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## **The Self and the Cyborg: An Analysis of Philip K Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep***

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### **Abstract:**

Postmodernism has been referred to as a “major symptom of Late Capitalism”. Fragmentation is seen as a sign of being lost in a world of globalization and of mass communication where there's no longer an obvious "centre" and space isn't easily mapped. However, when this extension of a late capitalist society is aided by unharnessed technology, it moves beyond abandoning just the traditional values and everything associated with the term God. It initiates the process of creating a Virtual Overarching system that slowly controls the human consciousness and is gradually transformed into a Technological Dystopia where the lines between the Virtual and the Actual are blurred. Virtual Reality, with no tangible existence, exists in a way that it affects everything else that existed prior to it. This Virtual Reality finds a place in an important Sub-genre of Science Fiction, The Cyberpunk Literature. Cyberpunk explores posthuman identities primarily through the representation of close relationships between human subjectivity and artificial intelligence or computer hardware. Artificial Intelligence, in this instance, encompasses cyborgs, robots, conscious beings that reside inside computer systems, and any other type of artificially created sentient being. Philip K Dick is an important American author of the Cyberpunk genre and has authored many books including *Ubik*, *Flow My Tears*, *The Policeman said*. His most acclaimed work till date, however remains *Do Androids dream of Electric Sheep* (1968), a story of a near future, where technology has over awed mankind. The paper will seek to analyse the treatment of Electronic Societies, Technological Religions, Virtual Realities, the Man vs Machine theme, in the novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*.

**Keywords:** Cyberpunk, Technology, Virtual, Existentialism, Self.

The novel is set in 1992 San Francisco (in the later editions, 2022). The Earth's dust-infested atmosphere encourages a mass emigration to off-world colonies in order to preserve the genetic integrity of the human race with the impetus of robot servants who look identical to the humans. These Humanoids are known as the Androids. However, the humanoid robots revolt against mankind and try to establish an identity of their own, sans the humans. In order to prevent this and quell the Android rebellion, the humans embark on a journey to wipe them out. The protagonist, Rick Deckard is an assassin hired by the government to kill or ‘retire’ the Robots known as Androids. He wants to use the money earned to buy himself a real animal, instead of the electronic ones which the poor people, including himself own. While

on the mission of retiring the last 6 robots, an existential crisis of sort engulfs not only Rick, but also his wife and other characters in the novel, many of whom are not humans, but Robots who begin to question their being. A parallel but intertwined story follows John Isidore, who is branded a “special” for his lesser intellectual abilities. He aspires to aid the robots but like the rest of the characters, is left to question everything else too.

Though technology is an over-riding theme in the novel, it also places the same technology in perspective by presenting the troubled cybernetic future and the existential plights of the residents. The characters in the novel are manipulated, tricked, or placed in situations where they have little or no choice. Despite their abilities to see things through, they do not necessarily come out any further ahead than they previously were. Traversing the areas of existentialism, spirituality, religion, faith and inculcating them into the skeletal framework of technocracy, the novel brilliantly brings together diverse elements such as Reality and Unreality, Faith and Cybernetics, humanism and post humanism:

*“Dick is an enthusiastic rather than a conventional writer of sf, so that he exploits the conventions of the genre rather than obeying them. Not that his version of sf is simply playful: the clash between humanism and postmodernism is played out in the complex forms of the fiction; the tension between realism and fantasy, endemic to sf, is exacerbated in this case. the focus on genre opens up issues of representation, which can otherwise be overlooked when texts are considered as responses to historical conditions” (Palmer 2)*

### **The Humans and the Robots:**

Written from the point of view of an omniscient narrator, the novel delves into the psyche of each character that it mentions, be it the humans or the humanoid robots. The opening lines introduce us to Rick Deckard and his wife Iran. Rick is commissioned by the Police department to retire the Nexus 6 Robots commonly known as the andys. Rick as an individual is far from satisfied with his life. He has a dysfunctional relationship with his depressed wife Iran who refers to him as a Murderer and a Crude Cop. Rick tries to make sense of his existence and his surroundings, tries to climb up the social ladder by owning an actual animal like the upper strata of the society but fails in his endeavours. His existential crisis is one of the key points of the novel.

Rick's Wife Iran is an anxious depressed woman, who deems her very existence as a burden that she has to carry on her back everyday. She uses her mood organ to accentuate her pre existing depression. The only high point of her life in the novel is when she owns a goat, but this joy remains short-lived and she slips back to the same State that she earlier inhabited.

