

An Analysis of the Subversion of the Self and the Other in *2001: A Space Odyssey* from the Perspective of Postcolonial Theory

Ting Sun

Xi'an Mingde Institute of Technology, The School of Language and Culture Communication, Xi'an 710100, Shaanxi, China

Copyright: © 2025 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: The author of this thesis found that the novel cares about such problems as human beings' exploration of the universe, the relationship between human beings and aliens, and the ultimate goal of the civilization of human beings. First, the author attempted to clarify the binary opposition relationship between human beings and aliens in this novel based on the binary opposition between the Occident (the Self) and the Orient (the Other) put forward by Edward Said. As aliens had visited the earth in the primeval age, and human beings have never stopped exploring the universe, the author of this paper then sets out to investigate the true identities of human beings and aliens. It was found that aliens are the true Self to some extent while human beings are the Other, which subverts the binary opposition in postcolonial theory and proves that under certain circumstances the Self can exchange identity with the Other.

The research on the concrete embodiment of the colonizer as the Self and the colonized as the Other and the interchange process of the identity of the Self and the other from the perspective of postcolonialism will help human beings to better understand their position in the universe, to maintain a friendly attitude towards aliens, and to harmoniously live with the civilization of the Outer Space.

Keywords: scientific novel; postcolonialism; postcolonial theory; binary opposition

Online publication: August 26, 2025

1. Theoretical Framework

1.1. Postcolonialism conception

Postcolonial theory originated in the latter half of the 20th century and mainly studied the "post" aspect of the colonial period, the cultural discourse power relationship between the colonial power and the colonies, Orientalism, Third World criticism, the other and the writing of cultural identity. Postcolonialism, also called postcolonial criticism, emerged with the publication of Said's *Orientalism*, which mainly investigates the relationship between the sovereign country and colonized country.

1.2. Postcolonialism theory and binary opposition

Edward Said, who is regarded as the real pioneer of postcolonialism theory, his book *Orientalism* published in 1978

becomes the sign of the rising of postcolonialism. From then on, postcolonialism begins to sprout in the western scholar field as a kind of academic ideology which has a keen sense of politics and cultural criticism. Orientalism studies is a knowledge system and theoretical framework formed around multidisciplinary research on the East^[1]. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak regards *Orientalism* as the source of postcolonialism discipline. The ideology of postcolonialism began to immerse into sociology, science of international relations, comparative literature, ethnic and gender study, etc. It is Edward Said who first used postcolonialism in literature criticism in his book *Culture and Imperialism*. In postcolonial theory, the colonizer is recognized as the Self and the colonized is confirmed as the other. This article uses Said's postcolonial theory to explain how humans are constructed as "the self" and how aliens are constructed as "the other".

Postcolonial theory, in general, is a critique of Eurocentrism, a dissolution and subversion of the binary opposition between colonizers and the colonized. In the book of *Orientalism*, Said has made a clear clarification of the relationship between East and West. Said mainly utilizes Foucault's theory of discourse to identify Orientalism. In Said's opinion, "if Orientalism can't be examined as a discourse, one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage-- and even produce -- the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the enlightenment period^[2]". In Said's analysis, the east is manipulated by the west, and is the dependency of the west. The east is the other, whereas the west is the Self.

The binary opposition (also binary system), by the literal meaning, refers to a pair of related terms or concepts that are opposite in meaning. The theory of binary opposition is first put forward by the Russia Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in his book *Course in General Linguistics*. Whenever the term "binary opposition" is discussed, it will always stir up such matches as light/dark, strong/weak, man/woman, forward/backward, married/unmarried, on and off, the colonizer/the colonized, etc. These terms will always construct an obvious comparison with the first term being privileged and superior whereas the second one being derivative and inferior.

Said's "Orientalism" launched a postcolonial cultural critique, focusing on how Western culture, within the framework of imperialist ideology, constructed a degraded, decadent and evil image of the East, making the East the "other" of Western concepts and power. This kind of Orientalism is a negative and ideological one. That is an orientalism that reveres and idealizes the East, seeking to understand it and present it in an appealing and friendly light^[3]. Therefore, the relationship between the west and the orient is not absolutely opposite, on the contrary, they could exchange their identity.

