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Literature and the Internet

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The invention of the Internet has revolutionized the information and communication systems. This results in several innovations in all domains of life including teaching and learning, reading and writing, both creative and critical. This article is an attempt to familiarize the readers with electronic literature especially different genres of e-fiction. In this attempt the author explains concepts like writing space, writing self, writing subject, hypertext fiction, collaborative fiction, interactive fiction and so on. The interconnectedness of space and Internet is also explained at the beginning of the article.

Writing in the Internet is digital born. It is produced, stored, circulated, accessed and consumed or reproduced in a digital environment. Even print culture is digital at one or other stage of its production. This is due to the introduction of Desktop Publishing (DTP). The applications of the Internet lead to several other innovations like Internet Relay Chat (IRC), Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) and Multi-dimension Domains (MUDs). These technical innovations allow individuals to communicate to each other and to “space” themselves fulfilling certain requirements. The virtual reality allows the users to be in an abstract space through texts, graphics and sound whereas IRC, BBS and MUDs enable them to log into a platform for exchanging messages through texts. IRC is a private synchronous messaging site; BBS is a community space like the conventional notice board; MUD is role playing game wherein the users generate fictional selves and engage in interactive text based gaming. These platforms are noted for their texts while the Web 2.0 is noticeable for its “user generated content.” Social media technologies provide interactive platforms which present the complicated programming languages in a simplified format.

Spacing the Internet

The concept of the space marks of three possibilities: material area, the boundary or lack of it that makes one inside or outside or nowhere in it and the virtuality of space that includes the relation between the subject and the space. The spatiality of a text is not visible unless it is taken as an event that includes many aspects like a space defined by many oppositions and relations between individuals. In his lecture “From Internet to Gutenberg,” Umberto Eco states that literature can only be influenced by the Internet and the hypertext. In spite of the caustic criticism against machinic imagination to understand the space of the text, the episteme that acts beneath the consciousness of the Internet subjects constitutes discourses like literature. Terms like cyber literature, electronic literature or hypertext literature, though restrictive concepts in themselves, are cultural products constituted by the Internet subjects and their relations. Cyber literature (Viires) is often understood as publication of poetry or fiction or fan-fiction in the Web. Electronic literature is regarded as “a hybrid progeny of computer games and literary traditions” (Hayles “Cyber|literature”). These concepts categorize the space of writing as a constricted act.

In this sense, softwares like Intermedia, Eastgate Systems and Storyspace are classified as literary texts. Digitized collection of classical texts like Project Gutenberg, online Literature Magazines and blogs signify an unaltered transplanting of material values and canonization of print into the Internet.

The cultural politics of the Internet activities is conditioned by late capitalist ideologies. Contemporary “Do It Yourself (DIY)” culture is a product of late capitalism. It generates the politics of individualizing persons, decentralizing systems and liberal concept of creating self-sufficient, authentic and responsible citizens. Fred Turner refers to the contemporary situation as a “vision of technology as a source of individual and collective information and media format” (112). Individuals are required to adopt a living with the autonomy to generate collective tools and simple manuals to use the format for multiple purposes. Late capitalism envisages a “digital generation” consisting of “playful, self-sufficient and psychologically whole” groups who gather together “like the Net itself into collaborative networks of independent peers” (113). Turner points to the cultural change brought out by the Internet: “. . . the same machines that had served as the defining devices of the cold war technocracy emerged as the symbol of its transformation” (2). Turner adds that the crucial change is the result of computer technology expanding itself into “personal technology” and the cultural milieu in the context of technological transition.

The World Wide Web merges with this cultural ethos and generates an easy framework for a self authenticating subject. In the context of the technological leap the Web organizes content by “information rather than location” (Castells 50). Ted Nelson invented the hypertext, a system of organizing information based on horizontal information links called hyperlinks. The application of hypertext makes the Web crucial in our understanding of “written language.” The decentred and labyrinthine qualities of the hypertext have changed our perceptions of textuality (Landow 52). Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) is designed by combining the uses of language generated by various Internet applications. HTML requires formatting on the top of Internet Protocol (IP) and transmitting through Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP), necessitating an address for every single use called Uniform Resource Locator (URL). Such applications require an interface or a mediating application technically called browsers like Netscape Navigator. The hypertext acquires the status of a “meta-language” integrating the written, oral and audio-visual modalities of human communication (Castell 356). The hypertext also “marks up” the text and processes it individualizing every single use.

