UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

READING HUMAN SUBJECTIVITY IN SELECTED CONTEMPORARY SCIENCE FICTION TEXTS

SHAHIZAH BINTI ISMAIL @ HAMDAN
FBMK 2010 13

READING HUMAN SUBJECTIVITY IN SELECTED CONTEMPORARY SCIENCE FICTION TEXTS

SHAHIZAH BINTI ISMAIL @ HAMDAN

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

2010

READING HUMAN SUBJECTIVITY IN SELECTED CONTEMPORARY SCIENCE FICTION TEXTS

By

SHAHIZAH BINTI ISMAIL @ HAMDAN

Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

April 2010

DEDICATION

This endeavour is dedicated to my parents and sisters for their continuing support, love and understanding in helping me achieve my ambition.

Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia
in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

**READING HUMAN SUBJECTIVITY IN SELECTED CONTEMPORARY
SCIENCE FICTION TEXTS**

By

SHAHIZAH BINTI ISMAIL @ HAMDAN

April 2010

Chair: Noritah Omar, PhD

Faculty: Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication

This study engages in a critical reading of subjectivity as portrayed in selected
contemporary Science Fiction texts published in the twenty first century. The
reading is concerned with investigating the futurist portrayals of human subjectivity
and their interfacing with technological advancements. In the context of this study,
"subjectivity" is used interchangeably with "identity" and "the sense of self". All
three concepts – subjectivity, identity and the sense of self - signify human social
constructs and consciousness. The concepts reflect human existence in constant
negotiation with the environment in connection to explicit and implicit details related
to embodiment and ideology. The reading therefore examines subjectivity within
these two dimensions – embodiment and ideology. Within the embodiment
dimension, whilst presupposing that the mind and body are two entities as
exemplified by Rene Descartes, the analysis looks at how and why the mind/body,
specified as the basis for human subjectivity is changed or altered with the
availability of technologies. The 17th century Cartesian theory on subjectivity is
adopted here to examine the presence and treatment of natural or nature-given sense

of subjectivity within the futurist context of the Science Fiction texts. Nevertheless it is found that the famous Cartesian notion of "I think therefore I am", which shows the mind as the entity that makes humans unique, becomes paradoxical within the materiality of the Science Fiction contexts. Therefore, to examine the material aspect, the reading appropriates Louis Althusser's notion of the subject, to look into subjectivity situated within social practices that are highly influenced by technology. Althusser's notion of the subject is utilised here because in his theorising, all subjects exist within ideological apparatuses governed by material practices and rituals. The technologically altered humans are then analysed within the framework of Donna Haraway's cyborg imagery. This imagery suggests the end of the natural concepts of subjectivity such as in the Cartesian theorising and marks the beginning of posthumanism where subjectivity is influenced by technology thus materially imagined. As such this research finds that firstly, subjectivity, characteristically fluid and continuously being renegotiated in its contact with technology, is influenced and determined by the body be it organic and/or machine in humanity's quest for longevity. Secondly, technology transforms human subjectivity into a notion that is predominantly material-imagined as the body becomes significantly important almost simultaneously as the mind loses its primacy. This switch is a result of the notion that the mind needs to be encapsulated by embodiment for subjectivity to be meaningful. Finally, the research finds that although cyborg imagery is predominantly portrayed in the selected texts as the prevailing future for human subjectivity, ironically the situation is still very much dictated by pure human desires driven by external material factors such as the need to overcome limitations of the body, the need to live a much longer live, the need to be physically beautiful and the need to be powerful as exemplified in the Science Fiction texts.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

