worth.

Marcel Proust's<sup>5</sup> concept of involuntary memory is epitomized by the line in the story, "he explained ecstatically beauty of numerous species, the delicacy of their flavour, the way they should be cooked" (2). Marcovaldo hypnotized by the presence of mushrooms cannot seem to control the thoughts related to them, and involuntarily, yet realistically feels their beauty and delicacy. Here Proust's involuntary memory enhances the experience with Nature and privileges spontaneous experience over deliberate efforts. But ironically in the end Marcovaldo ends up at the hospital and moves back and forth in memory of when he first saw the mushrooms till he consumed them. This nostalgic memory is a result of drastic cultural change in the modernist world in the twentieth century, when manmade technology caused drastic variations in the recordings of climate and weather.

In this story mushrooms by transmuting themselves into poisonous stuff get back at man, and his mechanistic world view which caused the modification in the natural world and contaminated natural vegetation. The loss of the natural world, especially pre-modern natural vegetation, represents huge cultural change. Technology contributed to the growth of fascism, totalitarianism, and capitalism, and has also altered our understanding of the subjective aspect of Nature. There is a disturbance of equilibrium in the modern world and for Marcovaldo this disturbance becomes visible when he is food poisoned along with other city dwellers and is forced to go to the hospital.



<sup>5</sup> Marcel Proust, was a French novelist, critic and essayist. He coined the term involuntary memory in his work, In Search of Lost Time or Remembrance of Things Past. The concept of involuntary memory evokes remembrances of the past without any conscious effort.

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