

# FICTION: A POSTMODERNIST CRITIQUE

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**M**ost of the fictions in the contemporary age belong to the electronic canon. This is the result of unprecedented popularity and meteoric development of the internet. Any fiction in the evolution of its print will be in a digital format at one time or another. This is due to the impact of electronic publishing, especially of literary texts. The computer has provided a new writing space: literary genres are born in the interstices of the cyberspace. This has radically altered the concepts of author, reader, text and the process of signification. The electronic text is a curious blend of visual and verbal signs. The text is not only written but also read and signified in an electronic environment of virtual reality. This is a novel and fascinating experience.

The electronic fiction has different genres like the hypertext fiction, interactive fiction and collaborative fiction. All these forms conform to the characteristics of postmodernist fiction. The most popular example of hypertext fiction is Shelley Jackson's e-novel *Patchwork Girl* (1995). It is essentially a rewriting of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. It also refers to the discursive premises of Lucretius, Derrida and Cixous. Hypertext fiction demands cyborg reading practices. The hypertexts are written, read and distributed in identical cognitive environment. The reader is constructed as a cyborg, the combination of a man and a computer. As the theme of the novel is fragmentation and resurrection, the text compels the reader to adopt a reading that is modular and fragmented.

The notion of the hypertext fiction has been anticipated by the postmodern view of the novel. It is a fragmented, ruptured and a chaotic narrative connected through hyperlinks. 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. It is an amalgam of different lexias, styles and genres. 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 interactive fiction is an emerging electronic literary genre with high commercial potentials. It combines a fiction and a computer game or a puzzle or a riddle or an adventure. Interactive fiction is not a simple narrative; it is an interactive computer programme. The readers find the pleasure of the text adventure as a pleasure derived from overcoming mental challenges. This prevents an easy acceptance of interactive fiction as a literary genre.

The reading experience or the pleasure of the text is a luscious 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 (1975:11). The pleasure of the text is eroticized as the seductive fascination of the female body: the concealed is seductive. 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?" (1988: 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.

Will Crowther's *Adventure* (1975) is his version of *Adventure* operated with the file name ADVENT. The commercial version of the fiction is called *Colossal Cave*. The interactor can enter the text from any of the five points offered by Crowther. Thus it has no conventional beginning or end. Tracy Kidder's *Soul of a New Machine* (1981) is an imitation of *Adventure*. 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 makes his exit from the text. The interactor's path is personal and therefore ideological. The graphical based interactive narrative *Façade* by Andrew Stern and Michael Mateas is one of the most interesting interactive narratives. It is a version of *Grand Theft Auto*. The commercial version *Dungeon Crawl* is marketed by Topologika. Versions like *Misty* are murder mysteries marketed by Data West. Evangelists Emily Short's *Savoir Faire* is a religious interactive narrative. The two way electronic versions of epistolary novels are also available. They are email novels for which Scott Rettberg's *Kind of Blue* is an example. SMS narratives like Robert Coover's *CAVE room* are intersections of computers and actions. In brief, interactive fiction is a laboratory of digital narratives.

A form of electronic fiction in which two or more authors collaborate to complete the fictional narrative is called collaborative fiction. The authors take turns to write the e-novel. A collaborative author may focus on a specific character, the next one on a different character and so on. Sometimes, different authors may write different subtexts which are finally combined into a complete narrative format by one of them. Collaborative fiction is an experimental digital narrative. Robert Asprin's *Thieves World* and *Myth Adventure* are examples of this genre. Avant 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

...tion between the two is that the former operates on unplanned collaboration whereas the latter develops on preplanned collaboration.

*The Unknown* (1998 – 2002) is a collaborative hypertext novel. The novel was primarily written by William Gilllessie, Dirk Straton and Scott Rettberg. It underwent expansion and revision in four years: new episodes were added, links were added and removed and the general structure of the narrative was changed. *The Unknown* was primarily structured in terms of spatial rather than temporal elements. Deena Larsen's *Marbles Springs* (1993), Cathy Marshall and Judy Malloy's *Forward Anywhere* (1995) and Robert Coover's *Hypertext Hotel* (timeless) are also examples of this genre. *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.

