



The Personal Dynamics and Virtual Dilemma in Robert Venditti's Graphic Novel *The Surrogates*

Narinder Kumar

Ph.D. Scholar, Department of English, University of Jammu, India

narenderbhagat50@gmail.com

Article Info

Received: 19 Aug 2024,

Received in revised form: 22 Sep 2024,

Accepted: 28 Sep 2024,

Available online: 04 Oct 2024

Keywords— Avatars, dilemma, dynamics, existence, marital, technology, virtual.

©2024 The Author(s). Published by AI Publications. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

Abstract

This paper examines the intricate interplay between personal dynamics and virtual dilemmas in Robert Venditti's graphic novel The Surrogates. It unveils the different aspects of near-future society where peoples interact through robotic avatars called 'surrogates'. The narrative of the novel delves into the psychological and social implications of living vicariously through technology. The focus of this paper is to deal with critical questions about the nature of reality and the ethical ramifications of substituting human experience with virtual engagement. By analyzing the tensions between human connection and technological mediation, this study highlights the broader societal challenges posed by advancing technology and its impact on personal relationships. It explores how the reliance on technology affects marital dynamics, highlighting the emotional distance and communication breakdowns that arise when partners opt for virtual interactions over genuine connection. Through the characters of Harvey Geer and Margaret Geer, the paper investigates the tensions between love and isolation, exploring how the characters negotiate their identities and desires in a mediated environment. Ultimately, Venditti's work serves as a poignant reflection on the dilemmas of modern existence, inviting readers to reconsider the value of genuine human interaction in an increasingly virtual world.

I. INTRODUCTION

Robert Venditti is a renowned American comic books writer. He is known for his works for the DC comics that are *The Flash*, *Green Lantern*, *Justice League* and *Hawkman*. His famous graphic novel *The Surrogates* has been adopted into a movie by the same name. His critically acclaimed graphic novel *The Surrogates* was published in the year of 2006 by the Top Shelf Production. It is written by Robert Venditti and

drawn by Brett Weldele. It anticipates the consequences of a virtual avatar dominated futuristic society of 2052. The plot of the novel revolves around virtual identity, monotony of modern life style and individual quest to be relevant amidst the total domination of technology. Besides exploring the social turbulence generated by the use of avatars, the novel focuses to depict the crumbling castle of relationships in a virtual reality addicted society.

II. DISCUSSION

The Surrogates depicts the conflict of real and virtual through the marital life of Harvey Geer and his wife Margaret Geer, where, Harvey Geer has been depicted as a supporter of reality but his wife Margaret Geer's character is portrayed as a maniac who is obsessed with her virtual identity and artificial world of surrogates (Avatars). She completely immerses in the realm of surrogates and unable to accept the fact that someone is going to destroy her virtual world. In the below given panels, the illustrator has meticulously drawn the expressions of Margaret to highlights her insane obsession, anger over the falling apart of her artificially created world. In the first panel, while saying "What is it, Harvey? What does he want?" her face expression reflects as someone is snatching her most loved thing. She has been illustrated as anxious and frustrated over the news of surrogate killing. She feels paranoid amidst the prevailing conflict between the real and virtual. Harvey confronts her that the killer wants to "...to change the world". In the second panel, Harvey's image is drawn from the side angle to show Margaret's hands on his shoulders to highlights her curiosity and fear while listening the details of the case. When Harvey says, "He wants to destroy all of the city's surrogates...", she gets terrified and tightly hugs him from the behind (In the third panel) to showcase her dependence on the surrogate for living her life. In the fourth panel, Margaret's face expressions suddenly changes on hearing Harvey, when he says, "Why? Because he sees where the world is headed. Cities filled with people who aren't really people. Life reduced to a data feed". Her face has been illustrated in the tone of extreme anger as in agitation to Harvey's opinion about surrogate technology. She furiously accused him of being on the side of the surrogate killer. In the next panel, she has been illustrated as arguing with Harvey, she says in a scolding tone "You sound like you're on his side". At this point of time, her senses have been completely overshadowed by the addiction of surrogates. She starts fighting with her husband on hearing his opinion that is slightly in favor of the killer. Harvey, who has been continuously observing the side effects of using surrogates, says, "My job prevents me from being on his side, but I do understand him. I've

seen the effects surrogates can have on people. I see it every day". His married life and relationships with his wife have been ruined by Margaret's obsession with surrogates. She always remains plugged into the surrogate to enjoy her virtual identity. She often forces Harvey to meet her through his surrogate, but he prefers to be in the real world. In the last panel, the illustrator has portrayed Harvey's disappointment and Margaret's anger through their minutely drawn face expressions. They are depicted as against each other's life philosophies and ideologies.