SUBJEKTIVITI MANUSIA DALAM TEKS FIKSYEN SAINS KONTEMPORARI

Oleh

SHAHIZAH BINTI ISMAIL @ HAMDAN

April 2010

Pengerusi: Noritah Omar, PhD

Fakulti: Fakulti Bahasa Moden dan Komunikasi

Penyelidikan ini melibatkan satu pembacaan kritis terhadap subjektiviti manusia seperti dipaparkan melalui fiksyen sains kontemporari terpilih yang diterbitkan pada abad ke 21. Pembacaan ini menyelidik hubungkait antara subjektiviti manusia dengan proses kemajuan teknologi yang giat. Di dalam konteks kajian ini, terma "subjektiviti" digunakan secara bertukarganti dengan "jatidiri" serta "rasadiri" (sense of self). Ketiga-tiga konsep ini menandakan serta saling meninggalkan kesan terhadap kesedaran individu dalam konteks sosial. Konteks ini juga menggambarkan bahawa manusia sentiasa berkeadaan dalam perundingan dengan apa yang tersurat dan tersirat di sekeliling seperti penjelmaan fizikal manusia dan pengaruh ideologi hidup bermasyarakat. Oleh itu, penyelidikan ini menganalisa paparan subjektiviti manusia masa depan dalam konteks dua dimensi penting ini - bentuk fizikal manusia (embodiment) dan pengaruh ideologi hidup bermasyarakat. Melalui dimensi fizikal manusia yang melihat minda (atau akal) dan tubuh sebagai entiti yang berbeza tetapi amat penting kepada jatidiri manusia seperti yang diperkatakan oleh Rene Descartes, analisa menunjukkan sebab-sebab subjektiviti manusia diubah dan berubah kerana

pertembungan dengan perkembangan teknologi. Teori Cartesian abad ke 17 ini digunakan untuk menganalisa kesedaran subjektiviti semulajadi di dalam konteks paparan futuristik fiksyen sains. Walaubagaimanapun, penyelidik mendapati anggapan Descartes bahawa "I think therefore I am" telah menjadi sesuatu yang paradoks di dalam konteks masyarakat futuristik yang sangat dipengaruhi oleh teknologi yang lebih bersifat kebendaan. Oleh itu, untuk menyelidik subjektiviti dari sudut ini, penyelidik mengaplikasi konsep subjek dari perspektif Louis Althusser yang menyatakan bahawa subjek bukan sahaja sentiasa terletak di dalam konteks amalan hidup bermasyarakat, lebih penting lagi beliau beranggapan subjek dipengaruhi oleh aparatus ideologi yang memang bersifat kebendaan. Menggunakan konsep Althusser tersebut, analisa terhadap subjektiviti dilakukan ke atas ideologi masyarakat futuristik. Manusia dan subjektiviti juga kemudiannya dianalisa di dalam konteks metafora cyborg Donna Haraway sebagai rangkakerja untuk membongkar subjektiviti manusia futuristik fiksyen sains yang kebanyakannya telah berubah disebabkan oleh teknologi. Metafora cyborg Haraway menggambarkan bahawa konsep subjektiviti semulajadi seperti yang diperkatakan oleh Descartes sudah berakhir dan digantikan oleh konsep pasca-manusia di mana subjektiviti dipengaruhi oleh teknologi. Kesimpulan penyelidikan mendapati bahawa subjektiviti manusia yang pada dasarnya berbentuk "fluid" dan sentiasa berubah di dalam pertembungannya dengan teknologi amat bergantung kepada bentuk fizikal walaupun bentuk ini tidak lagi sepenuhnya manusia. Kedua, subjektiviti manusia juga mula dipengaruhi oleh kebendaan dan bukan lagi oleh minda atau akal. Akhir sekali, metafora cyborg yang dipaparkan masih dipengaruhi oleh nafsu dan keinginan yang berbentuk kemanusiaan seperti keinginan untuk hidup lebih lama,

untuk mengatasi kelemahan, untuk mengubah fizikal menjadi lebih cantik, untuk

lebih berkuasa dan sebagainya.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on 28 April 2010 to conduct the final examination of Shahizah binti Ismail @ Hamdan on her thesis entitled "Reading Human Subjectivity in Selected Contemporary Science Fiction Texts" in accordance with the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U.(A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Members of the Thesis Examination Committee were as follows:

Wong Bee Eng, PhD
Associate Professor
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Chairperson)

Wan Roselizam Wan Yahya, PhD
Associate Professor
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Internal Examiner)

Washima Che Dan, PhD
Associate Professor
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Internal Examiner)

Carol Elizabeth Leon, PhD
Associate Professor
Department of English
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Universiti Malaya
Malaysia
(External Examiner)

BUJANG BIN KIM HUAT, PhD
Professor and Deputy Dean
School of Graduate Studies
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Date: 23 July 2010

This thesis submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

Noritah Omar, PhD
Associate Professor
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Chairperson)

Malachi Edwin Vethamani, PhD
Associate Professor
Faculty of Education Studies
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Member)

Ruzy Suliza Hashim, PhD
Associate Professor
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
(Member)

_____
HASANAH MOHD GHAZALI, PhD
Professor and Dean
School of Graduate Studies
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Date: 12 August 2010

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at Universiti Putra Malaysia or other institutions.

