

The Development of Postmodern Identity in the Characterisation of Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep

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Abstract: This paper shows that postmodern identity is closely related to the image of cyborg in science fiction. Analyzing the environment and characters in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, written by Philip K. Dick, offers a deep understanding of characteristics of postmodern identity, which is unstable, fragmented and changeable. The bleak urban landscape where only few people live presents a post war and high tech world that shares features of postmodernism. Besides, the character John Isidore, who is a special, and many escaped androids are all considered as “others” that should be excluded from the normal society. Hence the dilemma of postmodern identity can be uncovered. To be specific, the android character Rachael Rosen illustrates the fragmentation and reconstruction of postmodern female identity because she is a humanoid robot designed as a woman. Also the combination between a cyborg and a woman gives an insight into the similarities between its identity and her identity. Based on the cyborg theory by Donna Haraway, the criticism by Anne Balsamo in “Reading Cyborgs Writing Feminism” and the postmodern identity theory by Elena Abrudan, the extent to which *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* explored the identity can be disclosed.

Keywords: Identity, postmodernism, feminism, cyborg

1. Introduction

In traditional society, the identity of an individual was determined firstly by his or her biological structure. The difference between male beings and female beings drew a solid boundary, which was gender and further reinforced by patriarchal doctrines phallocentrism, and homophobia. One's role in the society and family remained steady. Thus the traditional identity was stable and integral. However, in postmodern society, with the rapid development of technology, which led to the invention of Internet and the creation of artificial intelligence, the frequent exchange of information awakens the self-consciousness and makes it become flexible. The flowing consciousness crosses boundaries in biology, social structures and attitudes. According to Elena Abrudan, “In a more and more complex world, excessively fragmented and with an accelerated rhythm of renewal, identity becomes more fragile, it loses stability, being always subjected to changes, adjustments.” [1] And Anne Balsamo also stated that: “Identity can only be studied as it shifts, skips, and stutters in different utterances or evocations.” [2]

In the genre of postmodern identity, female identity holds an important status. Since throughout the history of feminist movement, feminists have struggled to grasp the female identity. Some choose to return to the original biological identity. Others believe that the key to female identity lies in the postmodern world. Anne Balsamo has stated that: “A return to origins, the pastoral, or ‘the garden’ is no longer possible.” [2] Cora Kaplan also noted that: “The instability of ‘femininity’ as female identity is a specific instability, pointing to the fractured and fluctuant condition of all consciously held identity, the impossibility of a will-full, unified and cohered subject.” [3] While feminist scholars are trying to offer a comprehensive understanding of female identity, the appearance of cyborg in science fiction novels and films shows a fresh but familiar dimension to explore postmodern identity including female identity. As Donna Haraway pointed out in her essay “A Cyborg Manifesto”, “A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction.” [4] In Balsamo’s words, “Cyborgs are the postmodern icon.” [2] Like the postmodern identity of human beings, cyborgs also cross many boundaries. For example, they break the boundaries between machine and organism. Also without the limit of assumed race and gender, the cyborg identity can achieve more freedom in the construction and reconstruction of “self” and thus more possibilities may be explored. The existence of cyborgs blends reality with imagination, as noted by Anne Balsamo “and this illuminates a crucial dimension of postmodern identity: the fragmentation of subjectivity.” [2]

According to Balsamo, “Both Woman and Cyborg are simultaneously symbolically and biologically produced and reproduced through social interactions. The ‘self’ is one interactional product; the body is another.” [2] The robot character Rachel in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* was programmed as a beautiful woman and given the system of whole memory as a natural female and not until Deckard tested her did she suspect her identity. The boundary between machine and organism has been broken. Hence Rachel represents a combination of female identity and cyborg identity. The mixture is so successful that “Rachel’s well-worn pout and vulnerable sexuality shakes Deckard’s certainty about her replicant nature” [2] Overall, the basic setting where the dust is everywhere and real animals are almost extinct provides the background for postmodern identity. The male character John Isidore lives “alone with the lungless, all-penetrating, masterful world-silence” [5] since he has been diagnosed as a specific being mentally, which marks “a kind of postmodernist identity out of otherness, difference, and specificity” [4]. Furthermore, from the beginning when Deckard felt that owning an electric sheep was a shame to the end when he no longer cares too much about whether the toad is an electric thing, the process of his changing self represents another quality of postmodern identity, which is always flowing and pursues reconstruction. Other characters also display such changes in the story. Therefore, this paper argues that there is much to explore and analyze in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* in the aspects of postmodern identity and female identity by applying the theory of Elena Abrudan in “The Dynamics of Postmodern Identity” and of Donna Haraway in “A Cyborg Manifesto”.

