

HYPERREALITY AND CONSUMERISM IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ISHIGURO'S "KLARA AND THE SUN" AND QIU FAN'S "WASTE TIDE"

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Abstract

This study examines Jean Baudrillard's concept of Hyperreality and consumerism in two culturally and geographically distinct novels: Klara and the Sun by Kazuo Ishiguro and Waste Tide by Chen Qiufan. Using Catherine Belsey's model of textual analysis, the research highlights the divergent ways in which hyperreality is represented. In Ishiguro's narrative, Hyperreality is embodied through Klara, whose simulated existence nonetheless conveys hope, empathy, and love, suggesting a humanizing potential within artificiality. By contrast, Qiufan's Waste Tide depicts Hyperreality as a destructive force, dehumanizing individuals through Mimi's transformation from "waste girl" into a fragmented, cybernetic being. Despite these contrasting portrayals, both texts foreground consumerism as the underlying force shaping human identity and struggle. Ultimately, the study argues that while Ishiguro's vision of hyperreality culminates in peaceful acceptance of obsolescence, Qiufan's novel critiques technological consumerism as a brutal system that reconfigures subjectivity. These comparative findings contribute to contemporary debates on posthuman identity, environmental degradation, and the cultural politics of consumerism.

Keywords: Hyperreality, Consumerism, Technology, Identity, Jean Baudrillard.

Introduction

Twenty-first century marks the era of bombardment of technology where automated machines are replacing everything that can be termed as human especially the tasks that are supposed to be performed by humans. This very aspect triggers human thinking, and he begins to question reality itself. This is troublesome because such over-involving technology and the way it is replacing human beings results in the blurring of boundaries between reality and simulation. Western world for instance, British has played an important role in constructing simulated experiences through technology and consumerism. On the other hand, Eastern world, in particular, China recognizes the power of technology with a lot of investments in artificial intelligence.

Postmodernism is necessary to understand in this era where technological advancements blur the lines between reality and illusion. It is basically a literary theory that emerged in the 20th century in the reaction of modernism. Jean-François Lyotard (1979) defines postmodernism in his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (p.22). He argues that postmodern society rejects the existence of meta narratives (Science, progress and truth). Postmodernism is characterized by that meaning is constructed through the culture and language instead of absolute truths. Now society does not believe in the single explanation of anything, but people go for multiple perspectives.

Hyperreality is the postmodern phenomenon, and it is introduced by the French philosopher and sociologist Jean Baudrillard (1981) in his book *Simulacres et Simulation*, but then Sheila Faria Glaser translated this book into English in 1994. According to him, hyperreality is the condition where the line between reality and illusion blurs in such a way that it becomes

difficult to distinguish one from other. "It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (Baudrillard, 1996, p.2). The world which is masked by the signs and symbols conceals the reality of the original world. Consistent production of signs and symbols on social media basically becomes the reason behind this hyperreal world.

Jean Baudrillard gives the concept of consumerism in his book *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (1998), which is closely related to western culture. It is beyond the notion of fulfilling the basic needs of the people, but it is for the sign value to represent the status and wealth of the people. Jean Baudrillard basically extended the idea of Karl Max who gives the concept of consumption. He argues that consumption is the system of symbols, signs and their meaning. Social media is leading the process of the simulation where people interact with signs and symbols instead of reality itself.

The aim of the study is to draw a comparison between the two culturally and geographically distinct novels *Klara and the Sun* (2021) by Kazuo Ishiguro and *Waste Tide* by Chen Qiufan, which was originally published in 2013 in Chinese but translated by Ken Liu, who is a speculative author of America and award winning as well, in English in 2019. The selected novels are analyzed through the theoretical foundations of Jean Baudrillard's hyperreality and consumerism by using the textual analysis of Catherine Belsey. From *Klara and the Sun*, Klara, an Artificial Friend (AF) of Josie who reflects her emotions of love and faith towards Josie, raising a question in the mind of the researcher that what it means to be a human. On the other side, Mimi is the protagonist of the novel *Waste Tide*, who is waste worker in the e-waste recycling industry in China. Mimi's character reflects her struggles in a world where humans are fully interacting with machines and transforming their identities into something which looks more than to be a human.