Networked literature like collaborative fiction necessitates a reconsideration of the relation between authorship and agency. The collaboration takes place at different levels: conscious, contributory and unwitting. In conscious participation, the contributors are fully conscious of the nature of the project, its limitations and how their contributions may be utilized. In contributive participation, the contributors may not be aware of how their contributions fit into the design of the project or its nature, but they are conscious of their involvement in the project. In unwitting participation, the contributors are not conscious of their involvement in the project; the subtext used in the collaborative narrative are identified and gathered by a text machine. The three levels of participation are not mutually exclusive: a collaborative narrative can utilize contributions at all the three levels.

Forms of collaborative fiction are drawn from other practices of computers. A wiki novel is a collaborative fiction written by a community of authors using a wiki. *Wikinovel* and *Wikiworld* are two projects launched in 2007. *Wiki Story.com*, *META novel* and *Tailtelling.com* are similar projects.

It can be seen that electronic fiction can be juxtaposed with postmodernist fiction in its conception and reception. It conforms to

postmodern/poststructuralist theories of fiction.

Ferdinand de Saussure points out that language is a system that preexists the speaker. Both structuralists and the post-structuralists contend that speakers are always already positioned by the semiotic system of language. Jacques Lacan, for instance, refers to the Subject as a position *being spoken by* language. Roland Barthes also thinks in the same direction. He states in *Image-Music-Text*: "...it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is ... to reach the point where only language acts" (1977: 143). He means that a writer is also the written. Language is a medium of communication wherein the speaker/writer acts as a medium perpetuating linguistic conventions.

The concept of intertextuality problematizes the construct called "author;" writer is an orchestrator of what is already written. Barthes considers the text a mosaic of writing: "A text is ... a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (1977: 146). Barthes denies the writer the status of an original creator: "The writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original" (1977: 146). A writer only selects and combines the materials already written by authors, both present and past. In his book *S/Z*, Barthes "de-originates" Balzac's short story "Sarrasine" to show that it reflects many voices including Balzac's. Balzac does not "express himself;" a Subject does not precede language, but is produced by it. For Barthes writing does not involve a working from signifieds to signifiers, but a working with signifiers and letting the signifiers free to flow. Claude Levi-Strauss also agrees with this view: "I don't have the feeling that I write my books, I have the feeling that my books get written through me" (Wiseman, 2000: 173). He emphasizes that the writer is only a medium which makes the text written. The personal identity of the writer is a mystique constructed by the reader who invents the writer's identity in the text.

Barthes's concept of the "death of the author" results in the birth of the reader. The unity of a text lies not in his origin but in its destination or fortune. The framing of texts by other texts equally affects the writers as well as their readers. In this regard, Frederic Jameson's explanation seems appropriate: "... texts come before us as the always-already read, we apprehend them through the sedimented

rs of previous interpretations, or – if the text  
brand new, through the sedimented reading  
its and categories developed by those inherited  
interpretative traditions” (Rodowick, 1994: 286). He  
ans that the legacy of interpretation conditions  
reading process. A fortunate text has a history  
reading and a tradition of interpretations. As  
ry Eagleton remarks, “all literary works ... are  
ritten, if only unconsciously, by the societies  
ch read them” (1983: 12). The contexts in  
ch the text is reproduced constitute the primary  
me of reference which the reader cannot evade in  
rpreting the text.

The concept of intertextuality underlines that  
h text exists in relation to other texts. Texts  
therefore, more related other texts than to the  
hors. Michel Foucault emphasizes this fact in  
book *The Archaeology of Knowledge*: “The frontiers  
a book are never clear-cut: ...it is caught up in  
ystem of references to other books, other texts,  
er sentences: it is a node within a network ...”  
(1972: 23). Foucault thinks that the over-all meaning  
duced by the text depends on the network of  
ns. Texts are therefore framed by other texts.  
rthes introduces this concept in the term *anchorage*.  
guistic elements can “anchor” the preferred  
ding of a text/image: it is a device used “to fix  
floating chain of signifieds” (1977: 38). But  
rthes argues that the main function of anchorage  
ideological. Barthes also introduces another term  
y to describe the relationships between text and  
age. He states that *relay* is complementary and it  
nds for the “paradoxical case when the image is  
nstructed according to the text” (1977: 40). The  
ction of the images and the text are evaluated in  
e context of their rhetorical values. Levi-Struass’s  
ion of the *bricoleur* is that of an improvised  
cture created by appropriating pre-existing  
aterials. The *bricoleur* works with signs, constructing  
w signifieds and signifiers. He explains: “The  
st aspect of *bricolage* is ... to construct a system of  
radigms with fragments of syntagmatic changes,  
ding in turn to new syntagms” (1974: 150). Levi-  
uass also sees “author” in similar terms: writing  
n part a dialogue with the materials, a monologic  
course of language.