Writing Space

Space is defined in opposition to non-space where writing is not possible. Space is therefore defined as where writing is possible. Foucault connects individuals and space in his *Discipline and Punish*. He observes that normalizing acts proceeds from an organizing of individuals in space which requires a specific enclosure of “space” (Foucault 141). Foucault argues that unlike time, space is not “desanctified” (“Of Other Spaces” 23). The inviolable division leads to the categories like the “real space” and the “virtual space,” both quantifiable and extendable. Foucault states that “space takes for us the form of relations among sites” (“Of Other Spaces” 23). Space is therefore a set of relations that delineates sites which are not reducible to one another and not superimposable on one another.

The Foucauldian notions of space is connected to the concepts of panopticon and heterotopias. The computers offer us a material space of writing which is “animated, visually complex and to a surprising extent malleable” (Bolter 13). This writing space offered by the computer gives us a sense of fluidity and interaction. In his article “Foucault in Cyber Space,” James Boyle presents the contradictory features of the Internet, its freedom and control, to criticize both the legal orthodoxy of the Internet and cyber laws that specify the limits of “digital libertarianism.” Boyle refers to the panoptic surveillance offered by the Internet to highlight the non-sovereign and coercive nature of power pervasive in the cyber space. Foucault also refers to “spatial techniques” in his essay “Space, Knowledge and Power.” By spatial techniques he means the metaphors of space used for spatialization of knowledge, a function of the *techne*, the technology that creates knowledge systems as different from technology used in the common sense (*Foucault Reader* 256). Hence the concept of space is linked to the *techne* of the event of writing. The Foucauldian concept of the *techne* combines the ideas of panopticon and heterotopias. Panopticon is an external gaze that standardizes a boundary of space whereas heterotopias are “counter sites” in which all other real sites found in cultures are simultaneously “represented, contested and inverted” (“Of Other Spaces” 24). Foucault refers to the example of mirror as “a joint experience” of utopia and heterotopias where one sees an “unreal” self in a virtual space that opens up behind the surface (utopia) and also that enables one to see one’s “absence” in a place that “does exist in reality” (heterotopias). The *techne* of space is a normalizing grid that originates from our conception of cyber space as space.

Writing Self

Foucault’s concept of the functional author points to the entrenched manners in which power relations turn human beings into biological subjects. He discusses this biopolitics in his *History of Sexuality: An Introduction* where the normalizing pattern of society connects power to the body (140). Foucault challenges the concept of writing as a typical biopolitical exercise, one that delimits the discourse into the realm of body of the individual marking him/her as a component of the discourse. Foucault argues that author’s body, both the corporal body and the body of writing, functions as the most important “principle of exclusion” in the formation of a discourse (“The Order of Discourse” 58). It is in this context that Foucault regards author as a set of functions that controls the proliferation of discourses. Authorship is therefore a mode of subjection in which individuals establish their relation to writing spaces. An author is thus a “principle of thrift” (“What is an Author?” 221). With Foucault’s notion of the functional author the subject is deprived of the role of the “originator” and the writing self becomes a function of the discourse. Author is a functional and ideological figure who throws new light on the making and functioning of discourses. As a subject author controls the indiscriminate and dangerous proliferation of meaning through disciplining of discourse. An author is a key player in the “truth game” of language and he resists the power of language to reduce the abstractness of things into the materiality of words. Therefore the author mediates between virtuality and reality of things, between thing and its name.

With the application of Foucault’s concept of the functional author in the writing space of the Internet, we arrive at the notion of the “digital author” whose position is rearticulated “from the centre to the margins, from the source of meaning to an offering, a point in a sequence of continuously transformed matrix of signification” (Poster 91). Foucault differentiates between a discourse containing an author function and a discourse without it using an appropriation of

subject position. A discourse with an author function is always appropriated to a subject position that could be attributed to a self irrespective of its nature. It is endowed with a plurality of the self, for every narrator "I" accommodates both the object and the subject of the discourse. Therefore writings on the cyber space are discourses with author functions which create multiple cyber subjectivities.

Writing Subject

Subjectivity begins with the question of how and from where our sense of identity originates. As a critical concept subjectivity enquires into the nature of the self and its influence. The concept of subjectivity has undergone a sea change in the contemporary age of cybernetic and informational systems. Cyborg, for example, is a combination of a human and a machine. The relation between the human and the machine is different from that between humans or between machines: it is "based on internal, mutual communication, and no longer on usage or action" (Deleuze and Guattari 458). In the contemporary context man's allegiance with an external space like computer or television can be explained, though not in old terms, as a self-sufficient intentional agency. In this context, Deleuze and Guattari observe that TV viewers are neither consumers nor subjects of viewing but "intrinsic component pieces" or "constituent parts" of a broader system of input and output, one of the "means of transformations and exchanges of information" (458). Construction of identity in cyber networks addresses the issue of conceptualizing the "outer space" through a "self organization" that the subject "chooses" through writing.