Statement of the Problem

In reality and illusion, the blurring boundaries not only threaten the identity of human beings but also accelerate environmental degradation and disrupt the balance between humans, technology and nature. Therefore, to analyze the blurred boundaries of reality and imagination, this study will focus on the comparative analysis of Western and Eastern literature. Further, this study will discuss how literature reveals the dangers of unchecked technological growth and consumerism.

Significance of Study

This study is significant in an era where technological advancements are increasing in such a way that the growing interaction between humans and non-humans is blurring the lines between real and virtual. This study addresses the ways we understand ourselves and our relationship with other beings. Moreover, this study aids the scholars of dystopian literature and posthumanism by offering them insights into how literature shapes reality and virtuality. Furthermore, this study contributes to the literary field by applying Jean Baudrillard hyperreality (simulacra and simulation) and consumerism to highlight how literature represents consumerism, hyperreality, human identity and technology in the two culturally distinct novels, one from East and another from West.

Research Questions

1. How is the hyperreal world constructed by the protagonists with the excessive use of technology in *Klara and the Sun* and *Waste Tide*?
2. How do central characters of the selected novels reflect the similarities and differences to highlight hyperreality in Western and Eastern Literature?

Literature Review

Previous Studies on *Klara and the Sun*

In the study "Exploring Humanity Through the Lens of Artificial Intelligence: Analysing Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*", Siddiqui (2025) explores *Klara and the Sun* through another perspective as he investigates humanity through the lens of artificial intelligence.

Author has analyzed the protagonist of the novel Klara as an artificial Friend, who is highly empathic and observant in nature challenges the concept of anthropocentrism that humans are the centre of earth. “Klara’s observational abilities highlight the contradictions of human behaviour, while her limited emotional understanding serves as a mirror to readers, prompting introspection about the nature of love, loyalty, and sacrifice” (p.14). Klara’s character reveals the complexities of human existence.

Tan and Huang (2025) in their study “Beyond Anthropocentrism: A Posthumanist Reflection on Artificial Intelligence and Emotion in Klara and the Sun” observe the post-humanist perspective which challenges anthropocentrism, the idea that humans are superior to other beings by depicting that AI as more than a tool and depicting questions of exclusivity of human emotions and ethics. “Posthumanism challenges the view that all forms of existence should be valued only in relation to human utility, advocating for the independent ethical standing of AI and other non-human entities” (p.8). In their research study, Tan and Huang skilfully analyzed the limitations of anthropocentrism and revealed the possibility of performing ethical duties to non-human entities enabled by technology. While this research study only critiques the superiority of human beings, it does not pay attention to the AI’s limitations.

Previous Studies Based on Waste Tide

Perczel (2024) in her study “Re-Enchantment with the Waste of the World: Expressing Futures and Representing Wastelands in Chen Qiufan’s Waste Tide” examines the Waste Tide through the perspective of e-waste colonialism and investigates the mechanisms of late modernity. The main perspective of this study is to explore the duplicity of Western world. Developed countries export e-waste to developing countries by turning these places into dumping grounds. “Through the recycling trade of e-waste, multinational enterprises like TerraGreen Recycling can bypass the regulation of local governments in the third world and purchase important strategic resources at much lower prices”.

A study by Healey (2017) “Estranging Realism in Chinese Science Fiction: Hybridity and Environmentalism in Chen Qiufan’s Waste Tide”, discusses the hybridity between Chinese realism and science fiction by using hybrid narrative styles. She highlights how skilfully Chen blends the realistic themes of China like class tension, women’s sufferings and returning intellectuals with corporate conspiracies, body augmentations and cyborg subjectivities. Healey highlights that this fusion between reality and science enables Chen to depict environmental destruction while also protecting himself from censorship. Healey supports his claim by describing Chen’s style as “science fiction realism” through which he tries to depict reality by relying on science fiction. “I argue that Chen’s ‘science fictional realism’ combines themes and structures of twentieth-century Chinese critical realism with genre markers of cyberpunk to explore environmental issues facing China and the world at large today”.

