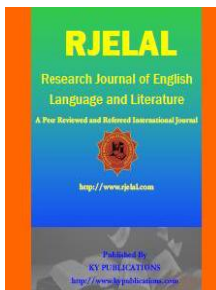




THE CHANGING WORLD OF ITALO CALVINO: A POSTMODERNIST STUDY OF *INVISIBLE CITIES*

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ABSTRACT

Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* is the most perfect embodiment of Postmodernism's rejection of a definite structure with a fixed and determinable centre as its sole organizing principle. Keeping in tune with the defining principles of Postmodernism, *Invisible Cities* presents before us a few cities (as described by Marco Polo to Kublai Khan) which persistently defy a coherent and binding structure so as to become a vehicle of a constantly evolving structurality. Undergoing an intermittent process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, the cities constantly remain in a dynamic tension between its original form and the persistently evolving ones in a way that they are constantly in the lookout for a form which, however, is never achieved. *Invisible Cities*, in the end, presents before us a world that is constantly in the flux, accepting plurality in place of a unitary principle of perceiving the world, and striving towards a persistently unstable and chaotic mess instead of a coherent and stable existence.

Key Words: postmodernism' deconstruction, signifier, signified, form, antiform

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Italo Calvino is undoubtedly one of the most prominent postmodern writers of twentieth century. Ihab Hasan, in his book, *The Postmodern Turn*, has succinctly demonstrated the difference between Modernism and Postmodernism by juxtaposing the features of Modernism against their correspondingly contrasted features of Postmodernism. Some such contrasts are: "Form/Antiform, Purpose/Play, Hierarchy/Anarchy, Totalization/Deconstruction, Centering/Dispersion, Signified/Signifier" (qtd. In Woods 60). A careful look at the above contrasts highlights one of the defining features of Postmodernism, i.e., Postmodernism defies unified entities like form, structure, stabilization and totalization etc. and augurs a world

where there is no stability, no definite structure, but only constant flux, replacements and repetitions.

French philosopher Jacques Derrida, in his phenomenal essay, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," makes a similar move by destabilizing the definiteness of any structure by dismantling its very centre. What Derrida lets us know is the indeterminacy of the exact positioning of the centre which previously was considered to be a fixed entity containing in itself the very core and defining principle of the structure. The typical Derridean destabilization of the centre leads to the automatic implication of the instability of the very structure itself.

What becomes evident from the above discussions is that in the postmodern condition of existence, a stable and definite structure is an impossibility. Rather, the Postmodern world offers us with a scenario where any structure is always in the flux thereby constantly undermining the concepts of fixity, definiteness and stability associated with itself. In this context, Italo Calvino's novel *Invisible Cities* seems to be the most suitable demonstrator of this typical Postmodern feature of the fluidity of structure by presenting before us many cities (as described by Marco Polo to Kublai Khan) that are clearly lacking any definite structural pattern. Based on these precepts, this article seeks to establish how Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* presents itself as a typical Postmodern text by thoroughly defying the notions of fixity previously attributed to any structure in the world.

The description of the city of Ersilia in the chapter "Trading Cities . 4" espouses the indefiniteness of structure to the fullest extent. The fleeting appearance of the city of Ersilia is established when we come to know that the inhabitants of the city keep changing their positions constantly inside its premises. First, they symbolically express human relationships "of blood, of trade, authority, agency" through "white or black or grey or black-and-white" (Calvino, *IC* 68) strings. However, when the number of strings become too much and their labyrinth too complicated, they dismantle their houses and build them elsewhere and weave similar labyrinths of strings there too. After the saturation of the labyrinth, they shift elsewhere and build another city. Marco Polo describes: "Thus, when travelling in the territory of Ersilia, you come upon the ruins of the abandoned cities, without the walls which do not last, without the bones of the dead which the wind rolls away: spider-webs of intricate relationships seeking a form" (Calvino *IC* 68). What is suggested especially from the last part of Polo's statement is that the city of Ersilia is constantly in the lookout for a form or for a definitive structure for itself which, nevertheless, is never achieved. This reiterates the fact that in the Postmodern realm of existence, a definite form or structure is always an impossibility.