Jean-François Lyotard, in his work *The Postmodern*

*Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, examines the nature  
of knowledge in advanced capitalist societies.  
Postmodernism has a preference for “legitimizing  
metanarratives.” Two important metanarratives are  
related to the production of knowledge: knowledge  
is produced for its own sake or for a subject in  
quest of emancipation. Postmodernity implies  
that these objectives of knowledge are disputed.  
Lyotard observes that “the status of knowledge is  
altered as societies enter...the postindustrial age  
and cultures enter...the postmodern age” (1984:  
3). He notes that commercialization has changed  
the ways in which knowledge is acquired, classified,  
stored, disseminated and exploited. The knowledge  
in computerized societies is “exteriorized.” The  
conventional concept that knowledge and pedagogy  
are mutually linked has been replaced by the new  
perspective of knowledge as a *commodity*. Lyotard  
observes “Knowledge is and will be produced in order  
to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be  
valorized in a new production: in both cases the goal  
is exchange. Knowledge ceases to be an end in itself;  
it loses its use value” (1984: 5). Lyotard argues that  
knowledge as a form of informational commodity  
has a major stake in the global competition for  
power. The system of production has changed:  
knowledge as an exchangeable commodity and  
competitive power replace material and capital in  
contemporary system of production. The new  
system of production has changed the perspective  
of knowledge. The state has become “a factor of  
opacity in the commercialization of knowledge”  
(1984: 5). The idea that knowledge or production of  
knowledge has a factor that falls within the purview  
of society needs be modified. It is now evident  
that the society progresses only if “the messages  
circulating within it are rich in information and easy  
to decode” (1984: 5). The system of knowledge  
has been organized in relation to the process of  
organized marketing and consumption.

Commodification has graded knowledge into  
payment knowledge and investment knowledge.  
A distinction is drawn between the two, between  
units of knowledge exchanged and the units of  
knowledge dedicated for the performance of a  
project. The transformation has redefined the labour  
and reconstituted the workforce. Technologically

trained and skilled youth have become the technocoolies/cybercoolies. Knowledge and power are analogous; they are represented in identically structured paradigms. But narrative knowledge has been marginalized by scientific knowledge because the producers and consumers of knowledge have realized that the latter is more profitable and more powerful. Lyotard observes that in the digital age the question of knowledge is more than a question of government (1984: 9). The power to make decisions is determined by the access to information. Eventually academics are subordinated to the position of facilitators of knowledge; they no longer enjoy the elevated status of the producers of knowledge. Ernest Mandel observes in *Late Capitalism* that postmodernity is characterized by an unprecedented "expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas ...like the media and advertising industry" (1978: 78). He points out that late capitalism has commodified representation itself, culture and media, both visual and verbal, and their interspaces. The artifacts of contemporary technology like the computer, television and so on no longer process the capacity for representation and articulate nothing. In postmodernity representation is related to a decentred global network of late capitalism. This leads to an apparent paradox. Though representation appears decentred, it is controlled by the power structures of centralized global capital.

Foucault thinks that power is all pervasive: the two forms of power, regime power and disciplinary power, accompany each other. Power entails a set of actions performed on another person's actions and reactions. The exercise of power is not violence, though violence may be part of power relations. Power is related to capability of action; the greater the capability of the individual/subject, the greater is the power directed against him. Foucault connects power to oppression and freedom. Power is exercised only over free subjects. So slavery is not a power relationship. The mechanisms of power produce different types of knowledge. The knowledge generated in this way further reinforces exercise of power.

Foucault investigates the conditions under which human beings become the objects of knowledge in certain disciplines which he called human

sciences. He looks at these disciplines through examining "discourses" or "discursive practices." For Foucault, a discourse is a body of thought and writing united by a common object of study and a common methodology. The concept of discourse provides him a context to analyze a variety of practices across space and time. Discourse connects power and knowledge as a frame of analysis. Discourse is constructed and perpetuated by those who have power, knowledge and means of communication.