Reviews on Theory

A study by Khan et al. (2021) titled “Exploration of Hyper-Reality in the Selected Fiction of Cargill: A Postmodern Paradigm”, examine the concept of hyperreality in two novels by Robert Cargill: Sea of Rust and Day Zero. The main perspective of this study is to analyse these novels through the lens of Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra and simulation to elaborate the technological advancements that have blurred the line between reality and artificiality. “Humanity is gone and took their intelligence with them, so how inferior was their artificial creation after all? Just as man was ape, we are man”. This research study connects hyperreality with technological advancements such as robots, AI etc.

A study by Abbar (2023) “Hyperrealism of Advanced Technology and its Influences on Human Identity in Jennifer Egan’s The Candy House” elaborates the Jennifer Egan’s novel The Candy House through the lens of Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality. Her main perspective in research study is to highlight the effects of advanced technology particularly memory-sharing systems and social media that alter human identity and create a hyperreal world where reality

and imagination are indistinguishable. "There is nothing original about human behaviour. Any idea I have is likely occurring to scores of others in my demographic categories" (p.77). In this research study, the author tries to connect the literary analysis with real-world issues such as freedom, privacy and loss of human identity.

All the previous research on the selected texts of *Klara and the Sun* and *Waste Tide* reflects different perspectives like complexities of human existence, environmental destruction, humanity through the lens of artificial intelligence and e-waste colonialism. Analyzing these various ideas and perspectives, this research study explores the ways technological advancement has become problematic for human identity in such a way that now it is difficult to differentiate between reality and illusion. This study examines how the concept of hyperreality and consumerism, particularly through the lens of Baudrillard's theory, is represented in *Klara and the Sun* and *Waste Tide*, contributing a comparative exploration of these concerns in both Western and Eastern, two distinct cultural contexts.

Theoretical Framework

Postmodernism is the literary theory that emerged in the late 20th century. The postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge by Jean Francois Lyotard defines postmodernism as it is incredulity towards metanarratives. He argues that postmodern society discards the grand narratives and universal truths which were embraced by modernism such as progress and science. Jean Baudrillard is the prominent postmodern philosopher whose work focuses on the ideas such as hyperreality (simulation and simulacra) and consumerism.

Hyperreality

Jean Baudrillard in his book *Simulacra and Simulation* gives the concept of hyperreality, describing it as a postmodern condition in which the boundaries between reality and illusion become so blur in such a way that it becomes difficult to distinguish them from one another. He introduces hyperreality as "It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" describing that simulations become more significant and meaningful than actual reality (p.2). The "lines blur" between the real-life childhood experiences and "hyperreal spaces" shaped to recreate emotions of joy (p.13).

Simulation and Simulacra

Jean Baudrillard (1994) introduces the concept of simulation and simulacra in his book *Simulacra and Simulation*; he argues that simulation refers to the fake reality which is formed by the signs and symbols that lacks the human genuine experiences. "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance" (p.2). According to Baudrillard, "Simulation threatens the difference between 'true' and 'false', 'real' and 'imaginary'" (p.4). Simulation leads to the process of simulacra in such a way that a product passes through the four phases and then it becomes simulacrum. Firstly, the image reflects the faithful reality (the sacramental order); and then it distorts the reality (maleficence); thirdly, it masks the absence of reality (sorcery); and finally, it becomes completely simulacrum which has no connection with the original image (p.7). Now a days, the world is surrounded by technological advancements due to which original reality is continuously replaced by the constructed reality which looks more significant.

Consumerism

Jean Baudrillard (1998) examines the idea of consumerism in his book *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, in which he argues that it is deeply embedded in the western society and has become an important aspect of the lives of the masses. "According to him, mass media has greatly enhanced and generalized the process of simulation. Instead of reality, people are treated to simulations involving the constant recombination of various signs, of elements of the code" (p.12). Technological advancements like social media amplify the process of simulation by encouraging the people to interact with signs and symbols. The influence of industrialization and advertisements on social media gives a new dimension, leading people to believe that

happiness is only attained through the money, wealth and commodities. There is increasing demand for goods, fuels, social media, and technology, which in turn foster hyperreality in the consumer society, where constructed realities begin to replace human genuine experiences.

