Identity Formation as a Site of Resistance: An investigation into posthuman identities through Priya Sarukkai Chabria's *Clone*

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Abstract

The concept of identity, at a glance, strives to establish a boundary around a self, so as to give it the distinction of uniqueness. However, the first and foremost question, while studying the politics of identity, that comes to mind is this - who forms the identity of a self? It has long been established that a self's identity is based on where and how it is positioned in the society.

In that manner, a self's identity can be used as a tool to assert dominance on that very self, depending upon who is in charge of the formation of that identity. However, when identity formation becomes a choice, it often becomes an act of resistance.

On the other hand, posthumanism, as a concept, is majorly known for deflating the uncritical acceptance of and blurring the lines between bodily borders, identities, and consciousness. Considering the basics of the politics of identity, then it becomes pertinent to ask, how,and if at all, a posthuman can have an identity.

This paper aims to investigate these questions, along with exploring how the very process of forming and claiming an individual identity can be a site of resistance, especially for a posthuman, through Priya Sarukkai Chabria's 2018 novel *Clone*.

Introduction

According to the *Oxford dictionary,* the first definition of the word 'identity'(412) is that it is 'the fact of being who or what a person or thing is', and the second definition suggests that it is 'a close similarity or feeling of understanding.' However, either of these two definitions, or the numerous other ones provided not just by English dictionaries, but also social science dictionaries fail to capture the meaning of identity in its entirety. It has been by and large established that the concept of identity, that captures the word along with all its nuances, is 'something of an enigma' (Fearon). While talking about the concept of identity, James D. Fearon in his 1999 paper "What is Identity? (As we now use the word)" mentions that "it proves quite difficult to give a short and adequate summary statement that captures the range of its present meanings."

The concept of identity, at a glance, strives to establish a boundary around a self, so as to give it the distinction of uniqueness. Even so, by virtue of providing a uniqueness, which is perhaps the 'fact' that the *Oxford dictionary* talked about, identity also gives the self a duality

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of character - that which is both inclusionary and exclusionary in nature. The self of a person cannot be something particular while simultaneously being something else. On the other hand, while being something particular, as it were, the self also gets a sense of belonging to the ranks of other similar somethings, which is especially applicable while determining a person's socio-political identity. The concept of identity invariably manifests in the form of stark dualities, which are more often than not in conflict with each other - thus creating binary ideas of identity.

On the other hand, posthumanism as a concept is majorly known for deflating the uncritical acceptance of, and blurring the lines between bodily borders, identities, and consciousness. One of posthumanism's major characteristics is pushing the boundary of the concept of established binary ideas, such as male-female, human-animal, man-machine and so on.

Considering these two concepts, which are perhaps more than somewhat at odds with each other, this paper aims to investigate the notion of a posthuman identity through a close reading of Priya Sarukkai Chabria's 2018 novel *Clone*. The paper has also strived to explore how the very process of forming and claiming an individual identity can be a site of resistance, especially for a posthuman.

The identity of self as the subject

It has long been established that a self's identity is based on where and how it is positioned in the society. The dual nature of identity, as mentioned in the previous section of this paper, can perhaps be better described in the words of James Fearon, who argued that identity can be perceptible in two senses of the word - social and personal. He further elaborated the two senses by showcasing that in the social sense, 'an identity refers simply to a social category, a set of persons marked by a label and distinguished by rules deciding membership and (alleged) characteristic features or attributes.' Likewise, the personal sense of identity is based upon 'distinguishing characteristics that a person takes a special pride in or views as socially consequential but more-or-less unchangeable'(Fearon). Thus it can be argued that a self's identity if formed by positioning its own sense of self-respect within the larger picture of the societal background it is situated in at a given time, much as Stuart Hall mentioned in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" that "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (Hall 225). Additionally, the individual identity formation of the self of a person depends on both its name as well as societal worth.

The posthuman subject and its identity

This trajectory of thought is therefore heavily dependent upon the nature of the aforementioned 'self'. From its very definition, it can be gleaned that the posthuman self is perceived to be an entity which is beyond human. So let us first see what is perceived to be human.

The concept of 'human' has always been androcentric, historically speaking. With the advent of colonialism, the idea of the perfect human self became built in the likeness of the white European male. However, this particular idea of the human self is tremendously exclusionary, as "several forms of life have been throughout history subordinated to the human as sub-human, non-human and inhuman in the system of classification" (Nayar 11). Nayar very rightly argues how the notion of what is human has historically been conceived by othering "differently-abled, women, particular races and ethnicities, and animals", putting them in the category of non-human and inhuman (35).