Foucault's concept of discourse helps to analyze group texts and ideas and deconstruct the status of the author. He denies the author the status of an individual or a personality and treats the author as a construct fulfilling a set of functions. Authorial figure exists only outside the textual space and as a person precedes the text. But author as a function coexists with the text and within the text. He admits author as the paradoxical Deleuze's centre where the text originates, yet remains outside the text. After spacing the author at the outside the text, Foucault proceeds to deconstruct author/centre. He refers to the concept of *écriture* and explores his application without its traditional dimensions. For Foucault, *écriture* is the play of signifiers. Language in this kind of writing does not refer to the signified, but to the play of signifiers. The *écriture* is a *monologic* writing of self-referential writing: a writing about writing or writing about language itself. So this kind of writing is always working against the rules of grammar and syntactic structures and the elements of discourse structure. Foucault observes in *The Order of Discourse* "Writing is not the vehicle for the author's expression of his/her emotions or ideas, since writing is not meant to communicate from author to reader; rather writing is the circulation of language, regardless of the individual existence of the author or reader" (1970: 139). He means that writing is neither an expression nor a communication; it is the circulation of language to create and exist without a writing Subject. Another principle that Foucault finds in *écriture* is the possible relation between writing and death. Conventionally, writing is regarded as a means to become "immortal," as evidenced in Greek epics or *Thousand and One Nights*. But *écriture* is not about the situation; rather than ensuring in

ing "kills" the author. Foucault states that the author's individuality is erased by the text, because the "author" or "authorship" is a function of language itself. From the humanist perspective, author, text and reader are self-evident and separate: author produces a text which is read by the reader; author is the source of creative power out of which he creates an entirely new product, the text. But in poststructuralist perspective the relations between author, text and reader are replaced by the relations between language and subject positions. Louis Althusser shows how authors/readers are interpellated as subjects into ideological structures within the text. Foucault uses the same theoretical premises to show that "authorship" and "reader" is a subject position within language or, more specifically, within a text.

Gerard Genette argues that the term *transtextuality* is a more inclusive one than *intertextuality*. He has classified five subtypes of *transtextuality*. They are intertextuality, paratextuality, architextuality, hypertextuality and hypotextuality (1980: 89). Besides, there is intratextuality which represents the relations between elements present in the text. The computerized hypertextuality is added to complete the list. Hypertext refers to a text which can take reader directly to other texts regardless of authorship or publication. Hypertextuality disrupts the conventional linearity of texts. Reading such texts seldom follows the standard sequences predetermined by their authors. Hypertext is a recent invention by Vannevar Bush and Theodor Nelson. Hypertext systems embody ideas advanced in contemporary literary theory: George Landow's *Hypertext: The Emergence of Technology and Contemporary Literary Theory*, Jay David Bolter's *The Writing Space*, and Leon Tuman's *Literacy Online: The Promise (and Peril) of Reading and Writing with Computers* bear testimony to this fact. Richard Lanham's *The Electronic Word: Technology, Democracy and the Arts* and Tuman's *Word Perfect* examine the impact of hypertext and electronic publishing on literary and education. Dana Snyder's *Hypertext: The Electronic Labyrinth* is an introductory hypertext theory. Landow's definition of hypertext is canonical: "Texts composed of blocks of words or images linked electronically by multiple paths, chains or trails in an open-ended perpetually unfinished textuality described by the

term link, node, network, web and path" (1992:3). Writings on hypertexts present a contrast between print literature and electronic literature. The printed work is stable, static and linear. Conventionally, reading is an essentially passive and private activity: readers are isolated from one another. But reading in the digital space is proactive and the readers are linked through database web servers. Hypertext began as electronic versions of conventional printed texts. Unlike printed texts, electronic texts are infinitely malleable: they can be updated, reedited or rewritten at any time by their creators. Electronic texts have no markers like page number, title, etc. In this regard, George Landow explains: "The text appears to fragment, to atomize, into constituent elements ... these reading units take on a life of their own as they become more self-contained, lose their intimate connection both with their authors and with other parts of a formally integrated work" (1992: 52). Hypertexts are connected to one another through hyperlinks which, when activated, call up a related text, picture, video or other objects. Readers, who move easily from one text to another, do not experience different texts as separate, but as interconnected.