_____

SHAHIZAH BINTI ISMAIL @ HAMDAN

Date: 5 July 2010

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century human lives changed dramatically as a result of the industrial revolution that started in Britain. The revolution changed modes of travel and communication, agricultural practices and manufacturing systems. For example labour-based activities turned into mechanised manufacturing, which increased productivity tremendously. In the late twentieth century, we witnessed and experienced even greater advances in science and technology where limits of human existence and capabilities were pushed even farther. We can travel hundreds of miles effortlessly, communicate with people across the globe in an instant and access information at the press of a button. In addition, we managed to find cures for many previously incurable illnesses and we also found ways to improve our health as well as our appearance. Immortality rate increased greatly as our aging process is slowed down due to the advances in medicine and improved physical environment and lifestyle. In the twenty first century, the human desire for longer life, increased cognitive capacities and immunity against diseases has initiated many more "technological projects" to help achieve these needs.

However at the basis of all human desire for improvement is the reality that many of these technological projects involve changes to the environment as well as to the human

body. Now more than ever, our environment can be adjusted by technology to suit our needs, for example, air can be heated or cooled and light can be dimmed or brightened. Human bodies are altered through plastic or cosmetic surgeries, organ transplants, implants and the use of prosthetics so that limitations can be surpassed. Inevitably these adjustments, especially those to the human body, have raised a fundamental question - as we become more and more compelled to embrace technology in order to fulfil our desires how much of our subjectivity, which reflects our awareness of sense of selves and identities, is also being changed? Additionally, in the future, how much more access to technologies will humans have and will we be able to make informed choices to ensure that humanity remains recognisable?

To take on an investigation into the area of human subjectivity and its future as introduced above, this study engages in a critical reading of selected contemporary Science Fiction (henceforth SF) texts published in the twenty first century that presents futuristic portrayals of societies as they interface with technological advancements. Through a critical examination of the concerns portrayed in the genre of SF, this study suggests that the technological advancements explored and experimented upon by the authors are influenced by contemporary understandings and apprehensions regarding subjectivity thus speculating a possible impending condition for humanity. In addition, the focus on SF manifests that technologies as material that influence our social practices are simultaneously determining, broadening and transforming the parameters of human subjectivity. Consequently, aspects of subjectivity that are examined in this

research are the mind, body and ideology as they represent the basis of the formation of the human self.

In the context of this study, "subjectivity" is used interchangeably with "identity" and "the sense of self", as defined and used by Donald E. Hall in his book <u>Subjectivity</u> (2004). All three concepts – subjectivity, identity and the sense of self - denote human social constructs and consciousness (Hall, 134). They reflect human existence in constant negotiation with the environment, as well as explicit and implicit details such as embodiment and ideology.

Background of Science Fiction Study

During the late twentieth century, there was an increase in SF criticism and SF as an area of study especially in the last two decades that saw "an explosion of critical writing about [Science Fiction]" (Veronica Hollinger)[1]. In her article "Contemporary Trends in Science Fiction Criticism, 1980-1999", Hollinger highlights three main trends in SF Criticism. The first trend is related to two general areas of study. The first area involves the study of the history and the genre of SF. The second area is concerned with representations of SF in the media. This area also covers studies done towards contributing to SF reference guides. The second trend calls our attention to a body of critical works on SF by authors of SF themselves. This trend also includes author interviews as well as autobiographies. The third trend, according to Hollinger, involves a transformation in SF studies. This trend is one that focuses on the feminist and

postmodernist studies of SF. The widespread interest in this genre has also allowed for "new perspectives in critical and theoretical frameworks" (Hollinger) in relation to discovering SF as a rich source of cultural material.

