

OBJECTS AS QUASI-HUMANS: NAVIGATING THE WORLD OF OBJECTS

ASHIK A

Department of English,
University College, Thiruvananthapuram
Corresponding author: aashik2497@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the conceptual framework of viewing objects as quasi- humans, examining the intricate relationships and interactions that unfold within the realm of Object Studies. Delving into the intersections of anthropology and literature, the paper investigates how attributing human-like qualities to objects shapes our perception of the world. By unravelling the nuanced dynamics between humans and objects, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the intricate tapestry woven into our daily lives, where the boundaries between the animate and inanimate become increasingly blurred.

Keywords: material culture, object studies, subjectivity, objects, things, quasi-human.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is not just that we live in a time of pronounced growth in the sheer number of things, or that we, as

humans, have recently come to delegate our lives to non-humans far beyond anything imagined by our ancestors (Fowles 11)

Our lives are meaningless without the interactions we have with our surroundings, which in turn are moulded by countless objects. In the intricacies of contemporary society, the relationship between humans and objects has transcended conventional notions of utility, evolving into a phenomenon where objects assume quasi- human characteristics. This paper delves into the conceptual framework of viewing

objects as quasi-humans, aiming to unravel the intricate tapestry woven within the realm of material culture. It explores the world they create and the myriads of stories they want to convey. As we navigate the intersections of anthropology, philosophy, and design, our exploration seeks to understand how the attribution of human- like qualities to objects significantly influences our perception of the world. Throughout human history, objects have held profound significance beyond their practical utility. From ancient artifacts to modern consumer products, humans have invested meaning in objects, making them integral to cultural practices, rituals, and identity formation. Even though these attributes vary based on monetary and social values, each and every object holds importance in clenching the world together. This historical perspective sets the stage for our inquiry, prompting an examination of how these age-old relationships have evolved and adapted to the complexities of the contemporary world. The significance of this study lies in its exploration of a nuanced aspect of human-object interaction that goes beyond the conventional understanding of material culture. By acknowledging and scrutinizing the quasi- human attributes bestowed upon objects, we gain insights into the intricate web of relationships that define our daily lives. This investigation is crucial in a world where the boundaries between animate and inanimate are becoming increasingly blurred, urging us to reconsider the nature of our connections with the material world.

2. OBJECT TURNED SUBJECT: AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Anthropology, as the study of humans and human societies, provides a rich lens

through which we can unravel the intricate tapestry of object-human relationships. Objects have been integral to human existence since time immemorial, serving not only as tools for survival but also as vessels for cultural expression and identity. Anthropological evidence across diverse cultures reveals a deep interweaving of objects into daily life, highlighting their symbolic, ritualistic, and social significance. From prehistoric artifacts to ancient religious relics, the historical context of object-human relationships unveils the evolving ways in which humans have attributed meaning to the inanimate. But, when and how did anthropologists turn toward objects to understand the human world? American anthropologist Severin Fowles in his essay titled *The Perfect Subject* (Postcolonial Object Studies) explores the beginning of learning object artifacts in light of anthropology.

To put it bluntly: as it became more and more difficult for Western scholars to make authoritative claims about other people, as colonized or otherwise disempowered communities throughout the world challenged the right of anthropologists to study them, and as critical scholarship continued to pick and scrape at the imperial legacies bound up in the ethnographic project itself – in other words, as human subjects increasingly protested against being treated like objects – anthropologists began to explore the advantages of treating (non-human) objects like (quasi-human) subjects. Things have the advantage of being safer to study than people, and my argument is that they have been increasingly embraced, at least in part, for this very reason. (Fowles 12) American anthropologists of twentieth century turned towards objects when they could no longer study

the non-western subjects. Their gaze turned towards the objects, turning them in quasi humans, objects turned subjects, since it was easier and safer to study than live human subjects.

One of the central facets of anthropological perspectives on objects lies in the realm of rituals and symbolism. Objects often become conduits for cultural practices, embodying sacred meanings and participating in rituals that bind communities together. Whether through totemic artifacts, ceremonial objects, or everyday items infused with symbolic value, the anthropological exploration of rituals unveils the profound role objects play in shaping communal identity and belief systems. Material culture studies

offer a comprehensive framework for analysing the significance of objects within societies. This interdisciplinary approach delves into the tangible artifacts, from the mundane to the extraordinary, to decipher the layers of meaning embedded within material objects. By examining how objects are produced, exchanged, and consumed, material culture studies provide insights into the socio-economic, political, and cultural dynamics that influence the creation and interpretation of objects. Anthropological perspectives come alive through case studies that illuminate the diverse ways in which different cultures engage with objects. The study of ancestral artifacts among indigenous communities unveils a deep connection to heritage and ancestral spirits. Similarly, the examination of religious artifacts in historical civilizations reveals the intricate relationships between the divine and the material. These case studies serve as windows into the anthropological exploration of object-human relationships, showcasing the nuanced interplay between culture, symbolism, and daily life. While anthropological perspectives provide valuable insights, they also present challenges. Cultural biases, ethnocentrism, and the

