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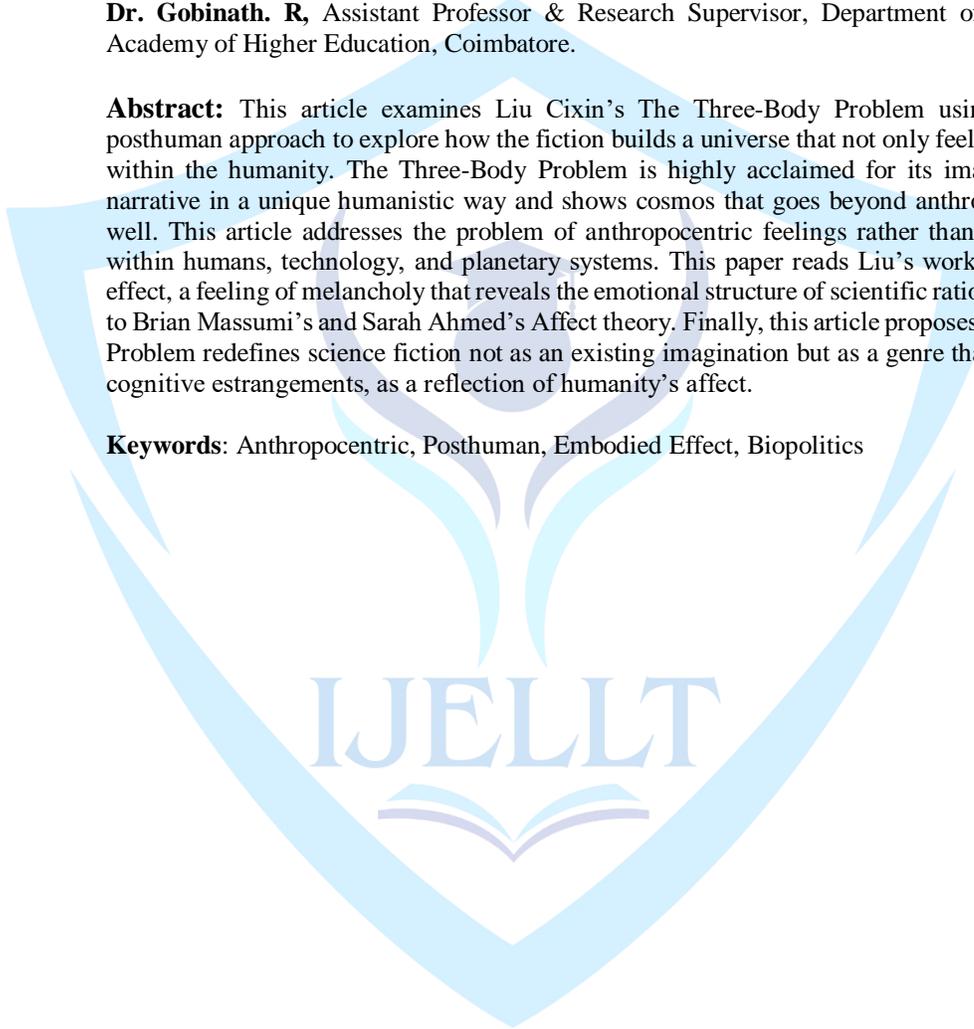
Cold Universe, Warm bodies: Embodied Affect in The Three-Body Problem by Liu Cixin

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Abstract: This article examines Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* using affect theory and posthuman approach to explore how the fiction builds a universe that not only feels emotion but holds it within the humanity. *The Three-Body Problem* is highly acclaimed for its imaginative, sensational narrative in a unique humanistic way and shows cosmos that goes beyond anthropocentric feelings as well. This article addresses the problem of anthropocentric feelings rather than emotions circulating within humans, technology, and planetary systems. This paper reads Liu's work as a form of cosmic effect, a feeling of melancholy that reveals the emotional structure of scientific rationality, with reference to Brian Massumi's and Sarah Ahmed's Affect theory. Finally, this article proposes that *The Three-Body Problem* redefines science fiction not as an existing imagination but as a genre that extends biopolitics, cognitive estrangements, as a reflection of humanity's affect.

Keywords: Anthropocentric, Posthuman, Embodied Effect, Biopolitics



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Introduction

The science fiction genre is a testing ground for narrating imaginative scientific concepts and explorations that go beyond the human. Unlike many Western science fiction works, Chinese science fiction tenaciously focuses on different themes and theories. It tends to emphasize survival and historical continuity, reflecting deep social and philosophical connections to Chinese tradition. Nowadays, Chinese science fiction continues to expand by offering innovative perspectives that challenge mainstream global science fiction works.

Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* (2008) gave the world an exemplary view of technology, the cosmos, and humanity's future through its narrative background. This fiction explores identity, the power of government, existing scientific theories, technological research, environmental crisis, and the tension between tradition and new modes of thought. *The Three-Body Problem* narrates a mixture of science, politics, and cosmic imagination. It is the first volume of a trilogy that shows humanity's effort to understand an alternative form of civilization. It also depicts humanity's feelings as they face the emptiness and indifference of the universe. This article argues that *The Three-Body Problem* transforms the universe into a system of feeling, where hidden politics and large-scale ideas produce a world of affect that goes beyond rational explanation but still binds people through the fragility of human emotion.

This article finds that affect theory offers an effective critical lens, as it holds that emotion is not a feeling inside the mind but a flow of intensity that moves across bodies, technologies, and ecologies. Sara Ahmed states, "emotions are not simply something I or we have; emotions are what move us ..." (Ahmed 2011).

In recent times, interdisciplinary research has further highlighted the correlation between speculative fiction and affect theory. Elizabeth De Freitas and Sarah E. Truman refer to it as a "methodological force", through which speculative fiction enables readers to experience non-human ecologies of feeling through the vitality of matter, offering a way of approaching realism through affective phenomena in a physiological register.

However, the cold universe is not experienced in emptiness; it is perceived through warm bodies, through the actions of humans and other species in the universe. Affect theory addresses pre-cognitive and visceral forces, providing a crucial framework for understanding embodied affect. This article works within posthumanist theory to examine how the limitations of humans are eroded by environmental trauma and technological obsession, while affect theory elaborates the cost of undermining human emotional and physical states.

The Cold Universe: The affective turn, environmental trauma, and anti-anthropocentrism

Liu Cixin's is the most notable architect of the motif of the Cold Universe. His work is marked by a focus on scientific totality and a cold-minded rejection of traditional humanistic patterns, while assuming the existence of a cosmos that is fundamentally indifferent to human values. This study states that the universe is an aggressive vacuum in which survival requires the direct annihilation of any other life form, rendering the universe a predatory and silent cosmos.

In *The Three-Body Problem*, the progression toward posthuman or anti-anthropocentric ideology is often framed as a form of cold logic, but it should instead be understood as an intense emotional disruption, rooted in environmental trauma and political violence. The character of Ye Wenjie is the primary catalyst for this transformation. Her witnessing of the Cultural Revolution and ecological devastation is the consequence of her "madness". This transformation occurs when Ye Wenjie encounters deforestation carried out by chainsaws ("steel locusts") and experiences a visceral response as she feels the earth shaking beneath her. Human embodied affect manifests through her response to an interplanetary signal as a form of non-human activity. This moment in the text reflects ecological violence in relation to political violence against humans, through the destruction of the environment.

The application of affect theory in this study connects directly to the provocation of posthumanist thought. Ye Wenjie explores the idea that the material foundations of humanity and evil are indistinguishable. She believes that only intervention from an outside world can bring significant change to Earth. This belief reflects how technological inventions become destructive forces to both humans and nature. The warm human body is rendered toxic, producing a desire for cold alien intervention to purify humanity. According to the character Mike Evans, "Equality is a moral concept," one that must include other species, such as non-humans (Dories 18).

While Liu Cixin's writing indicates a relationship with posthumanism, it also suggests a belief that strong emotional attachments to non-human beings tend to result in the development of a form of cold misanthropy toward the human race, as such relationships can ultimately culminate in a sense of the annihilation of humanity. As shown in Liu's writing, extending compassion and concern to non-human entities tends to displace ethical attention away from humanity.

Technological Embodiment

Unlike illustrative virtual worlds, Liu Cixin's virtual world emphasizes that people still experience sensation physically. In essence, Liu's virtual reality experiences transfer "haptics" (the use of technology to provide feedback about real-world interactions) to create a connection between humans and the virtual environment, enabling them to realize the conditions experienced by interplanetary species. As one critic explains, "These technological tools are a VR suit, which is also described as a haptic feedback suit, and a panoramic viewing helmet ... the suit allows players to experience both physical sensations, such as a punch, and temperature changes" (Steiner 62).