Scholar Rosi Braidotti, while defining the posthuman subject, spoke of an "entity which is no longer an animal but not yet fully a machine, is the icon of the posthuman condition" (74). The posthuman subject can be anything from shape shifting monsters like werewolf or vampires or animagi - creatures that were once human and then transgressed beyond human-ness, or it can be humanoid robots enhanced with engineered technology, or creatures with artificial intelligence.

While partaking in the discourse of posthuman subjectivity, Tamar Sharon argues that while discussing identity formation, the human being that is conceptualized is not an independent and autonomous entity with clear cut boundaries, but rather a heterogeneous subject whose self-definition is continuously shifting (Sharon). Yet, there are certain attributes to the human notion of identity formation of the self that are not extended to the posthuman. At the very surface level, the human self's identity formation process follows the trajectory of age. Psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, while arguing his theory of identity formation, mentioned that identity formation begins in childhood, gaining prominence during adolescence (Erikson). Unlike the human self however, the posthuman self is not extended these attributes due to either its position, or its origin. In Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005), which till day remains one of the best fictional accounts that questions the ideas of what it means to be human, we see that the clones are segregated from the humans from birth, and their only purpose of life is to become organ donors for 'actual' humans. The clones of Ishiguro's book aren't physically anything beyond

mere humans, built of flesh and blood– that is to say, they are not transhumans. But they are posthuman beings in that they are not acknowledged as humans in the society they 'live' in. Hence, despite having gone through the ages in the same manner as 'humans', they cannot form their identities as humans do.

Furthermore, in Chabria's *Clone* (2018), a series of clones originate in the 'birthing centre', and come out of there as fully formed adults bearing the coordinates of the aforementioned series. These clones therefore neither have individual identity, nor uniqueness as all the clones belonging to the same series bear the DNA of the same original, i.e. the original human being in whose likeness they are built. Specifically for the clones in Chabria's book, it can be said that rather than identity, they have identifiers- numbers which are bestowed upon them by the ruling Global Community; these identifiers work more as tools in tracking and detecting, rather than giving the scope to individualize. The clones do not have names. This namelessness of the clones further helps the people in charge to keep them outside the periphery of the human state, and relegate them to the posthuman state. In this particular context, the identities of these clones are used as a tool to assert dominance on their 'selves' by the Global Community. Which is why, when a clone seeks to form its own identity, it becomes a rebellious act of resistance.

Identity formation as a site of resistance

Priya Sarukkai Chabria's 2018 novel *Clone* is a dystopian fiction set in what was formerly India, much like Orwell's *1984* (1949), which was set in a country named Oceania in the former landscape of Britain. In fact, Chabria's book bears few significant resemblances to *1984*, which is one of the pioneering dystopian novels to come out after the horrors of the consecutive two World Wars. Both books are set in nations that are governed by a totalitarian sect - while 'the Party' ruled Oceania, 'the Global Community' is in charge of the world Chabria's book portrays. Like Orwell's Winston Smith, Chabria's Clone 14/54/G is also predestined to give labour for the 'betterment' of the people for their entire existence.

Like many other dystopian novels that deal with posthuman characters, Chabria's novel portrays the posthuman beings as the victims. The posthuman beings in this particular book are essentially transhumans, having been subjected to biomedical engineering to enhance or update certain bodily features. This enhancement happens for the sole purpose of benefiting the (original) humans portrayed in the narrative, critiquing both human exceptionalism and human instrumentalism (Nayar 8). Chabria's book is a first person narrative account of a clone, for the

most part, who is the protagonist of this story. Throughout the novel, we see two identities fighting to surface through the narratives through the same entity - one is that of the protagonist clone 14/54/G, and the other is that of its original (human), Aa-aa.

A mere worker clone, 14/54/G first trangresses in the form of having memories, something unheard of for clones. It realizes that its "consciousness has morphed"(Chabria 2). Initially, it sought answers before its "actuality runs out", since "it is educative and helps you perform your duties better"(Chabria 4). However, in the course of its quest to find answers to the physical transgressions– having out of bound thoughts, growing moles and body hair, and so on, its consciousness truly morphs, and it realizes that "these are strange thoughts for a clone"(18). As time passes, and memories that are not its own plague its mind, its thoughts take turns that are not allowed to clones–

"Yet I no longer know what is the reality of my… not life - that is the privilege of Originals; not presence - this is reserved for Firehearts; not existence- for Superior Zombies claim this mode. Clones exhibit actuality. I do not know the reality of my actuality" (48).

It should be noted here that as a clone, even the narrative of the reality this clone faces is controlled by manipulated language of the Originals - humans who were born of conscious coupling, and in whose image the clones are made.

