

Postmodern Ethical Deconstruction in Paolo Bacigalupi's The Windup Girl

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Abstract. Set against the backdrop of ecological and social crises in post-apocalyptic Thailand, Paolo Bacigalupi's science fiction novel *The Windup Girl* presents a world with a collapsed ethical order through the conflicts between genetically modified beings, transnational capital forces, and local cultures. Drawing on relevant theories of postmodern ethics, this paper examines the ethical dislocation between different human groups, the contestation over the ontological boundary between humans and genetically modified "machines", and the alienation of the relationship between humanity and nature in the novel. At the level of human-human relations, interests lead to ethical alienation, while empathy becomes the hope for symbiosis; at the level of human-machine relations, the awakening of genetically modified beings breaks the traditional binary opposition and promotes the establishment of an ethical system based on equality and symbiosis; at the level of human-nature relations, ecological retaliation forces humans to abandon the logic of conquest and turn to an ecological ethics of holistic symbiosis. Through this analysis, this paper reveals the novel's insight into the ethical dilemmas of postmodern society and its important enlightenment for the real world in handling diverse relationships and constructing a sustainable ethical system, thereby offering critical reflections on addressing contemporary technological ethics, ecological crises, and global conflicts.

Keywords: Paolo Bacigalupi, *The Windup Girl*, postmodern ethics, symbiosis

1. Introduction

Paolo Bacigalupi, a prominent American science fiction author, has become an important figure spanning both science fiction and literary circles with his profound insights into technological development and human destiny. He has received such major international science fiction awards as the Hugo Award and the Nebula Award for his unique ecological narratives and critical perspectives on society, and his works combine rigorous scientific imagination with profound humanistic concern. As his representative work, *The Windup Girl* depicts a postapocalyptic world in the late 21st century, marked by rampant plagues, the collapse of biodiversity, and the decline of industrial civilization. Thailand, having barely maintained its independence, turns into a battlefield for various competing forces, whose biological resources and seed banks are coveted by transnational powers. The novel revolves around the abuse of genetic engineering by transnational forces led by foreign figures such as Farang, the confrontation between political factions including the Trade Ministry and

the Environment Ministry, and the dire living predicament of marginalized urban groups such as the windup girl Emiko, fully presenting the decline and potential rebirth of the postapocalyptic world.

To date, scholars have conducted multi-dimensional studies on *The Windup Girl* and achieved fruitful research results. Yang Mei focuses on the food crisis caused by genetic modification and seed patenting, and analyzes ethical choices and threats to human survival under the hegemony of genetic technology [1]. He Tang adopts the theory of spatial discipline to explore the multiple ethical contradictions between humans and modified humans in the technological era through the survival experience of Emiko [2]. Tian Haofeng, Wu Liangyuan and Guo Zixi draw on Henri Lefebvre's triadic space theory, taking the representation of the otherness of characters as the starting point, to reveal the issues of social justice in the work [3]. Deng Wei draws on Tom Beauchamp's bioethical theory to explore the ethical relations between humans and posthumans, and between humans and technology against the background of the misuse of genetic technology [4]. Chen Qi, combining the perspective of the "masterslave dialectic" and "future law", points out that Emiko's "subjective awakening" constitutes the core innovation of the novel [5]. Wu Yan adopts literary criticism and comparative literature to focus on the crisis of national sovereignty and the survival plight of marginalized groups under genetic hegemony [6]. Foreign scholars have mostly conducted studies centered on ecocriticism, technoethics and posthuman issues. Their research includes not only an analysis of the plunder of Southeast Asian resources by transnational capital from a postcolonial perspective, but also an in-depth examination of the core issue that genetic modification has impacted human subjectivity.