In the city of Melania, however, we notice a different type of instability of structure where the city life keeps on wavering constantly amongst continually evolving social structures. In Melania, we observe a continual replacement of positions occupied by different people participating in an endless dialogue going on in the city. For instance, we find initially that "the parasite," "the procuress" and "the miserly father" have been replaced by "the braggart soldier," "the amorous daughter" and "the foolish servant" whereas in a second phase of replacement in due course, the latter group is also found to be replaced by a new group comprising "the hypocrite," "the confidante," and "the astrologer" (Calvino *IC* 72). Noticeably, what is obtained here is a series of replacements and reshufflings thereby making a constant, coherent and a definite structural pattern implausible. Apart from this, the frequently shifting nature of the roles ascribed to different people of the city adds further insight to the dismantling of definite structurality. We are informed that "a sole person . . . simultaneously take[s] on two or more roles—tyrant, benefactor, messengers" whereas on the other hand, "one role . . . [is] doubled, multiplied, assigned to a hundred, a thousand inhabitants of Melania" so that the city has "three thousand for the hypocrite, thirty thousand for the sponger, a hundred thousand king's sons fallen in low estate and awaiting recognition" (Calvino *IC* 72). Moreover, it is also observed that "As time passes the roles too, are no longer exactly same as before" (Calvino *IC* 73). Evidently, the prominently noticeable aspect of the city is that the structure of its social life is not a stable one, but something that is always in a state of flux. What we notice in Malenia therefore is a thoroughly decentered social life of its citizens where no fixed rule or pattern or center is there to govern the same in a definite pattern. On the contrary, a constantly shifting pattern of social life is observed in the city of Malenia. The impossibility of finding a fixed position or center in this city is in concurrence with French philosopher Jacques Derrida's rejection of a centered structure (as discussed in his essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences"). The rejection of a fixed centre (in a structure)—whose

job, of course, was to “orient,” balance, and organize the structure” (90)—culminates in the Derridean declaration that “Centre is not the centre” (90). The impossibility of forming a centered structure finally culminates in “the free play of the structure” (90). We observe a similar free play of structure of the social life in the city of Melania.

The description of the city of Olinda in the chapter “Hidden Cities . 1” makes further explications of the constantly changing structure of the city. While looked at initially, Olinda seems like a tiny point (like the head of a pin) whereas, when looked through a magnifying glass, it reveals within itself “the roofs, the antennas, the skylights, the gardens, the pools, the streamers across the streets, the kiosks in the squares, the horse-racing track” (Calvino *IC* 117). However, a year later, the tiny point enlarges into “the size of half a lemon, then as large as a mushroom, then a soup plate” and finally becomes “a full size city, enclosed within the earlier city” in a scenario where this new city keeps forcing “its way ahead in the earlier city” and pressing it “toward the outside” (Calvino *IC* 117). The point is that there is the constant evolving of new Olindas from the fragment of the previous Olinda and the process keeps on continuing endlessly thereby dismantling and modifying the pre-existing structure of the original city of Olinda. Such transgression of a fixed boundary justifies what Tim Woods calls “postmodernity’s desire for fluidity of boundaries” (15).

The chapter “Continuous Cities .1” adds another dimension to the dismantling of structurality. In Leonia, we find that the city expels ‘waste’ that keeps on accumulating and gets soldered into a huge pile at the outskirts. And finally, a situation comes when this waste gets toppled back into the city through a cataclysm and thereby changes the preexisting structure of the former. The narrator describes the situation as: “A cataclysm will flatten the sordid mountain range, cancelling every trace of the metropolis always dressed in new clothes” (Calvino *IC* 103). However, after all this happens, the city goes through the same process of expelling and accumulating ‘waste’ at its outskirts that invade the city thereby changing its structure once again. Hence, this intermittent process of

expulsion, accumulation and the return of the “waste” in the city, works like an unending cycle that prevents a single structure from solidifying into a definite one.

The description of the city of Sophronia in the chapter “Thin Cities . 4” adds further insights to the fleeting nature of structurality. We come to know that Sophronia is made up of “two half-cities” where “one of the half-cities is permanent” and “the other is temporary” (Calvino *IC* 55). However, it is interesting to note that we are not correctly informed about which one is permanent and which one is temporary. What is discernible from the picture is that there are two structures available before us: one, a permanent one and the other, its fleeting counterpart in a scenario where there is constant inter-transference and reshuffling between them so that the fixity of any permanent structure gets constantly undermined and nullified.