Fig.1 *The Surrogates*, page No. 98

In the first panel, Margaret has been illustrated as shouting, "People? Why don't you just say it, Harvey? You mean me". Even she is aware of her husband's disappointment over her

craze for surrogates and virtual world, but not ready to accept herself as she is in the actual world. Harvey warns her of the expected consequences of artificial identity she has created for herself as: “This isn’t you. Deep down you know it, but you won’t accept it. And it’s destroying our marriage”. Throughout the novel, their ideologies about life never get a confluence, they remain polls apart. Harvey constantly insists her to accept the life and herself as it is in the actual world, but she remains adamant at creating a fake virtual world for herself. The similar threats of virtual addiction have been anticipated by Kelly Dong, who writes in her essay “Reflection to ‘Is Hyperreality Harmful?’” about the addictive features of virtual world and human tendency to lure towards such simulated reality as:

To understand Eco’s criticism, we have to understand the difference between hyperreality and reality and evaluate hyperreality’s impacts. When we visit places of the “absolute fake”, we acknowledge that the things we saw are in a land of ‘fake’. However, since we choose to be in hyperreality to enjoy ourselves, we will put ourselves in the scenery to obtain the full experience of artificial locations we are paying to see. This doesn’t necessarily mean that we are not aware our surroundings are fake. It’s just that at the moment, we choose to believe that we are in the world of fantasy. Sometimes people choose to step into the world of hyperreality because they are overwhelmed by stress and depression in the real world. We need a way to relax and give ourselves a break. Therefore, we will be attracted to hyperreality like movies or games which are easily accessible. When we have more time to relax, then we will choose to visit places like Disneyland and escape from all the troubles of life.

In the novel, Margaret uses the surrogates to escape from the crude realities of the real world. Their married life goes through a difficult period because of her attitude, a strong desire to alter her identity and personality by using surrogate. She has accepted the fake, customized

reality as the only truth of her life; the virtual has overshadowed the actual reality. She forces Harvey to plug into surrogate to alter his identity and customize his personality in the virtual world; she demands, “Aren’t you so holier-than-thou. You don’t link for a few days, and that makes you some kind of a role model”? She desires to be with him but after altering his personality into a perfectly carved shape of her husband’s body.



Fig. 2 The Surrogates, page No. 99

They both longs for the different aspects, this creates a never ending conflict and turmoil in their lives. Margaret considers Harvey solely responsible for their deteriorating marriage and relationship. In the third panel, she is illustrated as blaming Harvey “I’m not the problem in this marriage. It’s you and your condescension”. It is evident in the panels that Margaret’s irrelevant demand to change Harvey, to see him in perfect shape by using surrogate technology to escape from their original deformities is the major cause of their stumbling marriage. She has suppressed

the original self under the artificially crafted, an 'absolute fake' copy. Harvey frequently requests her to "Put it away, Margaret. Just for a few days. Aren't you at least willing to try"? He wants to see her in her original form; on the contrary, Margaret is adamant at enjoying her life and relationship only in a hyperreal world. According to Borosso:

What is understood as hyperreal is produced with the claim of being more real than reality itself, which is no longer reality. Baudrillard demonstrates that the reality is supplanted or concealed by the imitation of the image, which is always new and more complete and therefore more interesting and captivating for the mass popular and visual culture. (47)

Margaret finds the virtual reality and identity of a perfectly customized surrogate "always new and more complete and therefore more interesting and captivating". Surrogate has become the perfect medium for her to delve into the desired hyperreal world, which cannot be possible to experience with her original self. She has been deeply affected by the incidents of surrogates killing and her mental state rapidly deteriorates because someone is trying to shatter her hyperreal world. Her madness and frustration is illustrated in the above given panel No. Eight, when she shouts at Harvey: "That's right. Do your job, Lieutenant. Go protect the lifestyle of me and everyone else you pitty"! She is adamant at living her life through the use of surrogate, whether her husband joins her or she has to spend it alone. The virtual reality has overshadowed her senses to the extent that she surrenders her everything to an artificially created hyperreal world.

With the stumbling castle of surrogates and hyperreality, the lives of people associated with it also start shattering. The social structure goes through a state of complete chaos and uncertainty. Margaret, who's character is depicted as an individual insanely obsessed with virtual life and totally dependent on the use of surrogate to live her life, unable to accept the dwindling world of virtual reality. She is accustomed to live her life through surrogate, without surrogate she is unable to accept an

ordinary self, people and society. The illustrator has drawn her horrific end in the below given panels.