Although existing studies have covered multiple dimensions such as ecology, space, and bioethics, most of them focus on a single ethical issue from a specific theoretical perspective, and fail to fully address the integrity and complexity of the collapse of the ethical order in the novel. In particular, there is a lack of a systematic interpretation of the ethical imbalance in diverse relations from the perspective of postmodern ethics. In the novel, the alienation of interpersonal ethics driven by interests, the blurred subjective boundary between genetically modified beings and humans, and the ecological backlash provoked by humanity's conquest of nature all demonstrate the distinctive features of "fragmentation" and decentralization of ethics in postmodern society, yet the existing research has not thoroughly explored the underlying postmodern ethical implications. Moreover, postmodern ethics' deconstruction of traditional universal ethics, as well as its emphasis on the ethical demands of diverse subjects and the reconstruction of relationships, provides an appropriate theoretical framework for interpreting the ethical dilemmas in the novel. Postmodern ethics emerged in the second half of the 20th century as a reflection on and deconstruction of the universality and authority of modern ethics. Its emergence is closely related to the technological development, social differentiation, and the trend of value pluralism in post-industrial society. Zygmunt Bauman, a representative scholar, points out that postmodern ethics breaks down essentialism and rigid moral orders, emphasizing the reconstruction of responsibility and care for others in a fluid and fragmented modern society. Emmanuel Levinas puts forward an ethical thought centered on "the face of the Other", criticizing the violent identity that instrumentalizes and objectifies heterogeneous lives, and advocating respect for the irreducible dignity of the Other. Hans Jonas, on the other hand, constructs a ethics of responsibility oriented toward the future and nature, emphasizing that humans must assume forward-looking responsibilities for the ecological whole and the survival of life, and opposing the plunder and domination of nature in a human-centered manner. The views of these scholars collectively constitute the core propositions of postmodern ethics, abandoning absolute ethical standards, focusing on the differences and equality of diverse subjects, and attaching importance to the dynamic construction of ethical relations.

Various ethical conflicts in the novel *The Windup Girl* accurately echo the core propositions of postmodern ethics, namely deconstructing tradition and affirming pluralism. Taking this as the analytical framework, this paper systematically analyzes the ethical dilemmas and profound implications of the text from three dimensions: the relationship between humans, between humans and genetically modified beings, and between humans and nature.

2. Interpersonal relationships: from alienation to symbiosis

2.1. Alienation of interests

Zygmunt Bauman argues that postmodern society is caught in a profound moral predicament: moral responsibility is often separated by space, class, and power structures, leaving people indifferent to the suffering of others, while moral relations are easily reduced to instrumental calculations of interest [7]. In his view, the face-to-face morality sustained by traditional communities gradually loses its effectiveness in the postmodern social order, as individuals are drawn into social relations centered on efficiency and survival. Morality no longer appears as an unconditional responsibility toward the Other; instead, it becomes an option that can be dissolved by distance and obscured by interests. In the world constructed in the novel, class, race, and power structures further rupture the moral bonds between people, continuously weakening the sense of moral responsibility.

When Calorie Companies pulled out of the Burmese market, they used "intellectual property disputes" as an excuse to shift blame, leaving the local people to starve. Yates' accusation lays bare the hypocrisy and indifference of the capitalist class: "The company goes somewhere, and we all stand back and wash our hands. Pretend we weren't the ones responsible. The company pulls SoyPRO from the Burmese market, and we all stand aside, saying intellectual property disputes aren't our department. But people starve just the same." [8] The company cares only about its own interests and refuse to take responsibility for the lives of local people. They choose to evade problems, turn a blind eye to the suffering of others, and their morality is corrupted by profit. Foreign forces represented by Carlyle regard ordinary Thai people as mere pawns on a chessboard, holding entire cities hostage for the sake of profit, with total disregard for the value of subaltern lives [8]. Such practices reflect the subjugation of morality by power. In pursuit of their goals, ordinary human lives become insignificant, further embodying the lack of fundamental responsibility and care between individuals in postmodern ethics. Meanwhile, conflicts over identity and power deepen the rifts between people. The White Shirts arbitrarily oppress civilians, destroy street stalls, and expel refugees through coercive authority, while the Yellow-Cards can only kneel and submit in fear, leaving nothing but oppression and obedience between individuals [8]. The antagonism between the White Shirts and the Yellow-Cards strips society of equal moral relations. Identity disparities allow the powerful to treat the weak arbitrarily; traditional ethics of mutual aid no longer function, and social relations grow cold and indifferent. Even among the vulnerable groups themselves, alienation in interpersonal relationships has emerged. As Hafiz bowed his head and said, "But we are not the men we were before. The Green Headbands are everywhere among us, and those of us who loved the yellow plague can only suffer. Your head would buy my family security. I'm sorry." [8] This is a stark manifestation of his betrayal—Hafiz, in order to protect his family, did not hesitate to betray Fusen, who once went out of his way to help him. In such a world, morality is no longer a responsibility to others, but a tool that can be calculated and discarded. Human relationships are filled with alienation, suspicion and betrayal.

