

An Analysis of *Story of Your Life* from the Perspective of Post-human Subject Theory

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Abstract

Ted Chiang is an American speculative fiction writer who has won four Nebula Awards, four Hugo Awards, and three Locus Awards. His short story, *Story of Your Life*, was published in 1998 and received the 2000 Nebula Award for Best Novella. Based on the Post-human Subject Theory proposed by contemporary Italian philosopher Rosi Braidotti, this paper mainly analyzes the relationality and affects of the post-human subject in the novel. Meanwhile, it is also hoped that this paper can serve as a reference for studying *Story of Your Life* and transcending the anxiety of post-human society.

Key words: Ted Chiang, *Story of Your Life*, post-human subject theory.

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction to Ted Chiang and *Story of Your Life*

Ted Chiang (1967-) is undoubtedly one of the most renowned and award-winning Chinese-American writers in the modern literary world. Up to now, Chiang has published 17 short stories, all of which are of high quality and are popular among readers. He has won four Nebula Awards, four Hugo Awards, three Locus Awards, and three Japan Science Fiction Awards, which have earned him worldwide fame. Additionally, his novel was selected for the Annual American Short Story Highlights, signifying recognition by the literary community in the United States. In general, his works blend the poetry of science fiction with the romance of philosophy and are full of reflections on post-human humanity and values.

Ted Chiang also specializes in exploring the essence of science in the form of magic and religion, focusing on the emotions and beliefs of post-humans. Additionally, he delves into profound reflections on post-human ethics. Humanity is being influenced by cyborgs, genetic technology, and the Internet. Chiang believes that we are already transitioning into a post-human state, yet a new ethical framework for this era has not yet been established. He employs science fiction as a medium to ponder philosophical inquiries, such as the possibility of free will, the potential for digital entities to possess

legal rights, and the blurring lines between humans and non-humans. Moreover, Ted Chiang adopts a “soft science-fiction” approach, avoiding grand narratives like cosmic wars. Instead, he depicts post-human characters against the backdrop of a near-future setting. With themes of decline, silence, and destruction, there remains an undercurrent of optimism that inspires individuals in post-human societies to think rationally about technology and the future.

Chiang’s short story, *Story of Your Life* was first published in 1998 and later included in his 2002 collection, *Stories of Your Life and Others*. The novel won the 2000 Nebula Award for Best Novella and the 1999 Theodore Sturgeon Award. Besides, a film adaptation of the story, *Arrival*, was released in 2016, which was nominated for eight Academy Awards and won the award for Best Sound Editing. *Story of Your Life* primarily explores the communication between humans and aliens through the lens of language. Its central themes are language and determinism in a post-human society. In this novel, linguist Louise Banks learned an alien language, which offered her an alien logic that completely changed her life. As the past, present, and future simultaneously unfold before Louise, there is a philosophical question about whether she will choose the same life path.

1.2 Research Objectives and Significance

This paper attempts to analyze the subject of Ted Chiang’s post-human image in *Story of Your Life* from the perspective of post-human subject theory. It summarizes the two main characteristics of the theory of post-human subject: relationality and affects.

Firstly, based on post-human subject theory, his paper takes the protagonist Louise Banks in *Stories of Your Life* as the object of study. It initially analyzes the relationality of post-human subjects and examines the non-unified nomadic subject. Through communication with aliens, the transformation of the subject is achieved via “Transposition”. By learning Heptapods’ language, Louise Banks evolved her brain and gained the ability to challenge conventional time and space-bound thinking. With such an experience, the post-human subject was constructed in relation, endowing Louise with life and independent subjectivity. Secondly, this paper focuses on the affects of the post-human subject. To begin with, it introduces the affective turn of post-human and studies two primary affective points embodied in the novel. The first significant affective point pertains to the struggle between life and death. The other important affective experience is the struggle against predestination.