Entering the premises of the city of Eutropia in the chapter “Trading Cities . 3” concretizes the experience of the fleeting nature of structurality. We get a glimpse of the ephemeral structure of the city of Eutropia when then narrator introduces the city in the following lines: “When he enters the territory of which Eutropia is the capital, the traveler sees not one city but many, of equal size and not unlike one another, scattered over a vast rolling plateau. Eutropia is not one, but all the cities together; only one is inhabited at a time, the others are empty; and this process is carried out in rotation” (Calvino *IC* 56). Evidently, Eutropia is not one but many cities where people, after getting saturated with one kind of life-style in one city, move to another and experiment with another life-style there. Noticeably, the city keeps on shuffling its internal social organization into various combinations—an act that resembles the movement of players on the chessboard.

Thus the city repeats its life, identical, shifting up and down on its empty chessboard. The inhabitants repeat the same scenes, with the actors changed; they repeat the same speeches with variously combined accents; they open alternate mouths with identical yawns. Alone, among all the cities of the empire, Eutropia

remains always the same. Mercury, god of the fickle, to whom the city is sacred, worked this ambiguous miracle" (Calvino *IC* 57).

What becomes evident from the above statement of the narrator is that the city of Eutropia does not have a fixed and totalitarian structure, but has a structure that is constantly changing, modifying and reshuffling itself. The city is therefore able to achieve a flowing and endlessly shifting structurality through a series of recurring repetitions and replacements.

The chapter "Cities & Names . 4" is arguably one of the most powerful demonstrators of the ongoing theme of discussion, i.e., the fleeting nature of structurality. At the outset, the city is presented to us in the following lines: "Clarice, the glorious city, has a tormented history. Several times, it decayed, then burgeoned again, always keeping the first Clarice as an unparalleled model of every splendor, compared to which the city's present state can only cause more sighs at every fading of the stars" (Calvino *IC* 96). Clarice, as is evident from the narration, constantly undergoes a process of destruction and reconstruction in which the structure of the city gets constantly modified and reshaped. As further evidence of the changing nature of the city, we come to know that Clarice is first "emptied by Plagues" in its "centuries of decadence" and in a subsequent act of revival, it is "populated again" even though the newly emerged city is full of "huts and hovels, festering sewers, rabbit cages" and the people are "swarming like rats" (Calvino *IC* 96). Startlingly though, the narrator immediately reveals before us again: "And yet, almost nothing was lost of Clarice's former splendor; it was all there, merely arranged in a different order, no less appropriate to the inhabitants' needs that it had been before" (Calvino *IC* 96). From the descriptions of the intermittent repetitions of destructions and reconstructions, it is made clear that structure of the city is always in a flux, between the previous order and the newly emerging one.

As another evidence of these continual changes, modifications, reshufflings and repetitions in the city of Clarice, the narrator informs us how the city keeps hovering constantly between its

newly emerged form and the remnants of its old form in a scenario where neither the old nor the new structure completely prevails. First the narrator presents before us the completely newly emerged city of Clarice in the following lines:

The days of poverty were followed by more joyous times: a sumptuous butterfly-Clarice, emerged from the beggared chrysalis-Clarice. The new abundance made the city overflow with new materials, buildings, objects; new people flocked in from outside; nothing, no one had any connection with the former Clarice, or Clarices. And the more the new city settled triumphantly into the place and name of the first Clarice, the more it realized it was moving away from it, destroying it no less rapidly than the rats and the mold. Despite its pride in its new wealth, the city, at heart, felt itself incongruous, alien, a usurper (Calvino *IC* 96-7).

With a narrative twist, nevertheless, the narrator informs us that that even in the completely newly formed Clarice, "shards of the original splendor . . . had been saved" and 'preserved under glass bells, locked in display cases, set on velvet cushions" (Calvino, *IC* 97). The scenario is explicated more profoundly by the narrator when we come to know from him that "More decadences, more burgeoning . . . [follow] one another in Clarice" (Calvino *IC* 97) whereas on the contrary, we are also informed by him that "Each new Clarice, compact as a living body with its smells and its breath, shows off, like a gem, what remains of the ancient Clarices, fragmentary and dead" (Calvino, *IC* 97). Evidently, Clarice is not able to eschew the old structure completely and assimilate to a completely new one; neither it is able to stick to the old one completely eschewing the new one thereby hovers uncertainly between the old and the new structures. Hence, Clarice becomes a symbol of change between the 'old' and the 'new' hovering like a pendulum between their intermittence and repetitions. In the continual process of shifting, comingling and reshuffling of its objects, Clarice becomes no more than a flowing structure fitting into new and constantly evolving permutations and combinations. The narrator

therefore declares: "Only this is known for sure: a given number of objects is shifted within a given space, at times submerged by a quantity of new objects, at times worn out and not replaced; the rule is to shuffle them each time, then try to assemble them. Perhaps Clarice has always been only a confusion of chipped gimcracks, ill-assorted, obsolete" (Calvino, *IC* 97).