2.2. Breakthrough of empathy

In a world of alienated interpersonal relationships, empathy still exists, providing the possibility of repairing interpersonal ethics torn apart by power, class and interests. Zygmunt Bauman points out in *Postmodern Ethics* that morality begins when we become aware of the existence of the Other and cannot remain indifferent in the face of their suffering [7]. Redemption in the postmodern context does not rely on grand institutions and authoritative discipline, but returns to the individual's empathy and responsibility for the Other, re-establishing connections between people amid distance and estrangement. Empathy is not a simple emotional resonance, but a fundamental path to breaking moral isolation and reconstructing a sense of responsibility, allowing the Other obscured by power and interests to be seen again.

When the windup girl was under attack, Anderson, even though he was fully aware that this act might arouse the investigation of the White Shirts and even put himself in fatal trouble, still chose to go against his instinct of interest calculation and extend a helping hand to her. When the windup girl repeatedly asked, "Why did you help me?" , he could not give a reasonable explanation with rationality, and finally only replied: "You needed help." Anderson's help was a simple and straightforward choice. He did not consider interests or risks, but only offered help because the other party was in distress, choosing to respond to the suffering of others. This kind of help had nothing to do with weighing gains and losses, nor with differences in identity; it stemmed merely from the direct perception of the Other's suffering and the moral instinct that could not be ignored [8]. The Dung Lord's sheltering of Yellow Card refugees also demonstrates empathy and responsibility. When the entire country regarded Yellow Card holders as a threat and was ready to expel them at any time, only the Dung Lord was willing to help this group of displaced refugees. Hock Seng expressed his sincere gratitude: "When the rest of the Kingdom would have rejected our kind, you took us in... I would be dead by now if not for you." [8] The Dung Lord did not follow the social discrimination against Yellow Card holders, but chose to provide a safe haven for the vulnerable. He showed his responsibility to others through practical actions, allowing the excluded group to receive care and bringing a glimmer of morality to the indifferent society. In addition, mutual support also exists within marginalized groups. As an underclass refugee with a Yellow Card, even though Hock Seng was fully aware that "if discovered by the White Shirts" would cost him his life, he still insisted on helping his compatriots find a livelihood, firmly believing that "it is worth it to help someone from the homeland, even if it is only for a day." [8] Hock Seng's help to his compatriots reflects the mutual assistance among the underclass. In a situation where danger could strike at any time, he still chose to take care of the people around him, and such small support allowed moral relations to be preserved among the vulnerable. In an environment where everyone was in fear for their own safety, empathy enabled individuals to re-assume their responsibility to the Other, temporarily repairing the moral relations torn apart by power and interests.