The theory of binary opposition is also clearly demonstrated in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. In this novel, human beings in the 21st century have a big ambition to explore the outer space and have already landed on the moon and established the Clavius Base, demonstrating human beings' ambition to make the moon as its colony. Before encountering with aliens, human beings always regard themselves as the superior species in the universe and conquer other planets in the universe according to their own will without considering the feeling of the life living there. By this way, human beings on the earth and aliens from the outer space constitute a binary opposition with human beings as the colonizer/self and aliens as the colonized/the other. Later on, with the development of the story, the identities of these two species experience an exchange.

2. The demonstration of Post-colonialism in 2001: A Space Odyssey

2.1. Human Beings as the Self

In the ancient times, human beings create many myths about the universe such as "Chang E Ben Yue", while in the modern times, human beings have designed several kinds of spaceships and spacecrafts to travel to the universe, for example, many countries have already sent satellite to the outer space. In the novel *2001: A Space Odyssey*, human beings have a strong will to conquer the outer space in the 21st century and have already landed on the moon, on the mars, even built various space stations and the Clavius base on the moon. In this era, human beings wonder whether there is life on other planets and explore the universe as if they were the true master of the universe. During the process of exploring the outer space, human beings regard themselves as the colonizer and modifier of the universe, regarding themselves as the Self of the outer space. The embodiment of human beings as the Self is mainly demonstrated in these two following aspects: the

image of human beings and the attitude of human beings toward aliens.

2.1.1. Image of Human Beings

The human characters who are elaborately described and play important roles in the development of the plot in the novel mainly include Moon-watcher -- an ape-man (forefather of humans) in the first part, Dr. Heywood Floyd (a doctor) in the second part, David Bowman and his assistant Frank Poole in the third part. As the image of human beings as the Self is going to be talked in this section, so some important and representative characters will be chosen as the study subjects. And human beings' explorations of the universe just start from the 21st century, the analysis will also initiate from main characters in the 21st century.

Dr. Floyd will be the first analyzed character. In the 21st century, after human beings' successfully landing on the moon and colonizing the moon, they find a black, smoothing and geometrically proportioned slab underneath the moon -- the monolith. However, scientists who have already been on the moon cannot figure out what the monolith is and can't explain the reason for the strange phenomenon that the monolith is buried under the ground of the moon. Under this circumstance, Dr. Floyd appears in the novel as a representative of the highest level intellectual on the earth coming to the moon to solve their puzzles. In the eyes of other scientists, Dr. Floyd is the "Chairman of the National Council of Astronautics" and the best scholar on astronomy, being able to help them figure out the truth of that monolith. Here, the image of Dr. Floyd is positive, glorified, powerful, which approximates to the image of the Occident in *Orientalism*, which always deems itself have the responsibility to reveal the mask of the orient. Even Dr. Floyd himself feel proud of being the best scholar and the only man being sent to the moon in this mission.

And that enormous vehicle, Floyd told himself with some incredulity -- yet also with some pride -- is waiting for me. As far as he knew, it was the first time that an entire mission had been set up to take a single man to the moon^[4].

Here, Floyd's confidence and pride towards the mission just like humans' superiority in front of the whole universe, believing that they are the best in the universe while marginalizing other species in the universe.

2.1.2. Attitude of Human Beings Toward Aliens

In the relationship between Self and Other, Self is always the superior one who has the discourse right and the other is deprived of right to express. In the novel *2001: A Space Odyssey*, aliens represented by the monoliths are so passive that the only fate of them are waiting for the coming of humanity. The monolith is the symbol of alien in this novel, and human beings' attitude toward the monolith has experienced a change from respect and awe to casually treating.

Actually, it is the discovery of a monolith underneath the moon that catches the attention of scientists on the moon. When Dr. Floyd together with some scientists on the moon go to the crater to see TMA-1, Dr. Floyd experiences some psychological changes. At first, he feels quite revere toward that monolith, "As Floyd walked slowly down the ramp toward the black rectangle, he felt a sense not only of awe but of helplessness^[4]."