Another Point of View Character in the novel is a “Chickenhead” named Joseph Isidore who works at the Van Ness Pet Hospital. Having failed his IQ test, he is deemed to live an

abominable life. Joseph is a part of a middle ground where he identifies with neither the humans nor the humanoids. He is looked down upon by the humans, due to this below human intelligence. He lives in a secluded building, and tries hard to just survive, his only source of entertainment being a television Set running Buster Friendly Programs. Having faced discrimination by the humans, Joseph initiates friendship and possibly Love with a Nexus Robot, though he is not aware of her identity in the first place. This attempt is initially welcomed, but later rebuffed. His behaviour towards the robots undergoes no change when he becomes aware of their real identity:

*"You're androids," Isidore said. But he didn't care; it made no difference to him. Dick, 65*

Joseph retains his humanity despite being the less intelligent one. The most powerful part of his personality comes to the surface when he shows strong disgust to clipping away of a legs of a spider. His like for a Nexus Robot turns to aversion when he witnesses her maiming a creature. Isidore, like the other characters in the novel, doesn't have a prior hate or prejudice for any creature, be it a human or a humanoid. He treats others with kindness and compassion, even though he himself is rarely treated with the same.

Out of the six Nexus Robots that Rick has been assigned to kill or retire, the prime focus remains on Rachael Rosen. She is a humanoid owned by the Rosen Organization and is the first robot to be interviewed by Rick. Though she ultimately fails the Voigt-Kampff, test, she proves out to be much harder to "crack" than what Rick anticipated. Rachel seems to have mastered the human emotions, the art of manipulating and is on the process of becoming more human like. She leaves a permanent impact on Rick, to the extent, that he does the unthinkable- he makes love to a humanoid. Though Rick is aware of the fact that an important part of his mission is to neutralize Rachel, he can't bring himself to kill her. Rachel has a clearer idea of her existence as a robot and demands the right to live. She keeps controlling Rick's actions throughout the novel, to the point that even when he knows that She is the one who killed his goat, all he can feel is a sense of defeat and helplessness.

Pris Stratton, the other Nexus Robot takes shelter in the building where J. Isidore lives. When Isidore tries to befriend her, she half heartedly accepts his attempts. She is irritable and rightly so, having to fight for every second of her life. She, however, becomes accustomed to Isidore to a certain extent, letting him take care of her, but her behaviour undergoes a sudden change when two of her other Nexus Mates come in to live with her. She too insults him for being a Chickenhead and Savagely maims a Spider which leaves Isidore scarred.

### **The Significance of owning a Live Animal:**

In a Post apocalyptic world, mass extinctions and difficult living conditions have made owning real animal a luxury that only some can afford. The Poor people can only afford realistic-looking electric animals. In a classic subversion of events, technology is not related to status anymore. Technology has grown to a point where it has become overbearing and nauseating. Humans, instead of revering technology have turned their faces away. They look

for empathy in live animals and thus spent their whole lives garnering up savings to buy an animal, any animal, that has a heart, a beating heart and not an electronic panel hidden inside its fur. Rick Deckard's mission to retire the Nexus robots is partly driven by the desire to use the money thus earned to buy an animal. Rick wishes to mend the strained relationship with his wife Iran ;

*"Instead of saving," he said, "so we could buy a real sheep, to replace that fake electric one upstairs. A mere electric animal, and me earning all that I've worked my way up to through the years." (Dick 2)*

Midway into the mission, that is, after retiring 3 robots, Rick is laden with guilt, so he decides to buy a goat on down payment. This decision he believes will make everything in his life fall into place, and it momentarily does. His depressed wife, Iran who called him a crude cop and a murderer earlier snaps out of her depression and transforms into a charming woman who is affectionate towards her husband:

*Iran said in an odd little voice, "My life is love and pleasure. An old, old song by Josef Strauss. Remember? When we first met." She put her hand gently on his shoulder, Leaned toward him, and kissed him. "Much love. And very much pleasure." (Dick, 68)*

When Rachel, one of the Androids, as an act of vengeance kills his newly acquired goat , the sense of order dissolves again and he descends into chaos. The empathy that came with owning a living being vanishes and Rick, lost and confused, flies out into the nuclear desert, away from all civilization.

Sheryll Vint is of the opinion that there is a general consensus among the critics that the novel's major concern is with alienated, modern, technologized life rendering humans increasingly cold and android-like. Most critics ignore the important role of animals in the novel and the specificity of the category of the animal in Western culture, Vint argues that :

*"the representation of animals is central to the novel's critique of the Cartesian subject and commodity fetishism, and that only by realizing the centrality of animals can we perceive all the implications of Deckard's change. It is not, as often argued, that Deckard risks becoming increasingly like the androids through his work as a bounty hunter; rather, the risk faced by Deckard and other humans in the novel lies in realizing that they already are android-like, so long as they define their subjectivity based on the logical, rational, calculating part of human being."(Vint 2)*