When studying Ted Chiang’s science fiction, scholars predominantly concentrate on philosophical issues and postmodernism. However, it is equally important to consider analysis from the perspective of post-human subject theory. Based on the theory, this paper aims to examine the post-human subject in Ted Chiang’s *Stories of Your Life*. Regarding theoretical significance, the post-human subject theory holds certain positive implications. It serves not only as a novel theoretical framework to navigate the post-human predicament but also as a theoretical leap and reconstruction of the subjectivity issue. This paper interprets the post-human subject image in Ted Chiang’s *Stories of Your Life* and analyzes the construction at both structural and ethical levels to achieve a deeper comprehension of the post-human subject in the near future. About the practical significance, the paper aims to offer suggestions to address the issue of post-human subject anxiety. Inspired by the nomadic subject, it also proposes relevant strategies for creating a community of life equality and a human destiny community that promotes racial equality.

2. Post-human Subject Theory

2.1 The Development of Post-human Subject Study

Post-humanism, which emerged in the 1980s, was a reflection upon and transcendence of traditional humanism. It challenged traditional human-centered ideas by focusing on interconnections among lives and complex systems, aiming to disrupt hierarchies and boundaries between humans and non-human entities (intelligent machines, animals, and plants). From Nietzsche’s proclamation of “God

is dead,” signaling a move away from humanism, to Foucault’s assertion of “Man is dead,” indicating the deconstruction of the human subject, the process was accompanied by a reconstruction of human subjectivity. Inspired by it, post-humanism emerged.

Focusing on interconnected and dynamic living systems, post-humanism primarily advocated for the deconstruction of anthropocentrism and believed that the boundaries between human beings and other entities could be disrupted. Concurrently, it contemplated the emergence of post-humans whose bodies might be changed by genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, and bionic technology.

In response to the question of the definition of post-human, Spinoza advocated for ontology. According to Spinoza’s theory, an entity was understood as something that was recognized in and through itself. In other words, the boundaries of separation always border on something else, implying that the separation itself must eventually become part of the entity. According to Deleuze, Spinoza’s monism believed the whole world as a monistic universe, dissolving the subject-object dichotomy of humanism and anthropocentrism. Having dissolved anthropocentrism, Katherine Hayles focused on the nonhuman elements of the post-human, asserting that the post-human subject is a mixture. Hayles argued that this subject is a collection of various heterogeneous components that continually construct and reconstruct its boundaries. In addition to the interaction between human and non-human entities, Rosi Braidotti referred to these non-human elements as universal life forces. I therefore do not work completely within the social constructivist method but rather emphasize the non-human, vital force of Life, which is what I have coded as zoe. (Braidotti 60) She argued that there exists a zoe that permeates all living matter, and that all living matter is universally equal in terms of it, breaking down the boundaries between human and nonhuman life, allowing for their re-connection.

2.2 Introduction to Rosi Braidotti’s Post-human Subject Theory

Contemporary Italian philosopher Rosi Braidotti proposed the Post-human Subject Theory, which significantly influenced post-humanists in their considerations of embodiment and hybridity in the post-human subject. Critiquing classical humanism and anthropocentrism, post-human subject theory was concerned with the practice of finding the life force in other entities. I refer to this move as expanding the notion of Life towards the non-human or zoe. (Braidotti 50) With zoe as a force that connected all species, the post-human subject was opening up new possibilities for a new definition of human being and ethics.

Based on the proposal of zoe, Braidotti put forward that the post-human subject represents successive waves of becoming, driven by zoe as the ontological engine. It is neither human nor divine, but relentless material and vowed to multi-directional and cross-species relationality. (B,137) It aims to reorient humans in post-human conditions and to facilitate a new form of self-awareness and cognition. She argued that the post-human subject was nomadic, which was the non-unitary subject in an interactive relationship between the self and the other. Through cyclical and rhythmic movements, the subject affirms non-human vitality. On the one hand, it lacks inherent connotation and essence and was always in a process of becoming; on the other hand, it formed intricate relationships with non-human animals, plants, and inorganic substances in shaping its subjectivity. It not only eliminated the rational subject constructed and perpetuated by non-human entities, but also disrupted biological and social hierarchies in human society. The case is made instead for critical post-human thought and a definition of the subject as nomadic, that is to say: transversal, relational, affective, embedded, and embodied. (Braidotti 13) This paper primarily focuses on two key features of post-human: relationality and affects.