However, later, his reverie toward this monolith is interrupted by the requirement for taking photographs. Although Dr. Floyd feels that it is ridiculous, he is quite happy to take some photographs with TMA-1 and other scientists, behaving just like tourists who visit some scenery and leave some memories. At this time, he is quite relaxed without the reverie toward the monolith before. Dr. Floyd's attitude toward this monolith experiences a psychological journey from respect and awe to treating it as a toy or an experimental sample. Here, as the representative of human beings, Floyd's attitude toward this monolith demonstrates clearly human beings' subjective initiative as the self, while the monolith's passiveness as the other. In the relationship between the Self and the other, the Self is always on the superior level and have the discourse right while the Other is deprived of expressing.

Because human beings rank at the highest level in the biological circle on the earth, they always think that they are superior and stronger than many other creatures on the earth. This superiority makes it possible for human beings to believe that they may be the only intelligence in the universe and can explore the universe according to their will. The finding of the monolith on the moon and the establishing of the Clavius Base are good examples. Human beings' attitude

and treatment of the moon demonstrates their inborn superiority as the Self.

2.2. Aliens as the Other

In Said's postcolonial theory, the Europa (Occident) usually describes the Orient as irrational, mysterious, dissolute, degenerated and inhuman while glorifies itself as intelligent, democratic, abstinent, and progressive, and the Europa really believes that it can bring civilization and reason to the laggard and fatuous Orient by colonizing it, so as to put the Orient on its opposite side -- the Other. And the term "Other" conveys a conception that objects or humans it refers to are not important, usually being neglected. Also, the term "Other" means the process by which the Occident transforms the Orient as its subordination. The Orient is usually the silent and marginalized one in the relationship with the Occident.

In the novel *2001: A Space Odyssey*, aliens represented by the monoliths which are placed on the earth, buried on the moon, and located in Japetus have experienced being neglected by human beings, passively waiting for the coming of human beings for a quite long time. When human beings notice the monoliths, they always try to learn knowledge about it and transform it to something they're familiar with. So, in this aspect, aliens can be regarded as the other in this novel as opposed to human beings.

Moon-Watcher came face to face with the New Rock when he led the tribe down to the river in the first light of morning. It was a rectangular slab, three times his height but marrow enough to span with his arms, and it was made of some completely transparent material; indeed, it was not easy to see except when the rising sun glinted on its edges^[4].

This passage is the first impression of the monolith in the eyes of Moon-Watcher, shaping the monolith as a crystal thing he never meets. The portrait of the monolith indicates that it will be easily ignored if without the light shining on the verge of it, which indirectly prove its otherness.

3. Subversion of the Self and the Other

3.1. Aliens as the Self

Although from the ancient time human beings are ignorant of the existence of aliens, aliens have visited the earth when human beings are still in the primeval age. It can be said that aliens always play a dominant role in the relationship with human beings, and everything is under the control of aliens. So, it is not difficult to find that aliens are the true self. The monolith, which is proved to be the embodiment of the intelligence of aliens who have already surpassed the physical existence, has been put in the prairie of South Africa. And the monolith plays quite a key role in stimulating human beings to learn to use tools. Clarke has depicted the purpose of the monolith in the following excerpt:

They could never guess that their minds were being probed, their bodies mapped, their reactions studied, their potentials evaluated. At the first, the whole tribe remained half crouching in a motionless tableau, as if frozen into stone. Then the man-ape nearest to the slab suddenly came to life^[4].

Before doing experiments on these man-apes, aliens carry out a research on their bodies and minds. After learning the basic state of these man-apes, aliens begin their experiment from the nearest one to the monolith. Moon-Watcher is chosen for testing. He feels a dull resent against the control of spirit from the monolith for his body moving out of his own control. Finally, all of the man-apes of the tribe are possessed and tested. During this process, man-apes are so weak to resist the power of the monolith. They are colonized by the monolith, which is the spirit of aliens. It can also be regarded as the successful ideological invasion of aliens towards man-apes, leading them to change to more complicated emotional human beings.

Transforming these man-apes from barbarous animals to intelligent human beings is a slow and tedious task, however, that crystal monolith has enough patience to wait for success, even if there is only one to be transformed successfully. If one of them has evolved into human being successfully, the genes will pass on to the next generation. Not too long after the experiment of the monolith, its influence on man-apes begin to demonstrate. In this first part of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the monolith serves as the Self who teaches man-apes, the other to use tools and remold the way in which man-apes live.