As it mutates and other mutant clones get in touch with it, 14/54/G's consciousness morphes to create a path for it to both question its identity, and seek to establish it. As Nayar argued in his book *Posthumanism* (2014), "consciousness is not inherent to the mind/brain: it is an emergent property that is effected only through the collation of information and the interactions of the various parts with the world" (39). Nayar's thought resonates well with the argument of Tamar Sharon mentioned earlier in the paper. This clone's self-definition shifts with the morphing of its consciousness. With continued visitations (visions) of past lives of Aa-aa, clone 14/54/G's Original, the clone takes the first steps towards forming an identity by understanding her form to be a female.

As her consciousness morphs, clone 14/54/G gets caught in the tangle of a breeding rebellion against the order of the Global Community, with the two sides wanting to use her for their own benefit, but only to the extent where she can bring back words of her original Aa-aa. For both the Leader, who is helming the uprising, and the Originals who run the Global Community, clone 14/54/G is simply a vessel needed for a manifestation of Aa-aa and her last thoughts. But while

clone 14/54/G seeks to claim her own voice, at times through the declaration that she is not her original (106), and another time through her poetry under the guise of recalling Aa-aa's words, it is also a struggle for her to realize the notion of her 'self', as she wonders:

"By mimicking her gestures could I become her? How does one become another? For this to happen, needn't one first know who one is? Who am I?"(225).

Her perception of her subjectivity is further problematized by her complicated relationship with the Leader - Aa-aa's son, who is both her lover, and the adult version of the child she yearns for because of her visions (or visitations as she calls them). Yet, she also continues to carve a space for her own self through small rebellions. Caught in a web that is adamant to make her into a version of Aa-aa by forcing her to live, eat, and dress like the Original, 14/54/G seeks solace in her 'actuality'(for clones do not have a life) as a clone. She seeks to wear her drab mandated-for-clones uniform, and goes on a hunger strike when she is refused clone rations, and is presented with a hoard of fancy breakfast options instead (118).

As her body continued mutating along with her consciousness, and physically she gradually started becoming more of a woman (she started menstruating, and eventually became pregnant), she also found faith in her 'self', concluding that "one has to trust one's self in order to understand significance"(244). This is why, eventually as she was pushed to the edge, she asserted that "I am human. Each one of us is human... I claim my birthright to be human" (269), thus laying claim to an identity that is of her own, and not merely a version of an Original human.

Conclusion

Through a close reading of the novel *Clone*, this paper has sought to discuss the idea of identity in the realm of posthumanist thought. In the novel, Chabria expertly portrayed the exclusionary stance of humans towards the posthuman, despite the fact that the posthuman subjects are creations for the betterment of the humans, by humans. Additionally, Chabria also raised the questions of 'morality, ethics, responsibility' that are considered to be the very makers of the "autonomous, self-conscious, coherent and self-determining human" (Nayar 6).

Interestingly, Braidotti brought forward that the emergence of posthumanism has begun movements where the non-human 'others', who are on the other end to the androcentric (caucasian) human, have began to come forward and raise their voices, claiming their own place through movements that protest against societal norms resulted by humanist thought

(Braidotti 37). Unfortunately, as Braidotti pointed out in her book that the approach towards posthumanist studies to conduct scientific or technological study is often humanist in nature, with researchers "reluctant to undertake a full study of their implications for a theory of subjectivity" (39). This creates a huge gap between the aspects of what is ethical and what is biological in the discourse of posthuman studies, since concerns about "how to draw a clear boundary between science and bioethics, since biotechnology tends to threaten moral and ethical values of human beings if being misapplied" (Wei and Yuan 456) become even more prominent.

Yet, in Chabria's book the progression of clone 14/54/G in her quest to find answers while building her own notion of her 'self' exhibits that the posthuman self clearly marks "the end of the opposition between Humanism and anti-humanism and traces a different discursive framework, looking more affirmatively towards new alternatives" (Braidotti 37). Braidotti further argues that "[t]he crisis of Humanism means that the structural others of the modern humanistic subject re-emerge with a vengeance in postmodernity" (37), these others are not only posthumans, but also historically excluded non-humans and inhumans.

Additionally, it is evident that "we need to devise new social, ethical, and discursive schemes of subject formation to match the profound transformations we are undergoing" (Braidotti 12) in the discourse of posthumanism in relation to the human subject. Inarguably, there is a "need for new universal values in the sense of interconnectedness" which needs to include "identity, dignity, knowledge, affection, joy and care" (Braidotti 49) when discussing and approaching the posthuman subject.

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