3. From opposition to equality: the relationship between humans and genetically modified beings

3.1. Solidification of boundaries

In the face of genetically modified life, traditional ethics adheres to anthropocentrism, strictly limiting the boundary between "humans and non-humans" and forming a rigid divide. Emmanuel Levinas points out that the fundamental limitation of Western traditional metaphysics lies in its tendency to objectify the Other, reducing it to an object to be dominated rather than an ethical

subject with an independent face and intrinsic dignity [9]. True ethics begins with the recognition of the "Other"—that is, no longer reducing the Other to a function, category, or tool, but confronting its irreducible uniqueness of life. In the world of *The Windup Girl*, the dominant ethical order refuses such recognition; the anthropocentric traditional ethics firmly fixes genetically modified beings in the position of "tools", excluding, oppressing, and objectifying the Other.

As a genetically modified being, Emiko was deprived of her qualification as a subject of life from the moment of her birth. She and her kind were repeatedly indoctrinated through systematic discipline: "What is your honor?" "It is my honor to serve." "Where does your honor come from?" "My honor comes from my patron." [8] Genetically modified beings like Emiko were educated to obey humans from the very beginning and were not allowed to have their own thoughts. She was regarded as a being that must serve humans, rather than an independent life. This set of questions and answers negates the subjective will of modified beings, completely binding their meaning of existence to obedience and service to humans. Under this logic, even though Emiko has pain, shame, and longing, she is still regarded as a tool. People only care about what she can do, not about herself, and her life value is reduced to practical functions. In the club, she was dragged, humiliated, and trampled arbitrarily, being regarded by everyone as "a joke, a toy from a foreign country." People around ignored Emiko's pain and only treated her as an object of amusement [8]. She did not receive basic respect, nor was she treated as a dignified individual, which further reinforced the insurmountable boundary between humans and genetically modified beings. Emiko clearly realized that her living space was merely a temporary gap obtained through bribes, and her existence was a charity that could be withdrawn at any time. Such systematic discrimination and violence, under the pretext of species boundaries, exclude genetically modified beings from moral care and refuse to recognize their dignity and value as individual lives.

3.2. Recognition of symbiosis

Emmanuel Levinas argues that ethics begins with the face of the Other presenting itself to me and issuing an irrefusable command. He emphasizes that a true subject is not a self-enclosed identical existence, but an ethical subject generated in the response to the Other; true liberation is not the domination of the weak by the strong, but the equal coexistence of different lives achieved through mutual recognition [9]. From this theoretical perspective, Emiko's awakening is no longer merely a personal resistance, but a transformation from a "assimilated tool" back to an "irreducible Other", and from a dominated object to an ethical subject.

Emiko's independent consciousness first germinated from her longing for a free community. Before meeting Anderson and others, Emiko had been living in endless abuse and fear. She was regarded by humans as an emotionless toy and tool, and had never thought about what kind of life she could have besides "serving humans". When she heard that there were villages in the northern jungle where "windups have no masters and belong to no one", a "sudden urge to live" arose in her heart [8]. This was the first time Emiko realized that windup beings did not have to be attached to humans forever, nor did they have to live under the orders of masters all their lives. This news rekindled her hope for the future, making her realize that she could also have an uncontrolled life and exist as an independent life, rather than an item that could be discarded at any time. It was this longing for free and equal existence that awakened her from numbness, made her develop her own true desires, and gave her the courage to actively pursue life for the first time. This longing for freedom marks the first time she broke free from the long-instilled discipline of obedience and began to yearn for an independent living state not attached to humans. Amid long-term humiliation and abuse, she constantly struggled for "something like self-respect". She began to doubt the rules

she had always abided by, and began to think about the life she truly wanted, instead of passively accepting the inferior identity imposed on her by humans.

Faced with Raleigh's order, she broke free from the obedience engraved in her instinct for the first time, constantly alerting herself in her heart: "You are not a dog... Service only brings you abandonment into the hands of devils in the City of Angels." She straightened up and declared firmly: "I must go north, Mr. Raleigh. And as soon as possible." [8] She further explicitly acknowledged: "I realize I am no longer a slave... I will never do this kind of work again." She began to face her own feelings and refused to give up her most basic dignity for the sake of survival. This sense of dignity allowed her to completely bid farewell to passive obedience, start to actively make choices for her own life, and move towards true self-liberation.