Our experience with the cyber space has been variously explained in terms of subjectivities like that of the cyborgs as in Donna J. Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto," "database subjects" as in Mark Poster's *The Mode of Information* and posthuman subject as in N. Katherine Hayles's "How We Become Posthuman?". All these concepts explain the notion of the self that is related to some exterior object, machine, technology or database. These phrases related to the "writing subject" refer to a subjectivity mediated by technology, the creation of a subject of human-machine systems. Haraway defines cyborg as "the figure born of the interface of automation and autonomy" (*Premate Visions* 139). It is a hybrid of cybernetic devices and organisms and a concept used to understand the nature of subjectivity in human-machine combinations. Cyborgs exist when the boundaries between autonomy and automation gets problematic. It is an individual in the periphery marked by an external machinic space and a certain capacity of individual autonomy. Cyborg subjectivity is therefore the tension at the periphery that gets marked, defined, carried over and transgressed in cultural combinations across the history of life. A writing self engages in self-space interactions creating cyborg subjectivity.

E-Literature

The artistic dimension of computing technology has been explored in "the organization of consciousness" through deliberate encounters with language. Jorge Luis Borges and Italo Calvino have examined the computer potential of literary language. In his essay "Cybernetics and Ghosts" Calvino observes that any "literary automation" (a possible machine that can produce traditional genres following canons) is not "the true literary machine." The true literary machine is the writer, the "one that itself feels the need to produce disorder" (11). He argues that

the struggle for literary production is in fact a struggle to escape from the confines of language. In his short story “The Garden of Forking Paths,” Borges terms as *labyrinth* the error that is referred to the unpredictability and disorder of language. According to Foucault, when discourse becomes the order of things, counter discourse provides a visibility of the order. Electronic literature conforms to Foucault’s concepts of both discourse and counter discourse.

There are several genres of cyber narratives, the most prominent of which belong to e-fiction. E-fiction is a digitally born fiction and the most widely circulated genre among digital narratives. It is created and consumed in an electronic environment. It is written using a writing software, stored in a cyber space, circulated and marketed through electronic media, accessed and consumed in the digital space. It closely resembles postmodernist fiction in its form and structure. There are three major genres of e-fiction: hypertext fiction, interactive fiction and collaborative fiction.

Hypertext Fiction

Hypertext fiction is accessed and read through hyperlinks, distributed horizontally at random. There is no particular order in which hypertext fiction is read or accessed. The choice of hyperlinks depends on one’s requirements. It is an amalgam of different lexias, linguistic styles and narratives. It is transtextual without any specific form or structure. It is a non-linear and non-chronological narrative which is also fragmented and ruptured. The reader can enter and exit at anywhere in the labyrinth of links. The most notable hypertext fiction is *Patchwork Girl* (1995) by Shelley Jackson. It is a rewriting of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

The notion of the hypertext fiction has been anticipated by the postmodern view of the novel. It is self-reflexive and self-referential in that it problematizes the process of electronic writing. Hypertext fiction accounts for disorientation of spatio-temporal elements. The hypertext fiction is obviously a structured network controlled by hierarchical digital protocols. The structures provide contexts to approach the text, read and interpret it from different perspectives. Thus, hypertext fiction promotes multi-perspective reading and interpretation. The nebulous and randomly scattered lexias integrated through the narrative produces a virtual reality which transpires the dual nature of cyborg/text: the cyborg is a combination of man and machine and the text is a hybrid of verbal and visual signs. It also emphasizes the polyphonic and dialogic nature of the multilayered, non-sequential narrative. Its distributive/decentred subjectivity matches with the tension between the verbal/visual texts combined into one in the virtual space. The non-chronological, non-linear narrative of hypertext fiction deconstructs the sense of history as a representation of experienced reality. The hypertext fiction also deconstructs the sense of gender since cyborg is constructed as a post-gender creature for whom the traditional sense of the male and the female becomes redundant. Hypertext fiction constructs multiple subjectivities in the text and reconfigures the consciousness through a fluidly mutated connection among the writer, the textual interface and the reader.