3. The Relationality of Post-human Subject

The most fundamental representation of the post-human subject is the nomadic subject. Criticism of the nomadic subject involves a critical rejection of humanism and anthropocentrism by post-human theorists, along with a greater respect for the power of the nonhuman factor. Post-human

critical theory emphasized the fluidity and dynamic nature of zoe, which shaped the post-human subject. The nomadic subject challenges fixed social hierarchies and power structures, rejecting any form of homogeneity. The subject is not only a way of being, but also a symbol of resistance against traditional social systems. Such a subject is neither disorganized nor unified. Instead, through a nomadic logic, it achieved a more flexible form of organization that is in a dynamic and inclusive movement. In essence, the nomadic subject diverges from the traditional concept of human subjectivity, encouraging individuals to transcend the constraints of past identities and to explore new possibilities in a different post-human society.

With the post-humanistic shift in focus from anthropocentrism to a “transposition” of the subject, the post-human subject was constructed and began to positively adapt to the environment in the near future. Considering the post-human dilemma is viewed as an opportunity to explore new modes of thinking, cognition, and self-expression, and to open up new possibilities.

3.1 Constructing the Nomadic Subject in “Transposition”

The characteristics and functions of the nomadic subject can be realized through “transposition”. The process of “Transposition” indicates that the subject is not unified or holistic, but rather hybrid and fluid. Due to environmental constraints, the embodied entity is constantly incorporating and transforming from its natural, social, and technological environments. By learning a new language and interacting with the alien mind, Louise acquired a nonlinear mindset and reinvented her subjectivity. Through completing her “transposition”, she constructed a heterogeneous and fluid subject.

Firstly, the post-human subject integrates and transforms from its environment. The post-human is a mobile subject in post-human societies, and the subject is no longer confined to the geographic and cultural space of its origin. It had the potential to transcend the limitations of race, ethnicity, and species, defying hegemony and anthropocentrism. In her interactions with aliens, Louise is no longer limited to the Earth and human culture that molded her, but rather, she acquired alien wisdom through language and nonlinear experiences of time.

Chiang endorsed Sapir-Wolf hypothesis in the novel and believed Language is a medium for thought. Based on it, human language is linear and follows a logic with obeying chronological order. Thus, the mindset of human beings is formed linearly, and they believe in the logic of cause and effect. In contrast, the Heptapods’ language is non-chronological and non-linear, which imparts a post-human perspective to Louise, suggesting predestination. In the novel, Louise successfully employs alien language and mindset as primary tools to transform her subject, indicating a deconstruction and re-adaptation of the rules of space. Through the alien language and thinking, she dismantles the established rules of the human subject.

As a post-human transformed by alien language and culture, she gained a clearer understanding of the environmental rules and the ability to appropriately foresee the future. Consequently, freeing herself from the constraints of the past human existence, Louise became a post-human with the ability to clearly perceive and even control the environment. Through her new subject, she was able to unleash this powerful force given by the aliens’ wisdom, completing the “transposition” to create a new post-human body. From this body, which was a fusion of Heptapod thought and the human mindset, Louise could possess a circular mind that perceives the environment from different perspectives. Besides, she learned to adapt to her surroundings. Louise built her subjectivity through a transformation in her thinking, demonstrating that the post-human subjectivity was always in a process of “becoming”. Thus, the body was embraced by the fluidity of the nomadic subject.

Secondly, the post-human subject that has been formed is better equipped to adapt to its environment. With an understanding of the world that transcends human limitation, Louise could better comprehend the rules governing the world and adapt to her surroundings until she masters

them. Louise gains a deeper understanding of the post-human environment by perceiving it in a nonlinear way. Through changing the mind and body, the environment generates a new identity for her. The process of becoming resonant with the movement of the nomadic body. Louise's successful "transposition" is evidence of a post-human subject in a process of "becoming" that was a fluid and hybrid subject.