It must be emphasized here that the shifting structurality of the city of Clarice resembles the same of "rhizome" (a concept innovated and explored by French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari). Rhizome, as explained by Deleuze and Guattari, does not possess a fixed structure; rather a shifting structure that is in a perpetual dynamic tension between fixity and transgression. Deleuze and Guattari explain: "Every rhizome contains lines of segmentarity according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed, etc., as well as lines of deterritorialization down which it constantly flees. There is a rupture in the rhizome wherever segmentary lines explode into a line of flight, but the line of flight is part of the rhizome" (10). Evidently, the city, like a rhizome, keeps itself moving in the dynamic tension between the original structure and the newly evolving ones that keep thwarting the former which of course tries to prevent the newly evolving ones from transgressing its confinements. This involves an intermittent process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization of its continuously flowing, changing and evolving structure.

It is also noteworthy at this juncture that city of Clarice not only undergoes continual changes, modifications, shifting, reshufflings along its physical space, but also along the temporal line as we observe that there is also a frequently changing dynamics established between past, present and future where the chronological barrier between them is dismantled and they are made to fuse into each other in a single temporal line. In the fleeting temporal structurality of the city, the past retains itself in the present whereas the future is also constructed in the present. Gilles Deleuze is of the opinion that past, present and future do not have separate temporal structures; rather, they mingle in

a single plane of "repetition of instants." He explains:

Time is constituted only in the originary synthesis which operates on the repetition of instants. This synthesis contracts the successive independent instants into one another, thereby constituting the lived, or living, present. It is in this present that time is deployed. To it belong both the past and future: the past in so far as the preceding instants are retained in the contraction. The past and the future do not designate instants distinct from a supposed present instant, but rather the dimensions of the present itself in so far as it is a contraction of instants. (91)

Thus, Postmodernism constitutes a world that is constantly in a flux not only physically, but also temporally. Reminding us of the shifting nature of the postmodern world, Joseph Natoli says: "Postmodernism allows us no still point, no center, and no place to rest. The center is everywhere. The life-world is in motion with respect to almost everything, not only in the present but in the past and in that part of the future that is constructed in the present. The self is not outside the flux or at the still center, nor is consciousness peering into the foundation of things, of the world. We are inside the flux" (239).

The city of Irene in the chapter "Cities & Names. 5" is similarly attributed with a symbolic fleeting structure where the city provides different appearances for different onlookers from different positions. We come to know that the city is a "different city" for those "who are standing in the midst" (Calvino *IC* 112). Moreover, the narrator informs us: "For those who pass it without entering, the city is one thing; it is another for those who are trapped by it and never leave" (Calvino, *IC* 113). It must be emphasized here that the continually changing shapes and appearances of the cities in the novel are nothing but a revolt against fixity, rigidity and sameness towards a wholehearted acceptance of plurality, differences and flux. Lawrence Cahoon quite rightly points out: "thus, if anything is fundamental to the postmodernist, it could be difference (difference in Derrida's terminology), the

production of differences, underwritten by no unitary agency or origin" (10).

It must be mentioned at this juncture that all the cities described by Marco Polo to Kubali Khan are the truest manifestations of Postmodernist architecture that promotes flux, pluralism and diversity instead of the singularity or unitariness of a definitive structure. Endorsing the diverse nature of Postmodern architecture, famous architect Robert Venturi writes: "I am for messy vitality over obvious unity [in architecture] . . ." (16). According to him, architecture should "evoke . . . many levels of meaning and combinations of focus" (16).

Famous Postmodern architect Charles Jencks, in his highly influential article "Post-Modernism Defined," talks about this endorsement of plurality by postmodern architecture of which Calvino's invisible cities seem to be the truest manifestations. Giving the examples of the endorsement of plurality in the writings of many other postmodern architects, Jencks writes: "If one reads the writings of obert venture, Denise Scott Brown, Christian Norberg-Schulz, or myself, one will find the constant notion of pluralism . . ." (116).

In the final analysis, Calvino's *Invisible Cities* typifies the Postmodern and Poststructural theme of the instability of structure. The cities described by Marco Polo to Kublai Khan, as is seen in the novel, do not have a definite structure; rather are always in the flux where they achieve a dynamic structurality through continual changes, modifications and repetitions. It can be said in the end that Calvino's *Invisible Cities* is an exemplification of typical Postmodern writing.

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