

Androids as Refugees and Migrants in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

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Abstract

Philip K. Dick is an American science fiction writer known for his ability to subtly critique the defects in the socio-political schema and its consequences on society. Especially in his post-world war narratives he has simulated a picture of a devastated real world and highlighted various issues which include the ones that have gained prominence in our times: displacements, migrations, and dislocations that impact humans by contributing to their heightened levels of alienation and anxiety. The present essay studies the fate of androids in Dick's 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* to show how it is like that of Refugees/migrants of our world, which helps to understand the impact of displacement and dislocation on their inner and outer worlds and their deep human resonances which triggers the core conflict of the novel.

Keywords: Androids/humanoids, Oppression, Psyche, Survival, Empathy.

Introduction and Related Research Work

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? is a dialectic work of science fiction by Philip Kindred Dick, published in 1968, in which on the surface level he raises several basic questions about our existence like: who are we, what makes us human and highlights the effects of technology which in the future the writer projects would become an integral part of our existence so much so that it would blur the boundaries between real and artificial. Various critics and researchers within the genre and outside have over the years commented on these themes directly or indirectly, imagining the kind of bearings the ideas knitted and scenarios painted in the narrative would have on our real lives if implemented because of the pragmatic nature of the genre. Jill Galvan in his dedicated piece in *Science Fiction Studies* named "Entering the Posthuman Collective in Philip K. Dick's." (1997) describes the novel as highlighting the awakening of the posthuman subject because of the immense involvement of technology in the life of its human characters leading them to skepticize their own identity. On the same grounds, Christopher A. Sim explores the dehumanizing effects of individualism in the post-apocalyptic dystopian world of the novel on its residents and demonstrates how technology can be used to reclaim the essence of humanity in "The Dangers of Individualism" (2009). Diving deep into the novel are critics like Tony M. Vinci and Sherryl Vint who believed that the study of the depiction of the ersatz animal is a must and central to the overall understanding of the novel and its encoded characterization so explored it in "Speciesism and Species Being (2007) and "Posthuman Wounds: Trauma, Non-Anthropocentric (2014) respectively. Nigel Wheale in "Recognising a 'Human-Thing'" (1991) studies the case of Androids and tags them as a human thing because their manufacturing and the abilities fed tell a lot about the human's socio-political psyche, emotionality, and sanity. Though critics have commented on various themes in the novel from technical

to metaphysical to religious, exploring the lives of the Androids/humanoids as that of Refugees/Migrants has not been discussed. Giving their role in introducing the central conflict of the novel, and their behavior as a reflection of the displaced people who are trying to adapt to the new country makes this aspect worthy of discussion.

Discussion and Findings

The novel is set in the future year 1992 when most of the populace and livestock have been wiped out by a nuclear war named World War Terminus. Since the planet has become inhabitable, most of the survivors, the ones unaffected by the radioactive elements in the atmosphere, have migrated to another planet along with their humanoid companions. In the opening part of the novel, its protagonist Rick Deckard is introduced as a bounty hunter (a skilled person who pursues and captures a fugitive and is rewarded for that) who has been assigned with the mission of retiring six humanoids: Max Polokov, Luba Luft, Garland, Pris Stratton, Irmgard Baty, Roy Baty who have escaped the Mars colony and taken refuge on the earth to stay safe.

The humanoids have been designed under the migration program of the government, right from the time of the breaking out of the war. They represent their most advanced model, for they come very close to mimicking human intellect, emotions, expressions, and reactions and are an improvement on their predecessor T-14 created by Rosen Association, and W-4 created by Grozzi Corporation. This model, developed by the Rosen association, is named Nexus-6 because it has the nexus-6 type brain unit which has “two trillion constituents plus a choice within a range of ten million possible combinations of cerebral activity.” (23) That makes them capable of selecting the most apt response from the millions of pre-programmed human responses in various socio-political situations. Developing such human-like companions had become necessary to ensure that migrating humans have some company and feel at home in the colony. They are like humans in their intellect and their looks too, so much so that natural human beings cannot easily make out the difference between the real and the artificial.

The humanoids as mentioned were developed to accompany and serve humans just like humans as per the colonization program of the US government:

“Under UN law each migrant automatically received possession of an android subtype of his choice... The TV set shouted, ‘-duplicates the halcyon days of the pre-Civil War Southern states! Either as body servants or tireless field hands, the custom-tailored humanoid robot-designed specifically for YOUR UNIQUE NEEDS, FOR YOU AND YOU ALONE- given to you on your arrival absolutely free, equipped fully, as specified by you before your departure from Earth; this loyal, trouble-free companion in the greatest, boldest adventure contrived by man in modern history will provide-’...”(12-13)

But the humanoids being naïve initially didn’t understand the connotations of the word ‘serve’. To humans, they were still machines under the human skin without any self-respect, ego, and rights. Humans could ask Androids to serve them in any way: physically, emotionally, or sexually which was fair enough as per the intent of their creation. But for Androids they were no less than humans as were made that way. They perceived themselves as equivalent to humans or even better than them. Because with everything they can do like humans, they were not susceptible to mental and physical degradation like humans, which is prevalent as the aftereffect of the nuclear holocaust in society. So, the actions of the humans registered as atrocities and persecution to them hence, they escape with the motto to never return and lead a good life on Earth. These reasons underlying their flight grant them the status of a refugee and migrant as per the United Nations High Commissioner’s norms of being one.