Research Methodology

This research study employs the theoretical framework of postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard keeping in view his concepts of simulation, simulacra, hyperreality and consumerism on the culturally and geographically two distinct novels Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* and Qiufan's *Waste Tide*. By using the theoretical lens of Jean Baudrillard, this research study uses the textual analysis of Catherine Belsey (2005) as a research method which has been taken from her Essay "Textual Analysis as a Research Method", given in the book *Research Methods for English Studies*. This study is qualitative in nature. Textual analysis as the research method aligns with my study because she argues that "Textual analysis as a research method involves a close encounter with the work itself, an examination of the details without bringing to them more presuppositions than we can help" (p.160). This study takes place by close encounter with the text of the novels *Klara and the Sun* and *Waste Tide* to explore the experiences of the characters and themes.

Belsey (2005) argues that textual analysis is essential for certain texts, particularly in the domain of cultural criticism. "Textual analysis is indispensable to research in cultural criticism, where cultural criticism includes English, cultural history and cultural studies, as well as any other discipline that focuses on texts" (p.160). The keywords "Cultural Studies" and "Cultural Criticism" are very related to this research because the aim of this research study is to analyze the two culturally distinct novels *Klara and the Sun* and *Waste Tide*.

Analysis and Discussion

Klara and the Sun (2021) and *Waste Tide* (2019) offer persuasive perspectives on the intersection of ideas such as hyperreality, technology, identity, and consumerism through the protagonists of the novels *Klara and Mimi*. By using the textual analysis of Catherine Belsey, this research highlights how differently the characters of the novels dealt with Baudrillard's hyperreality. *Klara*, an Artificial Friend (AF), is the symbolic representation of Western consumer society. She is designed to serve the children to provide them ease and emotional support in the world where emotions have become a purchasable commodity. The line, "A child like that, with no AF, would surely be lonely" (p.14), suggesting the anxiety of loneliness of modern society. Although, *Klara* is the robot in the novel but her character consistently mimics the human emotions, behaviours and empathy. In the novel, when she states, "I wanted to learn" and "I sensed something had changed" describing the narrative interrogates the boundary between robotic simulation and genuine human experience (pp.20-28). *Klara's* deep emotional connection with Josie and her observations about world aligns with the idea of Jean Baudrillard's hyperreality where lines between the real and virtual blur in such a way that it is difficult to distinguish between them.

Klara's gendered programming and social role is also being reflected when male AF Rex indicts her of being greedy, "You girl AFs are always so greedy", suggesting historically associated traits of female emotion, empathy and desire. The imitation of human behaviour muddles her identity, connecting her with the Jean Baudrillard's idea of the third phase of simulacrum, where there is a copy with no original, more significant than actual. In contrast, *Mimi* in *Waste Tide* is the protagonist of the novel. She is a waste worker who is commodified and dehumanized in the harsh and brutal land of e-waste recycling on Silicone Isle in China. Although *Mimi* is biologically a human being, her identity is endangered by the fierce interventions of technology. Her body is transformed into something beyond humans like a machine, suggesting Jean Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality where the breakdown of distinction between reality and virtuality takes place. "The augmented-reality glasses that connect directly to her brain" (Qiufan, 2019, pp. 97-98). It suggests that her sensory experience

is no longer based on reality but in technologically constructed reality, which looks more significant than the actual one.