2. Analysis of identity in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*

2.1. The Setting

Although the novel is short, Dick did make full use of language to form the background of a high tech, post war and postmodern world. As Haraway described, “we are living through a movement from an organic, industrial society to a polymorphous, information system” [4]. The “transitions from the comfortable old hierarchical dominations to the scary new networks I have called the informatics of domination” [4] have been fulfilled in this setting on earth, which is divided in three parts.

The first part is the main place where most of normal human beings live and try to maintain the traditional life. But their pet animals are mostly electric and the hero in their main virtual game is

fake, though the designer provides a realistic experience. More importantly, the radioactive dust that always fills the air shows that the world has changed, which has caused the death of most animals and humans. The second part is “in the suburbs where possibly a couple of deteriorated specials, antheads and chickenheads, hang out and go through their versions of living” [5]. In chapters where Isidore appears, the description of his living place sets the tone for himself who belongs to otherness. For instance, Dick wrote that “the uncared-for building itself would settle into shapelessness, buried under the ubiquity of the dust.” [5] Here the image of “Kipple” offers a deeper understanding of this world. In the words of Isidore, “Kipple is useless objects, ... There’s the First Law of Kipple, Kipple drives out nonkipple. ... It’s a universal principle operating throughout the universe; the entire universe is moving toward a final state of total, absolute Kipple-ization.” [5] This bleak and fragile world where no one can see the sun and any star in the sky symbolizes the disintegration and fragmentation of postmodern identity.

The third part is out of those new cities as well as decaying buildings, rather near the border of the state. It is an important place because Deckard, flying here, achieves his transformation of identity from a defender of solid identity who shows discrimination against the other gender as well as androids to a believer in flowing and diverse but still genuine postmodern identities. Another plot twist to make the change more clear and explicit is that he has found a toad and believes that it is a live animal. But flying back home, he learns the truth that it is merely electric like his sheep. However, Deckard accepts it in an almost calm and peaceful mood.

Clearly, the whole setting provides a sufficient postmodern background with different images functioned as symbols for characters to emerge, communicate and develop and thus different characteristics of postmodern identity as well as female identity show up.

2.2. Modern Identity of John Isidore

As Elena Abrudan put in “The Dynamics of Postmodern Identity”, in the postmodern world, “nothing is stable, anything can be subjected to change, can be transformed, renewed, in accordance with the individual’s options” [1]. In such setting, identity becomes fragile, fragmented and unstable. Abrudan concluded “the fact that the disintegration of the subject in a flux of moments that are impossible to tie into a whole is insisted upon, the fragmentarism and discontinuity being characteristic to ... the nature of the individual” [1]. In Chapter two, Isidore felt that “what he had already experienced and what he would eventually experience blended so that nothing remained but the moment, the standing still and resting” [5]. His self is filled with the daze and helplessness. Though it is aimless, rapid interactions in the postmodern world never cease to bring new encounters and stimulus toward individuals. Frequent changes happen and thus the postmodern identity can often make reconstruction.

The break down and the reconstruction of the identity of the protagonist is obvious whereas that of the character Isidore is quite subtle and imperceptible. Since Dick has put much effort in describing the mental state of Isidore before the final change. In Chapter seven, as a driver of the pickup and delivery truck of a hospital to repair electric animals, he picked up a malfunctioning cat. And on the way back, the cat kept groaning so painfully that Isidore tried to fix its battery in its body. However, he cannot find the battery and let it die. What seems horrifying here is that Isidore did not think it was a real cat made of flesh and blood. When dealing with the death of it, he even asked: “Don’t dead bodies decay or something?” [5] His identity represented a numbness and coldness because of mental illness caused by radioactive dust and the solitude of being classified as a special, which is another form of “otherness”.

Only after developing a deeper connection with the female android, Pris Stratton, Isidore began to grow into an empathetic and responsible person. His identity softens. The image of the spider is a symbol. Isidore started to feel empathy for it when its legs were cut by androids. In the end, though receiving the news that the hero he has believed was faked, with the mood of grief, he let it go in the

deserted garden. “But anyhow it was alive; it crept about within his closed hand, not biting him”. [5] By the action of releasing an alive spider, the identity of Isidore completes the process of reconstruction.