In the novel, Somdet Chaopraya is a representative of extreme anthropocentrism. He has long regarded genetically modified life as inferior consumables and adopted cruel oppression and elimination policies against windup beings. He not only acquiesced in but even encouraged the society to humiliate, abuse, and slaughter genetically modified beings like Emiko, and also tried to consolidate the old human-dominated order by eliminating all modified beings. In his eyes, lives like Emiko are completely valueless. After being humiliated, Emiko killed Somdet Chaopraya, which is the climax of her resistance against the long-term violence and discrimination imposed on genetically modified beings [8]. At the moment of the assassination, Emiko's heart was filled with firmness and anger at oppression. She was no longer the windup girl who only knew fear and obedience, but a resister who rose up to fight for survival. In the desperate situation where her subject status had been long deprived, Emiko no longer endured, and cut off the chain of slavery imposed on herself and all her kind in an extreme way. The death of Somdet Chaopraya symbolizes the complete collapse of the old master-slave ethics, and Emiko thus completed the final establishment from a passive object to a resistant subject.

At the end of the story, she reached a consensus with the scientist and accepted her mission as the "ancestor of the New People". The old human civilization came to an end in collapse, while the windup beings, once contemptuously called, became a new hope and a new beginning in the broken world. There is no longer a relationship of master and slave, domination and submission between the two; instead, the two kinds of life put down hegemony and prejudice, coexist equally in mutual recognition, and face the scarred world together.

4. Humans: from conquering nature to revering nature

4.1. Conquest of nature

Hans Jonas pointed out in his ethics of responsibility that modern technological civilization turns nature into a mere raw material, reducing all beings to the status of objects that can be dominated, modified, and consumed [10]. He emphasized that the fatal danger of traditional anthropocentrism lies in taking self-interest as the sole criterion, ignoring the intrinsic value of natural life, simplifying nature into a resource pool to satisfy desires, and ultimately destroying the foundation of life's existence through plunder and overexploitation. In Jonas' view, true ethics must extend to the responsibility for the future, for life as a whole, and for the natural order, rather than short-sightedly exploiting and dominating. The over-exploitation of nature is precisely the fundamental root cause of ecological collapse, species alienation, and climate chaos in *The Windup Girl*.

The novel opens with a cruel scene of humans wantonly exploiting genetically modified creatures: "Megodonts groan as they push the cranks on the spindles. They hang their huge heads low, walking slowly in circles around the power spindles, their trunks making an unpleasant

scraping sound on the ground." "Workers in red and gold uniforms walk back and forth beside the animals under their charge, shouting loudly at them, and occasionally replacing the overly tired livestock. In short, they do their best to drive these elephant-derived animals to exert more strength." The genetically engineered megodonts are bound by chains, abused in the workshop, and let out shrill screams when in extreme pain, while the workers roughly force them to obey their will, completely ignoring their life feelings and biological instincts [8]. In such a world, nature is no longer a sacred whole, but an object that can be arbitrarily modified and enslaved by humans. Genetic companies arbitrarily create, abandon, and slaughter modified creatures.

At the same time, humans' greedy consumption of energy and technology has further exacerbated ecological disasters: "Behind those glass walls, the servers with flashing red and green LED lights consume enormous energy, saving the City of Angels while plunging it into an abyss. She walked down the corridor and passed through several rooms. Scientists sat in front of huge computer screens, watching and studying the bright genetic graphics on the screens. In Kanya's imagination, she seemed to feel the tide of energy flowing away. How much coal had been exhausted just to keep the work in this building going." [8] The research building consumed a huge amount of electricity day and night, wasting resources in the name of genetic research, yet was powerless in the face of real ecological crises; the prolonged dry season, erratic rainy season, and completely disrupted climate rhythms were all consequences of humans' long-term plunder of nature and interference with ecological niches. Long-term plunder broke the natural balance, the climate no longer followed the rules, and disasters became the norm. Humans only cared about extracting resources and expanding technology, but were unwilling to take responsibility for restoration, eventually leading to the collapse of the living environment.

