

Self-construction of The Box Man from the Perspective of Lacan's Mirror Stage Theory

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Abstract. As one of the series of novels with the theme of human existence in the city, *The Box Man*, written by Kobo Abe, reflects the thinking of human self-consciousness in the unrealistic situation of transformation. In the novel, Character A's closeness to the man he imitates reflects his self-identity. The box man's jealousy of the doctor who impersonates him demonstrates a loss of "ego". Finally, the revenge of the box man on the impostor demonstrates the determination to regain himself. By analyzing the process of the box man's self-construction, it can be found that the box man's outrageous behaviors reflect the crisis of his self-consciousness and his resistance to survival in society. From the perspective of Lacan's mirror stage theory, the self-construction of the protagonists in *The Box Man* has particular significance for a deeper understanding of the spiritual connotation of Abe's novels with the theme of urban disappearance.

Keywords: mirror stage; *The Box Man*; self-construction.

1. Introduction

Jacques Lacan (1901-1983) was a famous psychoanalyst in the 20th century. He proposed the mirror stage theory at the 14th annual meeting of the International Psychoanalytic Society in 1936 and presented a paper at the 16th International Psychoanalytic Conference in 1949. He takes the typical situation of a 6-18 months baby looking in the mirror as an example, pointing out that the baby cannot identify itself in the mirror, namely the ego in the mirror when it first looks in the mirror. Then it excitedly identifies itself in the mirror and finally realizes the unity of the "ego" and "the other" through a series of processes, such as constructing an ideal virtual image in the mirror. This process explains the process of human self-identification. That is, the subject of the character takes the mirror image seen in the mirror as his image, changes himself according to the appearance in the mirror to achieve a perfect vision, and finally transforms himself into the mirror image. This process is like a drama. According to Lacan, the mirror stage can be understood as a drama in which the subject is deceived as a result of receiving a specific visual image [1]. Lacan used the mirror stage theory to explain the formation of human self-consciousness, the obsession and narcissism of mirror image, and the relationship between the "ego" and "the other" caused by aggressivity, jealousy, competition, etc., which provided a unique insight to analyze the dilemma of people's self-positioning in modern life. The mirror stage is what Danny Nobbs calls Lacan's solid theoretical paradigm [2].

Kobo Abe (1924-1993), who lived in the same era as Lacan, was a representative figure of postwar existentialist literature in Japan. *The Box Man* (1973) was one of his urban literature series. These works often reflect the subject's thinking of self-existence in the city through the monologue of characters with vague self-consciousness. The box man is a "transformational" figure who lives in a special carton created by the author. Relying on the masking effect of the carton, he is overlooked by others, so he can hide in the carton and observe others from a photographer's perspective, imagining them as his mirror image. Doctor C, another protagonist in the novel, notices the existence of the box man and brings his cardboard box at a high price. By imitating the box man's behavior, he satisfies his psychological needs and, at the same time achieves the purpose of placing the blame on others. When the box man finally realizes that his identity has been replaced by Doctor C and his sense of "ego" and social existence are threatened, he takes revenge.

Based on Lacan's mirror stage theory, this paper takes the novel *the box man* as an example and discusses the self-construction through the process of the formation, loss, and recapture of the self-consciousness of the box man in Abe's work.

2. Integration and Association of Subject and Mirror

The carton box of the refrigerator awakens the memory of Character A in the novel *The Box Man* and induces him to start to emulate the behavior of the box man gradually. In the section entitled *An Example: The Case of A*, the novel describe in detail A's psychological state of being disturbed by a man in a cardboard box living under the window of his apartment. To drive the box man away, A even shot him with an air rifle. However, when he saw the carton containing the refrigerator, he could not help recalling the box man he had chased away. The empty box was just big enough for a person to hide in, making it an ideal camouflage prop. A tried to put it away, but the confusion of the box man's thoughts prevented him from even this simple action as if the ricocheting pellet of an air rifle was at work and messed with his nerves[3]. After entangling repeatedly and confirming that there was no one around and the curtain was closed, he finally could not bear the inexplicable temptation, imitating the box man driven away by him with the air rifle and putting on the box.