As per UNHCR a refugee is: “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion.... being outside the country of his former habitual residence is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.” and a migrant is defined as someone who generally moves out of the country by choice to have a good life. So, the humanoids in the novel fulfill the criteria to be both refugees as well as migrants. Although UNHCR deems them different and hence are dealt with differently on the surface, studies show that the inner struggles and turmoil for both after entering the new country or the host country are the same. One such elaborative study was compiled by Binnie Kristal-Andersson after conducting twenty-five years of research in understanding the psyche of refugees and migrants and published it in *Psychology Of The Refugee, The Immigrant and Their Children* (2000) wherein she lists various factors which develop the viewpoint of the above-mentioned for the host country.

A refugee’s or migrant’s thoughts, behavior, and emotions for the host country (a planet, in this case) are formed and molded by the kind of experiences they have as individuals and social beings while living. These are reflected in their actions at work, in abiding by the rules and responsibilities of an ideal citizen, and the overall respect for its socio-political practices. In her psychological analysis, Kristal-Andersson enlists landscape, climate, culture, people, race, and political and socio-economic situations, as pivotal external factors in forming the inner world of a human refugee and lays down six factors that help to understand their inner world, which are: states of being or mind, adaptation cycle, childhood experiences, relevant background information, reason, and transition-related conditions. The researchers state that a refugee is always in one or the other state of being or mind among the seventeen; feeling like a stranger, missing, longing, separation and loss, sorrow, language degradation, inferiority, a sense of non-identity, prejudice, loneliness, guilt, shame, rootlessness, bitterness, suspicion and feeling like a scapegoat and is innate to each one of them. The adaptation cycle sees how long the refugees have settled in the host country and how well they have adapted to it. Then comes the childhood experiences which look at the kind of life they have led as children because though subjective, these early experiences add tangents to their present behavior. Next comes the relevant background information, which includes information on gender roles, socio-political, cultural, and racial environment from the age of arriving in the host country and before that. The fifth aspect is the reason for fleeing or emigrating, and the last is the transition-related conditions that are generally of three categories: previous homeland experiences of oppression, atrocities of war, violence, losses: the traumatic experiences accompanying them, and experiences in the new country, like waiting for permission to stay, and others mentioned in point number one.

Interestingly, the factors stated above that influence and shape the inner world of a human refugee, does so to the humanoids in the novel as well. Before escaping their mental status was compromised, they were bitter towards their home planet and scared of persecution. They wanted to escape their situation and have a normal life like humans as the protagonist Rick mentions in these lines and is apprehensive of the fact that:

“Do androids dream? Rick asked himself. Evidently; that’s why they occasionally kill their employers and flee here. A better life, without servitude. Like Luba Luft; singing Don Giovanni and Le Nozze instead of toiling across the face of a barren rock-strewn field. On a fundamentally uninhabitable colony world.” (145)

After arriving on earth, they first experienced the joy of being surrounded by people, which made them feel alive. But their joy vanished when they found that the socio-political dynamics and rules of the planet were different for them than that of humans. On Earth they were seen neither as superior beings nor as technical innovation, but as lowly, lifeless, and worthless entities meant only to be shot dead whenever

and wherever detected by the bounty hunters using the Voight-Kampff apparatus (captures reflexes in eye muscles and capillary reaction which is different in empathths than the ones who are not, when asked questions on social situations and wellbeing). The Kampf test was set up to separate them from humans at every barricade as they had been living under disguise. The triviality of their existence is clear from the fact that ordinary humans were not even aware of their being around.

This awareness of their condition on earth adversely affects their state of mind and is like that of human refugees who are not accepted in the host country. Like them, they too experience a whole gamut of emotions; they feel lonely, traumatized, and compelled to fight varied identities which arouse feelings of suspicion and bitterness towards the host planet and invariably turn them into rebels. The humanoids face two disappointments. First, they were exploited by their masters on Mars ruining their faith, afterwards when they escaped to the earth to seek refuge, they were treated as outcasts.

The heightened level of alienation and trauma triggers several bitter emotions like anger, annoyance, and hatred towards the humans especially bounty hunters: “ ‘Well, they had this investigator, this bounty hunter,’ Irmgard said in agitation, ‘named Dave Holden.’ Her lips dripped venom at the name.” (123) In the influence of these emotions and the struggle to protect themselves and establish their identity, they start killing bounty hunters whenever they became skeptical of them.