3.2 The Relational Subject

Braidotti posited that the post-human was a subject constituted in relationships and multiplicities, which worked across species differences and was always in successive waves of becoming. In response to this relational subject, it was given a positive reference on the construction of a living community. Post-human subjectivity expresses an embodied and embedded and hence partial form of accountability, based on a strong sense of collectivity, relationality, and hence community building. (Braidotti 49) Post-humanists adopted an inclusive, holistic, and collective approach to thinking, shaping a subject that resists hegemony and exclusivity. It provided a new perspective and attempted a positive transposition of subject reconstruction.

The post-human subject establishes identity within a network of relationships, incorporating different identities from the past and present to shape the whole entity. The contact of different identities of Louise produces a new hybrid identity that is neither one nor the other and that is formed in the process of "becoming".

Firstly, the subject is constructed from different identities. Following the communication with the Heptapods, Louise intertwined and restored these threads of relationship into a web, which in turn situated this web in the larger context of the universe, embodying the fluidity and hybridity of post-human subject identity. Through the exchange and transformation of identities via spatial contact, Louise learned about non-humanity, the most striking feature of aliens in *Story of Your Life*, which contributed to the complex power relations between self and other.

These aliens were born with a barrel-shaped structure at the center of their axis, exhibiting a highly symmetrical form. Moreover, they possessed seven appendages, each of which could function as a hand. Whether referred to as Heptapods by scientists or compared to hovercrafts by Louise, they tend to use the inanimate word "barrels". The stark contrast between these "barrels" and humans enables Louise to shift her perspective from the individual to the cosmos, where the individual's will is inconsequential against the enormity of the species and the universe, thus shaping a cosmic perspective of post-humanity.

Meanwhile, the non-humanity of the Heptapods is evident through their ethical differences. Those aliens transcend human standards of good and evil, who are neither invaders nor companions. Consequently, humans cannot ascertain the intentions of the Heptapods. In the logic of humans, the Heptapods must be on a distinct mission, whether they were merchants, missionaries, or scholars. In fact, these aliens were very cooperative with Louise's communication efforts, but never made any demands. However, the humans did not believe this attention and even worried that they would steal human secrets during gift exchanges. The reason for this distrust is that humans tend to think from an anthropocentric viewpoint and struggle to establish trust with other species. In the end, Heptapods departed suddenly, and humans never understood why the barrels left, why they came to Earth, or why they behaved as they did. At the same time, the Heptapods completely affected Louise's core qualities as a human. With an alien mindset, Louise foresaw this departure and could discard the traditional human perspective, respecting the differences between human and alien civilizations from a subjective standpoint. In this manner, as a post-human, she gained a deeper understanding of the Heptapods' ethics and behavior and realized the exchange of identities by learning the non-humanity of other species.

Secondly, the post-human subject is established across various times and spaces. The significance of the post-human nomadic model lies in its implication of a tendency towards a qualitatively transformed self. By situating oneself in different periods simultaneously, the non-linear time changes the subject's perception of things, particularly of experiences destined for tragedy. In this process of learning an alien language, Louise escaped the linearity of limited time, revolutionizing herself and reconstructing the post-human subject.

In *Story of Your Life*, Louise acquired a unique perspective on time through her study of Heptapods B. For her, the past, the present, and the future happen at the same time. When she fell in love with Gary, got married, and decided to have a child, she knew that their marriage would end soon, and their daughter died unexpectedly at the age of twenty-five. However, Louise's ability to perceive the future also allowed her to reassess these things from a post-human perspective. Due to the non-linearity of time, life and death became something that could exist and be experienced at the same time. Thus, when she mourns her daughter's death, she also feels her daughter's vibrant life. Her decision to give her daughter life transforms the tragic ending into a life-affirming one. Because of the non-linearity of time, the old and new generations, life and death, pleasure and pain cannot be separated. This perspective allows people to look at the pain of the present and the impending death of the future in a more positive light, accepting them as an affirmation of joy and life. Instead of avoiding the risk, post-human consider the beauty of the encounter to be more valuable than the pain that would occur in the future. Even though Louise knew the bowl in the market would hit her daughter in the future, she naturally purchased it. It would be a pity to miss the beauty of the Bowl at the present moment because of future injuries.