## **Mercerism as a technology driven Religion:**

Wilbur Mercer is a Sacrificial figure who receives never-ending punishment from unseen stone throwing enemies. With stones raining down over him, he walks day after day, hour after hour, exhaustively wandering up a mountain. In order to maintain some form of contact with their humanity, people invest in Empathy boxes that make them “one” with Mercer. His wounds, his torment become theirs. The pain, the torment is almost physical (When Rick initiates a union, he gets hit with a stone and starts bleeding). Through the empathy boxes, millions of people are united ever day with Mercer, and they willingly take part in the shared Sisyphian walk up the mountain side. Despite the pain of the stones and the ever continuing mountain, the ‘high’ is a feeling of forward movement, of endurance of pain and a sense of comfort in not being alone. Fusion with Mercer may not bring about Salvation, it does however bring the existentially torn apart people together. Their feeling of being one with Mercer is also the feeling of being one with each other.

*"How can I save you," the old man said, "if I can't save myself?"*

*He smiled. "Don't you see? There is no salvation."*

*"Then what's this for?" Rick demanded. "What are you for?"*

*"To show you," Wilbur Mercer said, "that you aren't alone.*

*I am here with you and always will be. Go and do your task,  
even though you know it's wrong." (...)*

*The old man said, "You will be required to do wrong no matter  
where you go. It is the basic condition of life, to be required to  
violate your own identity. At some time, every*

*creature, which lives, must do so. It is the ultimate shadow,*

*the defeat of creation; this is the curse at work, the curse  
that feeds on all life. Everywhere in the universe."*

*[Dick. 135]*

Mercer, for mankind, is also a way to separate themselves from the androids. One of the most distinguishing traits of Androids is they lack empathy. Infact, the test that Rick Deckard administers to the Androids precisely measures their empathic reactions. Their lack of empathy disables them from using the empathy box. Mercerism, thus should have been a way of uniting the humans against the Androids, but it fails in doing so too. It is not inclusive of the human beings in general. The followers of this religion have become very selective and have isolated themselves into an exclusive high society that does not accept everyone. The unaccepted humans, known as chickenheads or specials, who have had their intellectual capacity reduced are not allowed into the fold of Mercerism. Through Mercerism, humans are taught to accept all those who feel empathy, yet chickenheads, who can feel empathy, are not accepted due to their mental status. Thus the attempts of Mercerism to unite humanity through their ability to be empathetic towards other humans are half hearted and not utterly sincere. An underlying Irony in Mercerism is that it seeks to erase the disastrous effects of overarching technology using technology itself, that is, empathy boxes. Galvan notes that, the

empathy box "only temporarily [alleviates] the anguish of social dislocation" but "makes him dependent on the life of the machine" (Galvan 2).

There are strong suggestions in the novel, that Mercerism is a hoax created and nourished by the mankind to fill up the gaping voids in their souls, but like everything else in the novel, is left as an open ended argument. A television Host announces on National Television that Mercerism is nothing but an elaborated setup ;

*Buster Friendly said, "We may never know. Nor can we fathom  
the peculiar purpose behind this swindle. Yes, folks, swindle.  
Mercerism is a swindle!"*

But Rick equates Mercerism with Reality, or more so, a real illusion, when he has a vision of his own. When he runs off into the nuclear desert to seek the answers to how his life has become what it is and why nothing makes any sense anymore, what he achieves is an exalted version of Mercerism, a version which is inclusive of the electric beings as well. He goes on his own Mercer-like walk up a mountainside, and all of a sudden he realises that he has become one with Mercer, and perhaps risen above Mercer. And that he, like Mercer must continue his aimless wandering, forever 'followed by stone throwing enemies'

*'I had the absolute, utter completely real illusion that I had become  
Mercer and people were lobbing rocks at me. (...) The difference  
is I wasn't with anyone; I was alone.'*  
*'They're saying now that Mercer is a fake.'*  
*'Mercer isn't fake.' He said. 'Unless reality is a fake.'*  
[p.176]

On his way back to his car Rick by accident finds a toad which he at first glance believes to be an actual living frog and not an electronic. He marvels at its ability to have survived the nuclear desert.. He hurries home to show it to Iran, as the survival of the toad in the abandoned nuclear wilderness gives him new hope for the future of humanity. But despite the fact that the toad turns out to be artificial he realises that:

*"[It] doesn't matter. The electric things have their lives, too. Paltry as those lives are."*

The Union with Mercer, or more so, the act of becoming Mercer himself has ignited a new sense of empathy in Rick, a bounty hunter. Though empathy as a feeling is denied to the electronic beings, the man who made money off killing the robots now has a change of feeling. Even if the electric lives are paltry, they are lives too, nonetheless.

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