limitations of interpreting past societies pose hurdles in fully grasping the complexities of object-human relationships. However, these challenges open opportunities for reflexivity and critical engagement, encouraging anthropologists to navigate cultural nuances with sensitivity and acknowledge the evolving nature of these relationships over time. The anthropological exploration of object-human relationships contributes significantly to our understanding of the human experience. By unravelling historical contexts, decoding symbolic meanings, and examining material culture, anthropological perspectives provide a holistic framework for comprehending how objects shape and reflect human societies. This knowledge is crucial not only for academic inquiry but also for fostering cultural understanding and preserving the rich tapestry of human heritage. Transforming and accepting objects as quasi-humans enabled the anthropologist to study real humankind. From the ritualistic practices that bind communities to the symbolic richness embedded in everyday objects, anthropology provides a lens through which we can appreciate the intricate connections between humans and the inanimate. As we delve deeper into the anthropological exploration, we gain not only a historical understanding but also a nuanced comprehension of the diverse ways in which cultures have engaged with and attributed significance to the objects that populate their worlds. Thus turning objects into quasi-humans, archaeologists developed a new discourse of analysing the world of men. A world living understood and studied through the inanimate. Like Severin Fowles stated; Objects emerged, in other words, as anthropology's perfect subjects because, as subjects, they can so easily be objectified. And as objects-turned- subjects-turned-objects we can continue to save, enslave, represent, delegate, denigrate and emancipate them as it suits us.

3. QUASI-HUMAN OBJECTS AND LITERATURE

Literature has long been a mirror reflecting the intricacies of human existence. One intriguing theme that often emerges in literary works is the anthropomorphization of inanimate objects, giving them quasi- human qualities and characteristics. Through the lens of anthropomorphism, authors transform ordinary objects into characters with emotions, desires, and agency, offering readers a fresh way to engage with the world around them. Objects as quasi-humans often serve as powerful symbols and metaphors in literature. They can represent complex emotions, societal issues, or philosophical concepts. The anthropomorphization of objects allows authors to explore and critique human nature uniquely and indirectly. By endowing objects with human-like qualities, writers can comment on society, morality, and the human condition. Objects as quasi-humans also raise profound existential questions about identity and consciousness. The literary exploration of objects as quasi-humans adds a layer of complexity and depth to storytelling, offering readers a fresh perspective on the human experience. Through the lens of anthropomorphism, authors bring the inanimate to life, inviting readers to reflect on the blurred boundaries between the animate and the inanimate. Whether serving as symbols, metaphors, or mirrors of human nature, these quasi- human objects offer a deep world of meaning and interpretation.

4. CONCLUSION

Objects as quasi-human beings blur the traditional boundaries between the inanimate and the animate, challenging our existing beliefs. In this context, the term "quasi-human" suggests a quality of resembling or imitating human characteristics, granting objects a semblance of

life and intentionality. This discourse of understanding and studying objects as human like beings explores areas that have been left untrodden in the past.

In the new era of posthumanism, the discourse of Quasi-human objects holds more weight than ever. Advancements in robotics and AI have propelled objects beyond being mere tools, transforming

them into entities capable of interaction and adaptation. Smart devices, with their learning algorithms and responsive interfaces, exhibit a level of quasi-human intelligence. They anticipate our needs, learn from patterns, and engage in dynamic exchanges, mirroring some aspects of human behaviour. Moreover, the integration of anthropomorphic design elements into everyday objects contributes to the perception of quasi-human qualities. From humanoid robots to virtual assistants with personalized voices, these creations tap into our innate tendency to anthropomorphize, fostering a sense of connection and relatability.

REFERENCES

Appadurai, Arjun, editor. *The Social Life of Things*. Cambridge UP, 1998.

Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Hill and Wang, 1972.

Baudrillard, Jean. *The System of Objects*.

New ed, Verso, 2020.

Brown, Bill. *A Sense of Things*. 2003, <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226076317.001.0001>.

Brown, Bill, ed. *Things*. U of Chicago P, 2004.

Fowles, Severin. The Perfect Subject (Postcolonial Object Studies). *Journal of Material Culture*, vol. 21, no. 1, Mar. 2016, pp. 9–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183515623818>. Harman, Graham. The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer: Object-Oriented Literary Criticism. *New Literary History*, vol. 43, no. 2, Jan. 2012,

pp. 183–203.

<https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2012.0016>.

Heidegger, Martin. *The Thing*. Poetry, Language, Thought. Translated by Albert Hofstadter. Harper & Row, 1971, pp. 161–184.

Hodder, Ian. Thing Theory: Towards an Integrated Archaeological Perspective. *Scottish Archaeological Journal*, vol. 28, no. 2, Oct. 2006, pp. v–vi.

<https://doi.org/10.3366/e1471576707000034>.

Lucas G, Robb J. “The Terrain of Thingworlds: Central Objects and Asymmetry in Material Culture Systems”. *Journal of Material Culture*, vol. 26, no.2, 2016, pp.

219–238.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/13591835211002230>.

Miller, Daniel. *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter*. Taylor & Francis, 1997. Williams, Raymond. *Culture and Materialism*. Revised ed. Verso, 2006.