Despite the increasing interest in SF scholarship, the genre has had to contend with prejudices that have kept it away from mainstream literary studies. Although a few titles such as <u>Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde</u>[2] by Robert Louis Stevenson, <u>The Time Machine</u>[3] by H.G. Wells and <u>Brave New World</u>[4] by Aldous Huxley have been classified as SF classics and highly regarded in mainstream literature, immediate reactions to this genre are almost always ambivalent if not negative. Probably due to its pulp-magazine origins it is often deemed "popular" rather than literary, and regularly "considered an intruder on the academic scene" (James Gunn)[5]. Despite this, SF presents numerous alternative ideas. It is relevant to today's highly competitive, fast-paced and technologically driven world. Closely linked to current developments in science and technology, SF is a genre that conducts imaginary experiments on predicting change, exploring future possibilities and consequences as well as probing humankind's adaptability, perseverance and tolerance when faced with tremendous change and challenges (David Brin)[6]. It provides an avenue for us to see our world from a different perspective. Furthermore, according to Gunn, SF is highly imaginative and versatile as it crosses conventional genre boundaries effortlessly. There are SF detective story (cyberpunk), SF western, SF gothic, SF romance and the most obvious, SF adventure. This crossing of genre boundaries, adds Gunn, is necessary because unlike other genres, SF has little or no identifiable event or setting. He explains that readers may not easily recognise SF as

they do with other genres. As a result, SF writers incorporate many characteristics of traditional genres, such as the romance, horror or adventure genre and this all-inclusiveness allows readers to relate to the SF genre better.

The flexibility, forward-looking and non-mainstream nature of this genre has created an obvious and natural arena for the explorations of various aspects of contemporary issues such as our quest for and obsession with technological advancement and how it could affect humanity's future. In the context of this research, the probe into subjectivity reveals new as well as continuing concerns and perspectives on our own sense of selves as humanity is confronted with new brands of spirituality, sexuality, ethnicity, even mortality, as these concepts are being redefined and expanded by technology before our very eyes. The analysis of the selected SF texts shows how the human bodies and minds, as portrayed through the characters, work within a complex relationship with the dynamics of technological advancements. In addition, the analysis takes into consideration that the selves are also defined by ideology, especially in terms of the significance of the materiality of the technological advancements portrayed in the setting of the selected SF texts.

Statement of Problem

In the West, SF has been categorised as a serious genre since the 1920s.[7] However, locally produced SF is a fairly recent phenomenon in Malaysia and almost all are written in the Malay language. According to S.M. Zakir, early SF writings, written in

the Malay language, appeared in the 1970's written by mainstream authors such as Othman Puteh. This continued into the 1980's, with Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (trans. Institute of Language and Literature; henceforth DBP) being the sole publisher of SF written in the Malay language. However, S.M. Zakir adds that these works can be described as only having SF elements or characteristics. Only in the 1990's was "pure" SF were written by young writers involved in the DBP's Young Writers' Week Programme. Out of the programme came writers such as Ahmad Patria Abdullah, who is currently considered one of the more established SF writers.

In the 1990s, DBP continued to publish SF works especially by young adults for young adult readers. Other writers such as Hizairi Othman and Nisah Hj. Haron joined the ranks of Ahmad Patria Abdullah, who remained the most faithful writer to the genre of SF (S.M. Zakir 19). However, towards the end of the 1990's, the development of SF slowed down. In the West, contemporary SF writing and reading is not bound by age (20) but in Malaysia it is very much determined by the age factor where SF is not seen as a genre for adults. Consisting mostly of adventure-type narratives, the readers of SF very much consist of children and young adults. The decline of SF in Malaysia is also due to the fact that as the young writers of the 1980s grow older, they decide to utilise genres other than SF – genres that are considered more serious and more matured. The reason being, SF in Malaysia is not seen as serious literature and only associated with young readers, unlike in the West where SF is a highly serious mode of expression and written by established authors. In addition, according to S.M. Zakir, ironically so, young

Malaysian readers of the late twentieth and early twenty first century do not seem to be interested in SF despite the technological gadgets pervasive in this genre.

Perhaps the problem facing SF in Malaysia, according to Ahmad Patria Abdullah, is the fact that readers find the genre difficult to comprehend, unlike realist literature. Added to this is the general attitude that SF is "sampah" (*junk*), not realising that it is one of the most difficult genre for writers to produce (Ahmad Patria Abdullah 11). Despite the support from DBP, Ahmad Patria Abdullah observes that the slow development of SF in Malaysia is also due to writers themselves not interested to write SF. The general rule that to produce SF a writer needs to have basic understanding of the principles and theories of science has hampered creativity in this genre (Ahmad Patria Abdullah). This Malaysian phenomenon, Ahmad Patria Abdullah adds, is caused by writers coming mainly from the arts stream. Readers' attitude towards SF is also a demotivating factor for writers as SF generally does not receive acclaimed readership.