Throughout the novel, Louise undergoes several transformations, shaped by the various spaces she inhabits, and the post-human subject tends to emerge. The institute, the family, and the space for communication with aliens solidified the nomadic subject in space. Each space in her life is a relay station in the process of subject formation, collectively creating this unique post-human subject. Louise is a subject shaped by linguistics in the past space, a learner of an alien language in the present space, and the mother in the future space. Through circular thinking, the differences of those identities in the various spaces contributed to the constitution of subjectivity and intensified over time. In the process of contacting aliens, Louise could deconstruct traditional prescriptive notions on space and identity, thus disrupting anthropocentrism and achieving the goal of post-humanism.

4. The Affects of Post-human Subject

Affective action should be decoupled from individualism to account for the complexity inherent in the relations between humans and non-humans. From the perspective of post-human, emotional engagement is not only an inner feeling, but also a continuous flow which fosters a connection between the post-human body and its practice. When human beings cease to be the single measure of all things, they cannot perceive or comprehend the intricate mental experiences of the post-human subject. Braidotti believed that the post-human condition urged us to think critically about who and what we are actually in the process of becoming. I take the post-human predicament as an opportunity to empower the pursuit of alternative schemes of thought, knowledge, and self-representation. (Braidotti 12)

Following the advent of genetic modification and contact with extraterrestrial beings in the future, the post-human subject with its modified bodies experiences emotions distinct from those of past humans. The body of the post-human is infused with non-human elements. As a result, post-human exhibits a different form of cognition and emotion when confronting life and death, fatalism and free will, which can offer some suggestions for modern society.

4.1 Life and Death

Post-human beings are destined to perceive death and life in different ways. For the individual, death signifies the end. However, from a post-human standpoint, time, language, emotion, the body, and other attributes that were once considered unique to humans have become indistinct. Thus, life and death transcend individuality when humans are no longer at the center of the universe.

In *Story of Your Life*, Louise acquired a unique perspective on time through learning the language Heptapods B. For her, time was no longer chronological. She can perceive the present, the past, and the future in a seemingly equal way. She was aware that her marriage would soon end, and that their daughter would tragically die at the age of twenty-five. However, Louise's ability to perceive time enabled her to reconsider life and death from a post-human perspective, redefining the meaning of life. This dynamic vision of time enlists the creative resources of the imagination to the task of reconnecting to the past. (Braidotti 165)

For Louise, the non-linearity of time means that life and death are experienced simultaneously. Consequently, when she contemplated her daughter's death, she was also experiencing her daughter's vivid life. Due to the juxtaposition of past and future, the overlapping of life and death, Louise experienced the joy of companionship and relieved the pain of her daughter's future death. Her decision to forge this relationship and bring her daughter into the world affirms her daughter's life and is meant to provide her with a unique life experience. This choice represents Louise's desire to change the reality of the world, to seek a timeless quality of time in the exploration of spaces, and to frame the daughter's life in a co-temporal time from the perspective of post-human. Wandering between the joy of life and the pain of death is the unique emotional experience of life and death of the post-human.

Post-human beings no longer perceive life and death as binary opposites. The circular thinking introduced by the alien emphasized the process of life, allowing for reflection on death and the meaning of life. In this mode of thinking, the inevitable death of humans is not seen as the termination of life itself. Instead, life and death cannot be separated and coexist. This approach to critical thinking is an exercise in synchronization, which sustains activity here and now by making concrete or actual the virtual intensity. (Braidotti 166) Braidotti also argued that the process was simultaneously after and before us, both past and future, in a flow of mutation, differentiation, or becoming. With this critical thought, post-human conceived a different feeling toward death. In the novel, Louise wrote, "From the beginning I knew the end, I chose the path I was going to take, the path I would have to take in the future. I followed the path, full of joy, perhaps full of pain. My future, does it minimize, or maximize?" (149) In the end, the juxtaposition of space and time encourages Louise to reconsider the effects of ephemeral moments, thus partly alleviating the pain caused by her daughter's death.