The sudden change of A's attitude towards the box man from hostility to imitation is because he unconsciously sees the box man as the image in the mirror, as the "ideal ego" that he yearns for but can not reach, pointing out the solution to his unclear predicament, and was the root of all secondary identity processes[4]. Lacan believes that the function of the mirror stage is a particular case of the role of the image. This function establishes the relation between the organism and its substance, or as they say, between the inner and outer worlds. In this mode, the subject breaks into a primary form. Later, the subject objectifies the dialectical relationship with others [4]. Through one head-to-head confrontation between the two, a kind of unacknowledged joy of obtaining the body image in the mirror for the first time was also generated in the exchange of eyes between A and the box man, setting aside the anger caused by the occupation of the territory and being peered at[4]. Although A's air rifle bullet ended the lasting confrontation, the eyes of the box man invisibly shattered A's self-cognitive image from the inside, and presented it in a complete form in front of A, extending the war between the subject and the mirror to every moment of self-reflection in A's future life. Therefore, A found that even though he seemed to achieve his expected goal and successfully drove away the box man, his biggest regret was not seeing the box man clearly when he left. As a man who communicated with the outside world only through a pair of eyes emerging from a peeping hole, his face was just like a blank sheet of paper in A's eyes.

A benefited from imitating and identifying with the box man, giving himself up to the specter of the image in the mirror and willingly being seduced by it. Therefore, with the escalation of imitation behavior, the face of the box man became no longer important because in A's consciousness, it was he who was hit by the bullet of the air rifle, and the person in the box was also himself. He filled the gap with his facial image and walked to the life reflected in the fantasy of "the other"[1]. As A and the box man became closer and closer in behavior, A gradually fell into the identity with "the other" in the mirror and even produced a close feeling of returning to the mother — the womb. Somehow, he felt a longing for the place, a hope that was like a distant longing. He really wanted to stay in there forever [3]. The box man drew up a blueprint for A about the harmonious coexistence of man and things with his practice. In the face of a society where human beings were enslaved by objects while dominating objects, full of sharp confrontation and indifference, A urgently found a way to escape alienation from the box man. He realized that everything exerted invisible pressure on him like thorns, which made him very nervous. The streaks on the walls, the old magazines piled up at random, the little TV with the pointy antenna, the beef tins with cigarette butts all over the TV, it turned out that they were all prickly. With the intervention of the box man, all the thorns fell off and everything seemed so smooth[3].

Small mirrors were obviously not a necessity of life for the box men, who were always simple in the material. He did not have his hair cut, brush his teeth, or even take a bath[3]. However, A, who was in the transformational period of the box man, added significance to them. On the one hand, the mirror confirmed his disguise. In the dim environment inside the carton, with the help of weak flashlight light, A used advertising paint to dress himself up like a clown, a bird, or a fish. This dress was like a creature to hide in the unfamiliar environment better and generate protective colors. The coordinated picture between the subject and the background in the mirror confirmed the feasibility of all A's efforts, prompting him to deepen this identification mode. The mirror, on the other hand, created his illusion. As Lacan put it in *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the "I" Function*, the mirror stage for the subject seduced by spatial confirmation drove fantasies ranging from the mutilated image of the body to the orthopedic form we called the whole [4]. A saw him back running away through the small mirror. A was no longer bound to fragmentary physical experience or empty social symbols but was constructed as a complete statue and an eternal phantom.

The "ego" is integrated into the mirror to form the embodiment of narcissism, thus generating a kind of erotic correlation between the "ego" and the mirror image. The adaptation to the landscape eventually turns into the landscape itself. However, this relationship has an element of aggressivity, namely the hidden danger of trying to force someone else's place. Although A was aware of this at first, he still wallowed in it, not realizing that what occupied its ideal position and filled the gap in absence was ultimately a non-self. At the same time, the subject, under the appearance of its fake ego, quickly lost its guard and mistook it for its true being, leading to the alienation of the real "ego", which was secretly ingested of the master nature by the mirror image and was no longer there. As Taihei Fukuhara describes in *Lacan: The Mirror Stage*, the "ego" appears to us with the image of the imagination, robbing us of our essence before the subject is aware of it. In other words, the ego is a gorgeous and desirable mask in the image. It fixes time and space there, and as something given in the imagination, it has a substantial presentation value. Therefore, it is the same symptom as neurosis, showing silent centripetal force like a mask, showing itself silently without saying anything [1].