2.3. The Female and Cyborg Identity of Rachael Rosen and Her Influence

As Haraway stated in the conclusion of “A Cyborg Manifesto”: “Though both are bound in the spiral dance, I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess.” [4] Because the image of “goddess” is set in a traditional phallogocentric world, where “certain dualisms have been persistent” [4]. For example, female differs from male; virtual world differs from reality; mentality differs from physicality. “They have all been systemic to the logics and practices of domination ... of all constituted as others” [4]. Females, as one part of the “otherness”, have long been victims to the phallogocentric society. However, the appearance of the cyborg in fictional works provides a new insight into the possible future. Though mostly made by imagination, cyborg is a mixed creature, a hybrid of machine and organism, and thus it crosses boundaries built by dualisms. Haraway pointed out that “The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust.” [4] Furthermore, without “false ideals, abide by the traditional family model and believe in heterosexual relationships as a normative life goal ... the cyborg challenges toxic masculinity by reversing the origins of its creators to abolish patriarchy’s cultural dominance and detrimental social practices.” [6]

According to Anne Balsamo, “If the cyborg appears as the embodied image of both an ideological (human) identity and material (technological) reality, then woman’s identity, as much socially and psychologically constructed as it is physiologically and biologically determined, reveals her cyborg likeness.” [2] Since in different cultures, the image of woman has been made as a goddess. For instance, in Chinese culture, there is Chang’e, a goddess living on the moon and denoting purity and loneliness, as well as Mazu, the goddess of the sea. In one of Chinese folktales, *The Butterfly Lovers*, and the adapted opera, *Liang Zhu*, the female character Zhu Yingtai symbolizes chastity and the spirit of fighting against the old dogmas. Similar to the cyborg, woman is “a hybrid creature of fiction and reality” [2]. Therefore, as Balsamo stated, “the cyborg image” can be used “as a cultural image and possible prototype for a feminist re-conceptualization of personal and political identity which embraces, and perhaps, celebrates, the diversity of woman’s identity.” [2]

Then the android character Rachael Rosen in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* offers some reflections on the cyborg identity and female identity. At the first meeting of Rachael and Deckard, her identity was disclosed as a calm and distant woman. Though knowing that she is an android afterwards, Deckard finds her slender body and elegant appearance attractive, especially sexually. After retiring three androids, he is eager to seek comfort from her by having sex with her. As Phil Resch, another male bounty hunter, declared: “If it’s love toward a woman or an android imitation, it’s sex. ... You wanted to go to bed with a female type of android — nothing more, nothing less.” [5] Here the arrogance of phallogocentrism is represented sharply, which gives hints of the fact that female beings have long been simply suppressed and reduced to the object for males to squeeze. However, Rachael is not constrained in the realm of patriarchy, as a fragile female being. From the beginning, her identity combines cyborg and woman, and thus in the relationship with Deckard, she is the one who has dominance, and successfully exerted great influence on Deckard. “‘You’re not going to be able to hunt androids any longer,’ ... ‘No bounty hunter ever has gone on,’ ... ‘After being with me.’” [5] And after Deckard decided to retire the other three androids, Rachael came to his apartment, released his goat and let it die. Her behaviors are out of empathy toward other androids and wrath against Deckard.

The wonder of a hybrid of cyborg and woman sufficiently breaks down Deckard’s original identity and facilitates the process of reconstruction of Deckard’s identity, which is “a steady, unwavering index of Rachael Rosen’s achievement” and “her victory over him” [5]. Hence Deckard starts to

recognize the existence of empathic emotions of androids, which overthrows the righteousness of his test. He develops a new identity that crosses the boundary between organism and machine and thus he feels empathy to all beings, even if some are electric things. In the end, he shows no perplexity. "She had what seemed to her a reason. An android reason, he thought." [5]

3. Conclusions

Several characters, John Isidore and Rachael Rosen, representing the postmodern identity, and specifically the cyborg identity and female identity, show that their features, fragility, unsteadiness, and changeability, lead to many possibilities in an individual's experience. Identity can achieve reconstruction. What's more, female identity is able to defy the oppression from patriarchal social power when fusing with cyborg. The boundary of male/female, mind/body and organism/machine can no longer be the driving force to consolidate male domination. On the contrary, the "otherness" plays an important role in constructing the postmodern world. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* fully explores the identity and opens up a new way for later works to discuss more varieties of postmodern identity, particularly different female and cyborg identities.

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