Fig.3 The Surrogates, page No. 157

In the above given panels, the creators portray the aftermath effects of hyperreal bubble burst. Harvey is drawn as coming back to home to inform Margaret about the end of surrogates. His excitement over the end of surrogate technology from the society is evident in the panels. Unaware of the horrible consequences of virtual reality, he desires to enjoy their remaining married life in normal human bodies. The illustrator has meticulously drawn the panels, especially, the third and fourth panel. In the third panel, he draws the scene from third person perspective, with an angle from where reader knows about Margaret's death but Harvey has been illustrated as unaware of the situation. He has not imagined in his wildest dreams that Margaret would not be able to survive out of the hyperreal world of avatars. In a research article "Adverse Effects of Virtual and Augmented Reality Interventions in Psychiatry: Systematic Review", published by the *National Library of Medicine*, it is observed that being immersed into the virtual reality causes "...cybersickness and VR-induced symptoms and effects, symptoms of dissociation, negative emotional responses such

as increased rumination or thoughts of self-harm, and wider impacts on functioning". The end of the hyperreal virtual society causes "dissociation" for Margaret, and invokes "thoughts of self-harm" considering that she does not belong to the new real world. To develop a feeling of empathy for Harvey, the creators make the readers aware of Margaret's death earlier than Harvey, so that they can feel pity for his ignorance and innocence. In the next panel, the illustrator has drawn Harvey saying, "It's over, Margaret. People are starting to come out of their buildings. I thought we could go for a walk". He is unaware of the situation, but the readers feel empathy for his never accomplishing desires to live a normal life with his wife who has ended her life by consumption; the only way she found suitable to escape from the reality. The research shows the adverse effects of virtual immersion as some cases "report serious adverse events that would involve significant harm or death". Similarly, the creators of *The Surrogates* have depicted the threatening side effects of addiction to virtual realm through the tragic end of Margaret. In the end of the novel, Harvey is illustrated as sitting alone and mourning the death of Margaret, who could not tolerate the "dissociative symptoms, including perceived disconnection from the self (depersonalization) and the environment (derealization)" (Robert M Lundin) after the end of her virtual world.

III. CONCLUSION

In the contemporary time, virtual reality has been emerging as a medium for the people to escape from the deformities and deficiencies of the real world. It has perturbed the basic structure of human relationships. It has been depriving the people of experiencing the beauty, relationships and opportunities of the actual world. *The Surrogates* portrays the role of virtual reality in creating the distress in the human relationships through the characters of Harvey Geer and Margaret Geer, who fail to save their married life amidst the prevailing domination of two different version of reality. Both of them stand for the opposite side of the reality, they adamant at proving their version of reality as perfect one. The differences in their perceptions to experience the beauty of actual world create

distress in their personal dynamics. Margaret Geer's addiction to the virtual reality, a customized identity and escaping from her original self, destroy the sanctity of her marital relationship with Harvey Geer. They always remain in a dilemma of real and virtual, neither Margaret agrees to live in Harvey's version of reality, nor Harvey feels comfortable to be a part of Margaret's virtual world. The novel displays the alarming side of virtual reality, its potential to hamper the emotional growth of humans and negatively affect their personal relationships. Margaret Geer is unable to cope with the actual reality out of her virtual realm and eventually, suicide while alone at home. Moreover, the novel depicts the technology generated human loneliness, their increasing dependency on gadgets, social media platforms and newly emerged virtual platforms which enable them to experience different version of reality sitting at their homes.

REFERENCES

- [1] Barroso, Paulo M. (2019). "Hyperreality and virtual worlds: when the virtual is real," *Sphera Publica*, Vol. 2, 2019 pp. 36-58. [file:///C:/Users/best%20buy/Downloads/admin,+final_03%20\(2\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/best%20buy/Downloads/admin,+final_03%20(2).pdf)
- [2] Dong, Kelly. "Reflection to "Is Hyperreality Harmful?" *Kelly Dong*, December 14, 2018, <https://eportfolios.macaulay.cuny.edu/kellydong/2018/12/14/reflection-to-is-hyperreality-harmful/>
- [3] Lundin, Robert M. and et al. "Adverse Effects of Virtual and Augmented Reality Interventions in Psychiatry: Systematic Review," *National Library of Medicine*, Published online 2023 May 5, DOI: 10.2196/43240
- [4] Venditti, Robert. *The Surrogates*. Top Shel Productions, 2006.