3. The Subject's Jealousy and Alienation from the Mirror Image

The box man "I" and the fake box man "doctor" have a tangled relationship, which is like a strange "erotic relationship". As Lacan pointed out in his article *Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis*, what produces the vitality and form of the emotional organization of the subject known as the "ego" is the erotic relationship of the individual to an alienated image of himself [4]. The first encounter was when the doctor, who had not intentionally disguised the box man, attacked me with an air trifle. When calling the police failed to achieve the purpose, the doctor chose this brutal and illegal way to drive out me. However, I did not have a hatred towards this. Instead, I saw him as a companion. Rejoiced at the prospect of a new companion and even felt some closeness toward him [3].

When the "ego" placed an alienated image of itself in the "ideal ego" position, the tense relationship between the subject and "the other" turns inward. Under the contradictory effect of narcissism and aggressivity, like the up-and-down sides of a coin, an internal tension of passion and hostility is formed [5]. On the one hand, it is impossible for the subject to hate this object because he is the ideal image in the subject's mind, and the subject already regard him as itself; on the other hand, this inner tension manifests itself when the object becomes the ego in the eyes of others and may take over. This tension determines his desire for the object of another one's desire. Here, primitive cooperation quickly becomes an intrusive competition, from which arises the triad of others, selves, and things [4].

This form is also presented in the identity exchange between me and the doctor. From my view, the story of A was a typical paradigm of how the box man came into being. That is, A became a box man after attacking the box man as mentioned above. Similarly, the doctor also became a box man after attacking me. Therefore, just as the relationship between A and the unknown box man

reflected each other, so should the doctor and I. And the attack I am supposed to act as a mirror image of the doctor's ego. I predicted in the days to come, it will be the sniper who had to endure several times more pain than I did. Then why should I make his pain worse [3]. However, as the doctor's colleague and girlfriend, after healing me, the nurse bought my carton for the doctor with 50,000 *yen* and asked the carton to be torn up and thrown into the sea so that I, who thought that I was in the mirror position, was suddenly reversed the relationship between the subject and the mirror, and surrendered the power to lead this relationship between the voluntary consent and back to my broken "ego".

Only when noticing that the doctor lived in a box exactly like me and completely replaced me, did I realize the crisis of self-replacement. In the novel, I had the desire to see the nurse's body after the transaction and realized this desire under the window bar of the diagnosis room with the help of the car mirror, but the desire itself was not satisfied. Part of the reason is that although I made the desire become a reality, the doctor, as a fake pretending to be me, performed a closer peeping behavior and got a deeper degree of satisfaction in the voyeuristic desire, which made me feel jealous and produce a nightmarish sense of humiliation, just like being mocked by the doctor. And a more important reason is that the carton, as the face, body, and even identity symbol of the box man, has been replaced by the other. According to Lacan, the subject affirming himself as the image of the external other will expose himself to the danger of nothing, but stubbornly refusing to acknowledge this will also lose himself [1]. Even though I was still inside the real carton, refusing to accept the alienated truth, in the agreed transaction with the nurse, the carton was already floating on the sea. It could be said that the only proof of my existence disappeared. And since the deal was based on a plot by an army doctor to fake the drowning of a man for a doctor-nurse murder, I was no longer alive in a social sense.

The existence of "I" was literally removed from my body by this mirror image, and the "ego" was utterly stripped of its master nature and reduced to an empty shell. On the contrary, the doctor's existence replaced and occupied my existence, and obtained the nurse's identity as "the other" in the third person. From the moment I accepted the 50,000 *yen*, the power of the authentic product is transferred to the other person [3]. I became "the other", the reflection of myself, witnessing the absurd scene in the mirror in which I acted away from the subject consciousness, frustrated by the premature dropping of my guard and participation in identifying "the other". My shadow was staggering along the room's diagonal, like a robot toy. It was hard to see myself in the mirror walking around in a way I did not want to [3]. The doctor was not the ideal image of me, but he got the privilege that I dreamed of, indirectly and temporarily sitting in the ideal seat. But I betrayed myself by my desire and jealousy, degraded my dominant position of identity, and got into a disadvantageous situation so that I could no longer escape the shadow of the fake box man and needed to find an independent and unified "ego".