3.2. Human Beings as the Other

In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, human beings have already landed the Moon, the Mars and had established their living Base on the Moon. During the process of exploring the Moon, human beings have discovered a relic of other intelligence in the universe-- a monolith, which sends a ray toward the Saturn. Later, human beings carry out their plans to trace the route of that signal with a strong will to find the origin of that monolith and its secret. However, alien life had already existed long before the birth of human beings. Aliens visited the earth when human beings were in the state of man-apes. However, due to man-apes' ignorance, they did not recognized the aliens.

No sooner than the monolith settled down on the Africa prairie, had it begun to remold the man-apes. At the very beginning, it carried out a study on the minds, biological structure, and reactions of these man-apes while these man-apes were paralyzed before it for its astonishing display of pyrotechnics. Compared with the high developed aliens, these man-apes are just in their primeval age, never seeing anything like this, only to be controlled by aliens. And the monolith's experiment begins from a man-ape which is nearest to it. Aliens' first attempt is to make the man-ape nearest to it learn to make tools with natural resources. Gradually, the whole tribe is tested by the monolith, including Moon-Watcher, the leader of that tribe. The head of Moon-Watcher is nearer to man than ape, the body of him is half man and half ape. Undoubtedly, the promise of man is held in his genes. What's more important, the spark of intelligence of humans has already dawned in the eyes of Moon-Watcher.

What are the reasons and true intentions for the aliens to facilitate human being's evolution? In the fifth part of this novel, Clarke accounts for the origin of the aliens, the reasons for their visiting of the earth and what they have done on the earth. Three million years ago, aliens have already evolved to a certain level and can travel in the universe willingly. Maybe they feel so lonely and they want others to join their team, so they begin to visit different stars to see if there is life. The earth is only one of its destinations in travel. They have found that there are many kinds of life on the earth. They determine to do an experiment on the life on the earth to see which one of them could survive and evolve to a higher level of life, to find and join them. Like scientists who do experiments, they have done a comprehensive study on the species on the earth with cataloguing the species. They are interested not only in the species on land but also in those of the ocean, so they have left their instruments in both these fields. The fate of these chosen species may be changed in the future, however, during this transformation, they have no right to resist. During this period, the whole earth is the "silent" Other, marginalized by the aliens. After the visit of aliens, the earth has experienced many rises and falls of empires, developing its own civilization, yet it has not got the power to express itself toward aliens. During this period, the whole earth is the "silent" Other, marginalized by the aliens.

After the analysis, it is not difficult to find that human beings are the true other in the relationship with aliens. From the evolution of man-apes in the African continent to human beings' discovery of TMA-1 on the Moon, to human beings' tracing for the origin of TMA-1, aliens are always in the dominant role, monitoring everything of human beings.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, the author mainly used the postcolonial theory to study Clarke's masterpiece: *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Usually postcolonialism aims to subvert the authority and deconstruct the binary opposition when facing the cultural colonization and cultural hegemony. Based on the theory of binary opposition proposed by Edward Said, the author of this thesis analyzed the binary opposition relationship between human beings and aliens, and found that the binary opposition between human beings and aliens is not absolute and that under certain circumstances the identities of the Self and the other exchange.

In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, human beings have begun their journeys to conquer the outer space in the 21th century and have already landed on the Moon and the Mars. They always regard themselves as the Self (colonizer) in the relationship with aliens. However, when human beings finally arrive at the Japetus and travel through the third monolith, they find that intelligence much older than human beings have been monitoring the life on the earth since human beings' early stage.

They do not realize that these aliens are the actual controller of the universe and the true Self and that they themselves are the manipulated other until they are guided to go to the aliens' living space step by step. The real identities of human beings and aliens are gradually unveiled in the exploring process. The Self is not always in the dominant role, and the other is not always in the inferior status. Under different circumstances, the identities of the Self and the other exchange.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Sun Y, 2024, Metaphor Studies in the New Perspective of Oriental Studies.
- [2] Said Edward, 1978, Orientalism. New York: Grove Press.
- [3] Zhou Ning, 2004, Another Kind of Orientalism: A Critique Beyond Postcolonial Culture.
- [4] Arthur C C, 1968, 2001: A Space Odyssey. New York: New American Library.

Publisher's note

Whioce Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.