Hypertexts are accessed by readers through a computer. They often use a software which possesses many of the creative techniques used by the authors. A reader may enter a work through a search engine. Reading of hypertexts is different from conventional reading: start reading from the beginning of a work to the end. Hypertexts can be accessed at any point: they do not have beginnings or end or clear narrative threads. Readers are guided through hypertexts not by authors' interests but by their own. They choose links that interests them and pass over other links. The trail of links a reader chooses to follow is more important than the original works. Authors can neither define nor predict what a reader will encounter; they can offer possibilities that can be accepted or rejected. It is the reader who chooses what path to take or whether to take the same paths twice. This changed relations between the readers and the authors have many far-reaching consequences. The field of hypertext is unstable and ever-changing; it is gradually growing, acquiring new texts connected by an evolving

network of links. Hypertexts provide the same electronic environment to both the reader and the writer: the two are, therefore, no longer poles apart. The readers are no longer passive; they have become critics and co-authors. The dominance of writers over literacy and culture disappears. Hypertextuality radically challenges the traditional notions of author, text and reader on the one hand and knowledge and pedagogy on the other. It also threatens conventional pedagogy which is linear and pyramidal.

Hypertext reference retrieves the actual text. Once retrieved, the text can be searched, taking the reader to the exact point of enquiry. Cross-references are replaced by hyperlinks to external texts. A citation index of corollary sources can be displayed on command. Any of the corollary sources can be selected instantly on command.

Hypertext embodies the notion of *unlimited semiosis*, a texture of signs that give rise to interpretants. Elements in an electronic writing are dynamic, fluid and even chaotic. They are perpetually re-organized, not by the author but by the reader. Hypertext satisfies Barthes's notion of the ideal *writerly* texts: "a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, ... the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach; they are indeterminable." The dynamics of hypertexts is determined by readers who perpetually reorganize them. Hypertexts, as writerly kind of texts, invite the active participation of readers, their attention to linguistic mediation.

By electronic fiction we mean fiction that is "digital born." E-fiction incorporates all genres of print fictions in addition to genres unique to networked and programmable media. It has blurred the boundary between computer games and fiction. The digital space has come to integrate more and more of the literary form. The print and electronic texts are increasingly interpenetrated by system of code. Print text is now considered a particular output of any electronic text. The popularity of internet has hastened the acceptance of e-fiction. But it does not mean a decline or even imminent demise of print culture. E-fiction is not a descendent of conventional fiction: it has incorporated many of the characteristics of its immediate predecessor, the postmodernist fiction.

E-fiction has conformed to the ideas of Barthes and Derrida about authorship and multiplicity of texts, Barthes's perspective about the writerly text and non-linear narrative and Derrida's arguments about intertextuality and openness of texts. Like the postmodernist fiction, e-fiction eschews the possibility of meanings in the contexts of transcendental subjectivity. Like metafiction it undermines the univocal control of the author and transpires the fictionality of fiction to the reader. Its unexpected narrative shifts displace emotions and bring in objectivity and impersonality.

E-fiction underlines that authorship is a matter of selection and organization. Author is a construct constituted by concepts like originality, authority, intertextuality and attribution. In e-fiction, the functions of the author and the reader are entwined with each other. The transference of authorial power appears in the reader's choice of metatexts and paratexts. In this context Jacques Lacan's observation in *Hypertext 3.0* is remarkable: "What literature solicits of the reader is not simply reception, but active, independent, autonomous construction of meaning" (2006: 71). In e-fiction the author is a decentred network of codes that also serves as a node within another centreless network. Radical changes in textuality produces 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-fiction has challenged the canons of texts. In e-fiction the reader becomes the author and gains power to reestablish originality.

The greatest theoretical influence on electronic fiction is the postmodern epistemology. The structure of knowledge and the structure of power are analogous in their functions and operations. The functions of author and reader are redefined by Foucault. According to him, an author is a function or text itself rather than a person. The idea of an

a person is a figment of attribution. In the of the electronic text, the author and the are each other's function in a democracy of naring. If we go deep into the structure of ic text, we can see that the epistemological ver structures that define them are mutually n the cyberspace. The interstices of the digital onstruct and reconstruct identities of the So an internet user can invent or reinvent his the cyberspace. In addition to the analogous pondence between the epistemological and structures, the order of narrative sequence e psychological conditions of the author/ are determined by the hyperlinks and entralized surveillance system respectively. ult's conception of the panoptic surveillance his arguments on the order of hierarchal ons find their application in electronic fiction. he electronic fictions always undergo digital ediation in the course of their narrative sey. They are controlled by digital protocols h emphasize the Foucauldian perspective that wledge is not free: it is not knowledge that is ver, but the application of knowledge.

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