This VR suit has two purposes: to enable players to experience the "realism" of the simulation, allowing them to feel the Trisolaran "Cold Universe" physically, and to demonstrate the role of direct experience in shaping affective and posthuman impressions, such as pain, heat, and cold, as the primary means of understanding what it means to be truly encountered by the Trisolaran.

To illustrate the interference of the Trisolaran "Cold Universe" into Wang Miao's "warm body," as described above, the novel presents a visceral physical manifestation of this invasion when Wang begins to see the countdown timer embedded in his vision. The countdown timer is not a hallucination but rather an alteration of Wang's body by alien forces, which use his biological eye as a screen for the transmission of cosmic data. This countdown timer becomes a physical component of Wang's existence, representing the intrusion of non-human elements into his own body. Through this experience, the study emphasizes that many individuals perceive their transition toward posthumanity as an experience of "madness" or as a profound violation of bodily integrity.

For Wang Miao, high technology is present in a directly physical form, while for Ye Wenjie and Mike Evans there is a primarily emotional embodiment. The way each individual engages with industrial technology and its associated discourses determines how high technology is embodied within them. For Ye Wenjie, psychological trauma resulting from the Cultural Revolution leads to her transformation and, through her visceral response to the industrial technologies of deforestation, to the realization of that transformation.

The chapter entitled “Silent Spring” begins with the cutting down of a “large Dahurian larch,” during which Ye Wenjie feels “the Earth quake” (Liu 23). As one critic observes, “Her company wielded hundreds of chain saws like a swarm of steel locusts” (Dories 5). This moment is not merely descriptive; the physical trauma produced by the machinery of deforestation is registered through Ye’s body, creating a direct connection between ecological violence and the political violence she experienced during the Cultural Revolution. For Ye, these two forms of violence are ultimately indistinguishable from one another.

Technological advances in the oil industry similarly generate environmental destruction, which profoundly shapes Mike Evans’s life and worldview. Evans states that the moment he first saw “the eyes of those drowned birds” was “the day he became radicalized.” The ecological damage caused by the oil industry produces toxic bodies, and such environmental harm generates a radicalized vision of the world in which all living beings are rendered equivalent. Evans’s experience with industrial devastation therefore leads him to adopt a biocentric, pan-species communist philosophy.

Dories compares Evans’s biocentrism and anti-human philosophy with Peter Singer’s ideas in *Animal Liberation*. Unlike Singer, who advocates equality based on the “moral” principles of human beings, Mike Evans extends this concept to an extreme that ultimately endorses misanthropy. Unlike Singer, Mike Evans believes that saving an individual bird from extinction is equivalent to saving an individual human being from extinction; as a result, he develops a belief system in which both forms of salvation become interchangeable (Dories 64).

Eventually, both Evans and Ye develop philosophies that hold the human body to be fundamentally corrupt and therefore in need of purification through the total annihilation of the species. While their respective philosophies encourage empathy toward the non-human, they can be understood as producing the opposite ethical effect for humans: through radicalized empathy, they arrive at the conclusion that human extinction becomes not only acceptable but desirable.

Conclusion: The Persistence of the Bug

Affect theory and posthumanism intersect to reveal an ambivalent vision of the future articulated by authors in Chinese science fiction. For example, Liu Cixin illustrates a “Cold Universe” structured by anthropocentric narcissism, in which humans are reduced to a mere “bug” within the greater cosmic order. He employs narrative novelties such as alien contact and virtual reality to destabilize the coherent human subject and construct a world in which emotion appears to have no place.

On the other hand, the characters’ “warm bodies” do not allow affect to disappear entirely. Ye Wenjie’s tears fall for the forests, Mike Evans gazes into the eyes of dying birds in an act of radical biocentrism, and in the work of Chen Qiufan, laborers experience visceral pain both from acts of pollution and from witnessing its consequences. These affective experiences remain the primary lens through which posthuman conditions are registered and understood.

This analysis thus argues that posthumanism is not concerned with transcending the body but rather with the radical recontextualization of embodiment. Affective involvement compels the human subject to acknowledge its interconnectedness with non-human entities, including trees, birds, aliens, and toxic waste. The ultimate metaphor for the embodied subject of the New Wave is the insect, which compresses the human subject to the point of near eradication, where it can exist only as a bug. Finally, this article concludes that while the “Cold Universe” governs existence through mechanical indifference, the endurance and affective persistence of the “warm body” ultimately determine the deepest and most fundamental level of meaning.

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