The reading experience of hypertext fiction is an erotic experience. Barthes makes an erotic concept of reading in *The Pleasure of the Text*. According to him, a text reveals itself in a sort of striptease: the reader who skips boring passages resembles a spectator who helps the dancer’s striptease (11). The pleasure of the text is eroticized as the seductive fascination of the female body: the concealed is seductive.

Interactive Fiction

Interactive fiction is an interactive platform for both writer and readers. Here every reader is also a writer who reads, interacts, adds, deletes, improvises and contributes to the text. It follows Barthes's rule that "every reading is a rewriting." The reader acts as an "interactor," a reader and writer at the same time. Interactive fiction is usually conceived as a combination of a fiction and a computer game. It can be read by both humans and computer programmes or cyborgs. Interactive fiction is the earliest form of cyborg reading practice. The originator of interactive fiction is Will Crowther. His *Colossal Cave Adventure* is the first work of this genre. This text is an adventure computer game which allows a change to the content with each visit of the interactor. Other works of this genre include Tracy Kidder's *Soul of a New Machine*, Andrew Stern and Michael Mateas's *Façade*, Emily Short's *Savoir Faire* and David Jones and Mike Dailly's *Grand Theft Auto*.

The process of interaction is a personal choice: it depends on the point at which the interactor enters the text, the textual trail used to solve the riddle, contribute his writing and finally make his exit from the text. The interactor's path is personal and therefore ideological.

Jean Baudrillard connects the ecstasy of reading to the secret/suspense deferred in the text. He wonders in *The Ecstasy of Communication*: "What could be more seductive than the secrets?" (64). In interactive fiction the secret is locked away. The reader attempts to unlock the secret in a series of text adventures. The pleasure of the reader rests in solving the puzzle and learning the secrets. The pleasure of interaction is obtained through alternating elements of reading and writing processes. The person who reads and writes to interact is the "operator" or "interactor" of the interactive fiction in which the narrative disclosure is controlled by a puzzle. The interactor is at once the reader and one of the writers of the interactive fiction. He contributes to the writing that becomes part of the text: he is thus one of the co-authors.

Collaborative Fiction

Collaborative fiction is written by two or more authors in the form of subtexts or episodes. The number of contributors is limited and each contributor is given a specific task. Every collaborative fiction is a form of interactive fiction. But unlike interactive fiction where the number of interactions is infinite, collaborative fiction has only limited interactions. Collaborative fiction is an experimental digital narrative. Robert Asprin's *Thieves World* and *Myth Adventure* are examples of this genre. Avante garde literary groups like Dadaists engaged in writing games on a collaborative basis. They think that literature is a system of interconnected writings, persistently opened to expansion. This is particularly true in the case of interactive and collaborative fictions. The main distinction between the two is that the former operates on unplanned collaboration whereas the latter develops on preplanned collaboration.

Softwares and writing platforms like Wikinovel, Wikiworld, Story Mash, Fiction Wikia and META novel are used in collaborative fiction writing. Website which features collaborative fiction include wikistories.com and taitelling.com. The first collaborative fiction is *The Unknown* by William Gillespie, Derek Straton and Scott Rettberg. Other notable collaborative fiction include Cathy Marshall and Judy Malloy's *Forward Anywhere*, Robert Coover's *Hypertext Hotel* and Deena Larsen's *Marbles Springs*. *Invisible Seattle* (1979 to the present) is a

collaborative narrative written by a writing group who were the residents of Seattle. The novel was based on Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. The subtitle of the text, *The Novel of Seattle by Seattle* appropriately resonates with its collaborative functions.

Other Genres

Other digital literary genres include email novel, SMS novel/narratives and flash poems and flash fiction or micro-fiction. Email novel is in the form of a series of two way emails. It is the modern form of epistolary novel which is but bilateral. The first email novel is Scott Rettberg's *Kind of Blue*. Robert Coover's *CAVE room* is an SMS narrative which is an intersection of computer game and action. Flash poems are of several sub-genres and they defy all canons of poetry. Flash fiction or micro-fiction is an extremely short fictional narrative.

In e-literature the author is a decentred network of codes that also serves as a node within another centreless network. Radical changes in textuality produce radical changes in the concept of author. Lack of textual autonomy based on textual centredness reverses the concept of author. The unbounded textuality of e-fiction dispenses with the authorial persona and disperses the authorial functions. Foucault's attempt to erase the hierarchy between author and reader is evident in e-fiction which stresses that "author" and "reader" are functions based on the use of the texts. Author as a presence or a sign of power is related to representation. This leads to canonization of texts. E-literature has challenged the canons of texts. In e-literature the reader becomes the author and gains power to reestablish originality.

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