In the novel *Klara and the Sun* (2021), Klara experiences a lot of struggles during her journey. Sometimes she becomes anxious about how to satisfy human beings through her actions. In the novel, “Rosa: she was, in her own way, excited and observant, and as anxious as I was to prepare herself to be as kind and helpful an AF as possible” (p.20). Rosa who is an Artificial Friend (AF) talks about Klara that although she is very observant but still, she is struggling to learn human behaviour such as love, empathy and illness to adjust herself among human’s society. On the other side, in *Waste Tide* (2019), Mimi also experiences a lot of struggles in the consumer society. According to Mimi in the novel “They call us the waste people” on the Silicone Isle (p.171). Basically, she is talking about powerful clans (Luo, Lin, Chen) who are running the industry on the Silicone Isle. In the novel, these lines “They think we are confined to the shacks, the wastewater pools, the incinerators, the abandoned fields—they are wrong. We are also in the security rooms of their hotels, the kitchens of their restaurants, the medical supply sterilization rooms of their hospitals. The clean water they drink, the cars they drive, the escorts working in their nightclubs, even their babysitters—anywhere where they don’t want to get dirty, the waste people struggle there to make a living. Do they really think they can avoid us?” suggesting that although elites are not considering and acknowledging the waste workers because they think that they are separate from them, but in truth, their comfort relies on them such as clean water, childcare, transportation (Qiufan, 2019, pp.171-172).

In *Klara and the Sun* (2021), Klara’s interaction with hyperreality is different from Mimi. Klara experiences hyperreality in a very peaceful and observational way. She finds her role as a companion to give care and empathy to the children. Her emotional programming bridges the gap between humans and machines. In the novel, Rosa’s remark, “I’m glad you watch everything so carefully, Klara” (p.24), marks the learning behaviour of Klara that aligns with the Jean Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality. Hyperreality is the postmodern condition where real and virtual are indistinguishable. Unlike Klara, Mimi experienced hyperreality in a brutal and harsh way. Her interaction with the technology makes her physically and psychologically devastated. The metaphor “like a shadow puppet cast by the flickering candle in the wind, illusory rather than real...” encapsulates her lack of agency and fractured identity as a of human being (p.147).

The protagonists of both novels Klara and Mimi dealt with hyperreality according to their own sociocultural backgrounds but both characters struggle within systems of commodification. Klara is placed as a product in a consumer society that values emotional wellbeing. In the novel, when Josie says to her mother that “Mom. Klara’s the one I want. I don’t want any other” suggesting that she is chosen for her uniqueness (Ishiguro, 2021, p.40). At the end, when her usefulness ends, she is left in the yard. After meeting again with the manager, she expresses “happiness”. Unlike Klara, Mimi symbolizes human beings whose lives are destroyed in the highly consumer world. She has no concern about her identity, body and labour, which is commodified in society just for the sake of economic output. The plastic products which are turned into “pellets” and transported coastal “factories” where they transform waste plastic into affordable new products labelled “Made in China” are exported to the different countries for their benefits. After some time, when these products are discarded, transported back toward China for recycling, the lives of the people of China get damaged and destroyed through this e-waste recycling. This idea aligns with the Jean Baudrillard’ consumerism as it is the notion beyond the fulfilling of basic needs of the people rather it is about the desires of the people to show their status. “The world ran on such cycles, which Mimi found fascinating and marvelous: the cycles kept the machines roaring and the workers busy”. The key words “marvelous” and “fascinating” deeply demonstrate the ironic behaviour of Mimi in such a way that this e-waste recycling process is inevitable and ever moving (Qiufan,2019, p.75). The characters of both

novels are confronted with hyperreality in different ways but the common motive behind their struggles is consumerism.

Conclusion

This research study explored the novels *Klara and the Sun* and *Waste Tide* through the ideas of Baudrillard's hyperreality and consumerism by using the textual analysis of Catherine Belsey. The study found that the protagonists of both novels *Klara* and *Mimi* reflect the collapse of distinction between humans and non-humans. Both characters experience hyperreality differently according to their own socio-cultural backgrounds. But the motive behind their struggles is rooted in consumerism and technological advancements. This study concludes that overreliance on technology threatens the human values such as morality, agency and empathy. These narratives reflect how Western and Eastern societies normalise misuse, exploitation, and dehumanization under the guise of development. It is recommended to future researchers to delve deeply into how cross-cultural dystopian literature highlights the existential, emotional and psychological impacts of global consumerism on both humans and machines.

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