Inspite of this, DBP continues its effort at publishing SF and promoting it in Malaysia through writing competitions, the latest being an on-line SF short story and poetry writing competition (S.M. Zakir). Recently another local publishing house, PTS, has also put in its effort to promote SF by publishing a few titles (Nisah Haji Haron). However, Nisah Haji Haron is strong in her views as she states that publishing houses need to publish more titles. She says that two or three titles a year will only result in the books getting lost on the shelves of bookshops amidst books of other genres. She also says that writing competitions should be organised consistently and not as and when

they are deemed trendy or fashinable. In addition, S.M. Zakir says that there also has to be follow-up efforts to complement writing competitions as these writers usually stop writing after winning due to the lack of avenues to continue producing. These efforts are vital, Nisah Haji Haron states, in determining the survival of SF in Malaysia.

In 1989-1990 <u>The New Straits Times</u> and Shell Companies in Malaysia organised a short story writing competition to promote creative writing in the English language in which many entries were received for the SF category (Krishen Jit et al vi). None won the major prizes but two made it into the collection of winning stories published by Berita Publishing in 1991. Apart from these, K.S. Maniam, a renowned Malaysian writer who writes in English also writes SF for young adult. His novel <u>Escape from Module H. 7959</u> was published in 2003 by Maya Press. However, these publications in English, like its Malay language counterparts, are few and far between.

As such due to the slow development of SF in Malaysia, literary researchers related to this genre, be it on local texts or on the flourishing Western SF texts, are also rare. Therefore, this study seeks to improve the dearth of SF studies in Malaysia with the main significance being to enrich the local literary scholarship. In addition, this study's concern with subjectivity will bring to light to the local literary scene, the importance of SF as a genre that explores the human condition.

Research Aim and Objectives

One of the most significant markers in the development of human civilisation comes in the forms of tools and devices. Humans form close "relationships" with these tools and devices to the point of being inseparable. Just as children play with toys that reflect real life technologies such as airplanes, trains, robots, fake guns, telephones and computer games, adults indulge in new softwares, appliances, super cars and accessories, telecommunication gadgets, sports equipment as well as medical procedures.

However, as we continue to live in a technologically-mediated world, we rarely stop to think critically about the tools and devices that surround us. As humans invent more technologies, we need to think whether we are in control or have we become totally dependent or even addicted to it (Nye, 225). When we have implants put in or artificial limbs surgically attached to our bodies to replace the original, are we merely removing our biological impoverishments or actually changing our selves to fulfil our desires? In subscribing to these advanced technologies, are we in fact thoughtlessly exposing humanity to dangers and consequently driving it to extinction as more and more of our selves are attached to or even resemble and operate like the technologies that we create?

Therefore, the aim of this research is to analyse SF's futurist portrayal of human subjectivity as it interfaces with technology and how it operates within an intensely technological setting. By analysing character portrayals and the technological trappings of SF, the objective of the reading is firstly to analyse the mind/body aspect. Taking the

mind and body as two entities, the analysis looks at how and why the mind/body, specified as the primary site for human subjectivity (Hall; Mansfield), is changed or altered. The effects of the alterations on subjectivity will then be analysed via the "interaction" between mind, body and society. By "interaction" I take it to mean the way the human mind and body communicate and interface in dealing with everyday experiences and realities which not only connect the research to ideology but will also reveal the importance of embodiment to subjectivity.

Secondly, the reading will ascertain the role that ideology plays in determining subjectivity. Ideology is analysed to determine the set of beliefs or ideas translated into social practices that shape the characters' subjectivity. In addition the analysis will determine whether these beliefs allow the characters to recognise their own identities and how they occupy their realities in the context of the interfacings between human, society and a technologically-mediated environment. Within this section, agency - commonly used as a synonym for action, will also be juxtaposed against ideology to draw attention to the psychological make-up of the characters in relation to the control they have over subject formation.

Lastly, the reading will situate subjectivity within posthumanism, as this worldview[8] has a very significant connection to current opinions and developments in science and technology. As humans take liberties to alter and improve the body in tandem with posthumanism, the analysis of the alterations portrayed in the selected SF texts will