I was undoubtedly jealous of the doctor, reflecting the other's plunder of my legitimacy as the subject, and perceiving the aggressivity intention of the subject being devoured. I cried out in my heart for this infringement, "You son of a bitch, get out of that box. Are you drunk? You keep this up, you'll never get out!" [3] But at the same time, I was so obsessed with this illusion of ego that I gazed long, carefully and covetously, couldn't stop staring, and even got agitated when a dog broke in and interrupted the act. On the one hand, I desperately longed to be embodied in the mirror, to be in the scene, and to be in the same space as the nurse in the illusion, with the doctor—me in the mirror staring fresh and clear, the subject was confused with the mirror image. On the other hand, I soberly realize that reality was always within reach of the imagination, and it was because the illusion existed only in the moment of looking and then disappeared that the desire was so strong. As what was in my dream of shellweed, fish did not think. When the fish began to think, it became a different fake fish. The fake fish in the dream was aware of the falsity of the freedom it enjoyed, experienced the imperceptible constraints of reality, and had a sense of inexpressible sense of deficiency [3]. Then it committed suicide by reverse-falling—falling into the sky in the opposite direction—drowning in the atmosphere. The fake fish died before awakening, so it could not wake

up and go on with its dream. In reality, the “I” in the carton was also a fake “I”, who died before abandoning the carton. Then the dead “I” could only be a fake “I” forever [3]. Therefore, not only is the mirror actively trapping the subject, but the subject himself is willing to be imprisoned by it, so the game is hard to break. No matter how many times box men kept awakening from their dreams, they apparently ended up being only the box men they always were[3].

4. The Subject’s Hatred and Contention for the Mirror Image

A duel in which the subject stakes his life to reclaim his stolen “ego” from the mirror image also takes place in Abe’s work. As the mirror stage progresses, the behavior patterns of me and the doctor changed substantially. In this mode, I was again placed in the seat of the “ideal “ego”, but the “ideal ego” as a doctor. In the section *In Which It Is a Question of The Sullen Relationship between the I Who Am Writing Me and the I Who Am Being Written About*, I went to the hospital to negotiate with the doctor after disposing of the carton in response to the transaction requirements and tried to exchange roles with him to leave. However, it was found that the doctor’s imitation behavior of me was escalating. From the outside to the inside, from the appearance of the carton to the action mode, the image of me was reproduced everywhere. The creature was leaning the carton against me, and the vinyl curtain of the window opened a crack to reveal an eye, a cold eye staring at me without feeling, a defiant look that forced me to submit at once. When did this guy learn how to do that? He must have learned it from me. What could I say? I was the one being looked at, and I was the one looking at. I could not tolerate this inferior other surviving in this change of owner, so I decided to give up the carton at the cost of a gamble [3].

My hatred of the doctor was determined by the aggressivity between the subject and the similar. If the “ideal ego” only made me jealous when the doctor appeared increasingly idealized in front of me, then I in turn became the doctor’s “ideal ego” which was even more unbearable to me. Because it meant that I was repeatedly robbed and occupied and there was no hope of getting it back. The invasions inherent in self-identification made the subject intolerant either of others who embodied the “ideal ego” superior to him; or of others who saw themselves as the “ideal ego” inferior to him. Although he cherished his life very much, he even risked his life to fight for a sense of certainty and complete sufficiency. As explained by Ma Yuanlong in his book *Jacques Lacan: Psychoanalysis in Linguistic Dimensions*, Lacan believes that the subject’s self-identity has an inherent aggression instinct that death is not enough [6].

It can be said that “I” as a box man was a complete box man, but “I” as a body had not yet become a complete social man. On the contrary, the doctor as a body was a full social man, but the doctor as a box man was not yet a full box man. In the present situation, as Yasuhei Fukuhara puts it in his book, the human who does this folly and is unaware of his own tragedy is seduced by the mirror image of his own state of integration, and as a result, bears for life the imprint of the personality of the usurper of his own right in a state of ignorance of the mirror image as the usurper of his own unity [1]. Thus the victim’s anger did not disappear. It only intensified, leading to a kill-or-die outcome. For me, the doctor could return to society at any time and satisfy his hobby of peeping through the box only. But as long as the doctor existed somewhere as a fake box man, I could not return to being the box man after losing my identity. Only when the mirror image of the box man is destroyed like its subject could I eliminate the idea of becoming a box man again. And have the option of returning to society.