4.2 Fatalism and Freewill

There exists a contradiction between free will and destiny. When humans are aware of their destiny, it seems that free will cannot coexist. There is an inherent conflict between the concepts of predestination and free will. In the face of the free will dilemma, the struggle between predestination and free will is also a significant affective experience for post-humans. In *the Story of Your Life*, time is portrayed as non-linear, with Louise existing simultaneously in the present, past, and future. By learning Heptapods B, Louise mastered the Heptapods' synchronized and concurrent thought patterns and realized that she could predict the future. In the novel, Louise contemplates the nature of free will: the existence of free will implies that humans cannot predict the future, and the sole reason they are aware of free will's existence is because they have experienced it directly.

Meanwhile, in the novel, the journey towards predestination also reveals the presence of free will, with the contradiction stemming from differing cognitive approaches. The Heptapods' mode of thinking does not adhere to the law of cause and effect, but rather to the theory of purpose, which

explains the different comprehension of Fermat's Law between human scientists and the Heptapods. Whether human beings prove through scientific experiments that light will choose the path of least time, or the Heptapods know the destination of light before it begins its journey, the outcome and the reality remain identical. Just as Louise's daughter in the novel would request her mother to retell the fairy tale repeatedly. Even though she was thoroughly familiar with the story and could point out Louise's errors, she still desired to listen to her mother recount it. For the child, the joy of the interactive process was undiminished by repetition, and as Louise advanced step by step towards her future, the authenticity of the process was not lessened by it.

For Louise, even though she was aware of her daughter's impending death, the joy of spending time with her and witnessing her growth held equal significance. Thus, she supported her daughter's hobby, despite foreseeing the risks associated with extreme sports. While her daughter's passing was heartbreaking, the beauty of the journey led Louise to embrace her daughter's free will. Meanwhile, this process shows Louise's free will, where she accepts the tragedy and gives her profound respect for her daughter's life and passions.

Fate and free will are not necessarily irreconcilable. Being powerless to change the past or the future does not have to bring sadness. In *Story of Your Life*, characters have no choice in the face of the past or the future. Their bittersweet experience stems precisely from the fact that they are destined to live a life that is both painful and joyful. Even though they knew the end from the beginning, they still chose to go on. The free will that humans make is not entirely free, and this state of fatalism is not necessarily detrimental. However, it is in this process of choosing that people are compelled to consider what is truly important in life. Louise could foresee the misfortune of her marriage and the death of her daughter, but she also chose to love without hesitation. Because life was a state of flux rather than permanence. The purpose of life did not lie in its end, but in the experience of the process of life. The post-human story seems to revert to the primal state of mankind, where humanity re-examines itself and re-realizes its own insignificance.

5. Conclusion

For post-humans, there is a huge challenge, which is how to think critically and creatively about who they actually are and how to construct a suitable system of symbiosis and coexistence. Simultaneously, this presents an opportunity to empower the pursuit of alternative paradigms of thought, knowledge, and self-representation in post-human society.

Ted Chiang's novel *Story of Your Life* offers the reader a glimpse into the process of becoming post-humans through the character of Louise Banks. By summarizing the two main characteristics of the post-human subject in the novel, the paper concludes that Louise embodies relationality and affects. By observing and learning actively, one evolves into a post-human with a nonlinear mode of thinking, which shows the zoe of the post-human.

Moreover, by examining Louise's unique choices when faced with the issues of death and fatalism, readers gain a deeper insight into the impact and moral framework of post-human subject. Meanwhile, inspired by the core concept of post-humanism: anthropocentrism and zoe, it offers relevant suggestions for the establishment of a community of survival with equality of life.

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