This act of murder is deemed inhumane by the earthlings which was the direct consequence of the absence of the principal emotion of “empathy” (which is the token of being a human in the novel). Although emotionally they are more active than the humans of the novel, but they lack ‘empathy’ Their actions in the novel show their lack of empathy toward humans and animals who are left few post-war: John Isidore is the only human in the novel who considers them humans and hides them in his house to safeguard their lives, but the leader of the group Roy Baty plans to kill him. Another android Pris kills the only living spider adored by Isidore only to see if it can crawl on four legs because she thinks that eight legs are of no use and chops them off one by one. In yet another incident, Rachael (android) kills the protagonist’s pet, an electric sheep, by pushing it off the roof even though Deckard had saved her life. Because post-war all types of animals big or small are swiped out hence the remaining living and artificial animals are cherished more than the living humans as having an animal means that one is alive, healthy, and empathetic. The humanoids knowing the importance of empathy try to experience a similar group experience with the help of fusion drugs but fail, which makes it clear that no matter how hard they try, they cannot possess this emotion. So, they opt the other way and try to undermine the concept of empathy by sabotaging its only propounder and practitioner Wilbur Mercer, (whose sole purpose is to re-establish order in the world, invoke faith among humans, and make them rise and rebuild their lives together amidst the crisis) with the help of Buster Friendly, a propaganda show run by humanoids declaring Mercer a fake.

Androids’ escape from their home planet to live free, their sufferings after arriving on the host planet, their depiction of several emotions while adapting, their failed attempt to experience empathy and their constant efforts and struggles to establish themselves as equal to humans not only makes them a refugee/ migrant but makes them more human than the humans in the novel. This resemblance at first triggers the core conflict of the novel as the protagonist on various occasions gets confused about the fact that who is the real human? Who is the android? :

“In that elevator at the museum, he said to himself, I rode down with two creatures, one human, the other android...and my feelings were the reverse of those intended. Ofthose I’m accustomed to feel– am required to feel.”(114)

And second, reflects on the condition of refugees/ migrants.

Being a post-war narrative writer Dick's this 1968 work captures the essence of how the world looked post wars, during the cold war, and most importantly gives a good insight into the mental state of the people who got displaced in massive numbers because of these wars. The humanoid refugees went through the same inner turmoil as the human refugees and migrants post wars as was discussed previously in Kristal's work. Today, after more than twenty years of her work the treatment of refugees/ migrants is the same as it was then. They still feel the same disappointment and bitterness toward the host country and are skeptical about their future.

Going through the recent data on the treatment of refugees and migrants (who were displaced because of various wars and conflicts going on like Russia- Ukraine war, Israel-Palestine conflict, and Syrian Civil War to name a few) it is visible that they are being seen by the government and natives of the countries the same way the Androids of the novel were seen by the bounty hunters (when they are not even dangerous like the Androids were to the host country).

UNHCR Canada shared various stories of refugees and migrants from across the globe reflecting the hardships they are going through immediately after entering the host country. In a report from Khartoum, Sudan 28 refugees were killed along with some civilians in the ongoing conflict. The UNHCR director said, "Once again, refugees and other civilians are the innocent victims of this tragic war. Both sides must allow civilians to move freely to safer places, ensuring their protection and well-being and respecting their fundamental human rights." In yet another story it was brought to light that Rohingya refugees face hunger and loss of hope after the latest ration cuts and it's the second time in three months, these are the few among many.

Most of these refugees are in their adaptation cycle when they are trying to get their lives back on track and relate and adapt to their new homes and identities. Just like the humanoid refugees in the novel they are hopeful that they would somehow get to lead the life they once dreamt of in their native country. Eventually, they all will adapt to their new identities but to make their journey trauma free so that they don't live in fear of being kicked out anytime or live in a dual state of mind reminiscing their old home is the least the natives could do being a human.

Viet Thanh Nguyen in her 2018 elaborative account on refugees in *Refugee Writers On Refugee Lives* retells the kind of treatment she and various other writers received while living as refugees and how those experiences gave them a bad sense of alienation. In one of the accounts Marina Lewycka a British novelist and a refugee from Germany retells her story and reminisces the hardships, she had to face living in Britain though she had mastered the language, literature, and accent, had opted the British lifestyle and culinary habits and in many ways became more British than the Brits but still was not accepted as their own till the very last hence asked herself.

"...So where do I belong now, I wonder? In the rural shambolic Ukraine of my parents' memories—not even my own memories? In Germany where I was born, now rebuilt and prosperous, whose post-war decades of soul-searching have brought it face to face with the darkness and horror that can lie at the heart of a bid for "national greatness"? Or here among British people, who treated me with such kindness when I was a refugee, but never, it seems, saw me as one of them?." (146)

Conclusion

According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees at the end of 2020, the number of forcefully displaced people across the globe was 82.4 million which doubled from the year 2010 and out of which more than a quarter were refugees, which is a big chunk and means that a good portion among the

population of most countries is of refugees and migrants. As the number of refugees and migrants is on the increase given the geo-political situation the treatment of these dislocated people rests at the core of building a happy society. Be a human, humanoid, or any sentient being that seeks refuge at any other place besides their own, experiences the same inner turmoil in the process of settling down. A traumatizing process of reminding, comparing, and questioning the old memories, lifestyle, status, and comfort with the new one begins and leads them to live in two worlds. This persistent psychological investigation ends if these two worlds positively coincide and merge. If that does not happen, then the conflict continues and causes simmering bitterness, with dangerous repercussions.

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