In the novel, to regain my “ego” and realize the goal of returning to society, I carried out three countermeasures based on multiple identity positioning: First, I create the fear of disappearance in the author’s position. Since the first-person self-description of I in the book was all presented in the form of notes created by I in the carton, I, as a writer of notes, had the right to see anyone but not be seen by anyone, and even had the right to decide the fate of characters, the change of environment and the development of the plot. In Lacan’s view, only the subject can understand the meaning; in turn, all phenomena of meaning must involve the subject. In analysis the subject reveals himself to

be understood, and indeed he is understood [4]. The doctor, as a mirror image, could not understand the meaning. All meaning was given by me as the subject. Therefore, in the aspect of the text, the author changes the existing state of the subject at any time, making it “appear” or “disappear”. But in reality, once I tear up the carton and eradicate the carrier of words, the characters in the script -- doctors, nurses, I, the plot -- the fight itself will also “disappear”.

Secondly, I exposed other people’s crimes by means of a photographer. I confessed that on the day I was attacked by the doctor with an air rifle, and at the very moment of being shot, I moved out of my business and pressed the shutter. I took pictures of the doctor’s image and movement on the day he committed the crime, obtained evidence that the doctor murdered the army doctor, labeled him a criminal, and eliminated the doctor’s choice to return to society.

Finally, I murdered the box man’s mirror image as an avenger. I grabbed the sandbag and hit him in the shin. The doctor let out a scream and sank his hand into the carton. A series of groans came from inside. Then I felt that my body had seeped with sweat. To calm the guy down, I lifted the sandbag up and down the carton again—hesitated and pulled it back — I didn’t want to leave a mark on the carton. Then, saving my energy, I kicked the calf a few times. The doctor shrank into a ball in the carton, back to his wastebasket ego” [3]. I attacked the doctor with a sand-stuffed crocodile doll, ending the campaign in a complete rout of the doctor as a box man. However, the persecutor that I saw in that hit was not the doctor, but the mirror image of the box man “I”, which was myself. After staring at the mirror image for a long time, I gradually felt the ugliness of the carton and grew tired of it. I realized that every time the subject struggled with the choice between the carton and the society, the carton was like a thick layer of skin on the body, and there would be another cut in the maze, in which the knot will become more tangled [3]. Therefore, I finally chose to attack the mirror image to deny the ugly cardboard box in reality and save myself from the self-imprisonment of the cardboard box, thus protecting the cardboard box, which is regarded as the eternal refuge in the ideal. The question of whether the doctor was dead, whether I was a criminal, or even whether I was dead was not necessary to me. There is no evidence to show that “I” in the novel was alive[3]. Even the question of whether I was the journalist, the hypothesis of the doctor’s murder method, and the repeated mention of the box man being the ideal slaughtering object [3]. And the news bulletin entitled *Dead By The Roadside Ignored by 100,000 People* in which many details of the deceased match with me and other clues from time to time reveal the information that I had died. However, for me, the choice to return to society was now in hand, the desire to reclaim myself had been satisfied, and there was no other meaning, and the carton looked like a hole dug out [3].

5. Conclusion

“The other”, in the box man’s eyes, is the object of his observation and the mirror of himself. This mirror can verify the existence of the box man, but also because of the imperfection of the mirror to the box man’s discomfort. Through imitation, A becomes a box man, gradually constructs a perfect image of the “ideal ego”, and then becomes jealous of this image. When the “ego” is replaced, the roles of mirror image and “ego” are changed, and the box man actively resists. The creation of a good image and its destruction is at the heart of tragedy, and why Lacan calls the mirror stage a drama. Through the embodiment of the shapeshifter, Abe metaphorically describes the plight of the little people ignored by the society in Japan’s urban population after World War II. He tries to make the reader think deeply with an open ending. From the perspective of Lacan’s mirror stage theory, it can be found that a series of outrageous behaviors of the box man reflect the crisis of his self-consciousness and his resistance to the survival of social significance. In the process of transforming from perfecting the mirror image to breaking it, the box man’s self-consciousness wakes up, but whether the true can exist in society is still a mystery.

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