People like Gibson even took pleasure in "beating nature" and "cultivating death", regarding the modification of life in laboratories as an intellectual competition and completely abandoning awe for life and nature. Humans posed as conquerors, reducing both nature and genetically modified creatures to tools and consumables, and ultimately pushing the entire world to the brink of collapse.

4.2. Reverence for nature

Hans Jonas argues that in the face of the unprecedented scale of our power, ethics must be extended to the unconditional responsibility for nature, the future, and all forms of life [10]. He emphasizes that humans are not masters of nature, but members of the community of life; true redemption does not lie in continuing domination and transformation, but in recognizing the intrinsic value of nature and assuming the responsibility of safeguarding the integrity of life. This responsibility is not an external coercion, but originates from the reverence for the fragility of life and the re-identification with the ecological community. In the devastated ecological ruins, the characters in the novel gradually show a faint awakening of ecological responsibility. After slaughtering thousands of cheshires, Somchai was trapped in long-term guilt. Even though others claimed that these creatures were "not natural", he still admitted that they were "as real as you or I". This guilt is a vague recognition of the intrinsic value of life and a silent reflection on the instrumentalization of nature [8]. However, the sense of powerlessness of Anderson and others in the face of technology and disasters reveals from the opposite side that plundering and controlling nature will eventually lead to a dead end. Anderson exhausted his capital and biotechnology in an attempt to obtain genetic resources and monopolize the lifeline of food in Bangkok. Although he held commercial power, he ultimately could not escape being infected by the virus in his own factory and died in the out-of-control plague [8]. His factory never truly tamed nature, and in the end, he became a sacrifice to greed. When humans regard nature as a plunderable and controllable resource, no matter how

advanced the technology or how powerful the power, they cannot prevent the system from collapsing. All attempts to control and plunder nature by standing above it will ultimately drag humans into a dead end together.

The novel does not ultimately rely on technology to rebuild the old order, but acknowledges the violence that humans have inflicted on nature, abandons the conqueror's stance, and re-understands the symbiotic relationship between humans, genetically modified organisms, and the natural environment. When humans no longer regard nature as a consumable resource, no longer treat modified life as a disposable tool, but face all life with responsibility and reverence, symbiosis can truly become possible.

5. Conclusion

In summary, from the theoretical perspective of postmodern ethics, this paper systematically interprets the threefold contradictions in Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* with the help of the views of Bauman, Levinas and Jonas. At the level of interpersonal relationships, the novel shows the moral alienation caused by class, power and capital in postmodern society, where people are isolated from each other due to interest calculation; while the empathy and mutual assistance shown by Anderson, Hock Seng and others have become the key force to break indifference and rebuild moral connections. At the level of human beings and genetically modified beings, humans instrumentalize and objectify modified life, maintaining hierarchical order through oppression and discipline; while Emiko's journey from obedience to awakening, and from enslavement to resistance, breaks the shackles of master-slave ethics and ultimately points to the recognition and symbiosis between different life forms. At the level of human beings and nature, the novel profoundly reveals the ecological disasters caused by human conquest of nature and abuse of genetic technology, and the excessive plunder of nature ultimately leads to climate and environmental damage; while the reflection and guilt of characters in the face of disasters mark the awakening of ecological responsibility awareness, pointing out the direction from domination to awe and from plunder to symbiosis.

Through the imagination of the future world, *The Windup Girl* reflects the real dilemmas of contemporary society in technological development, bioethics and ecological protection. The ethical reflections presented in the novel help people re-understand the relationships between people, between humans and technology, and between humans and nature, providing a literary reference and ideological enlightenment for reflecting on the crisis of modernity and constructing a more equal and sustainable ethical order.

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