

Techno Literature & Hyper-real World Themes & Intricacies in Post-Modern Fiction

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Abstract— This study examines the effects of technology on digital citizenship and the modes of text adaption for post modern readers. Post Modern world is characterized by the changing relationship between 'representation' and 'reality'. Technology, by the means of language (which is the first human technology) interacts with our bodies and develops the ways we tell about ourselves and adept our surroundings. Technology, when juxtaposed with literature, has become the extension of our bodies into the digital world, modifying and transforming continually. In today's world, literature (whatever its subjects and topics may be) can be perceived as a form of data processing; literary texts receive and store and thus constitute a 'discourse', a reflection on the very hardware of cultural data and its widespread application through popular media apparatus. We human beings, as characters in books, movies, press, paintings, and cyber-space and so on are cyborgs whose physiological functioning is aided by a mechanical or electronic device and thus represent digital literature which is hyperreal a new thing which seems to refer to something real in contemporary times. Techno literature today appears in apocalyptic scenarios in which writers create monstrously deformed human bodies or minds, decaying cities nuclear annihilation and collapsed environments that degrade humans to mere parts of machinery. This paper will attempt to focus on recurrent theme of pervasiveness of technology as an inevitable, disastrous, innovative and powerful aspect of postmodern fiction. Technology can take a form of hyper literature i.e., a genre of electronic literature, characterized by the use of hypertext links which provide a new context for non-literary in literature and reader interaction or in other ways it can be persistent in its content i.e., the themes it mainly talks about are inextricably linked with the effects of cyber expansion.

Index Terms— Technology, cyber-space, cyborgs, hyperreal, digital literature, hyper literature and cyber expansion.

In the changing digitized world, there is no more hope for meaning as meaning is mortal and its reign is ephemeral. The real today is replaced with the 'hyperreal' which in Baudrillard's terms is more real than real. Technology, by the means of language, interacts with our bodies and develops the ways we tell about ourselves and adept our surroundings. The complication arises when one has to figure out that what happens to literary texts in cyberspace and how do they adapt in the environment. The aim of this paper is to explore the effects of technology in the making of literature in today's digitized world. For this, two postmodern fictions *White Noise* by Den DeLillo and *Patchwork Girl* by Shelly Jackson are analysed in the light of the theoretical underpinnings of the works of Jean Baudrillard, Katherine Hayles, George Landow and Jacques Derrida.

Technology appears to capture reality in all its minutest details. The technical and visual means employed in any text construct a reality of another order, which has been called "hyperreality"- a postmodern semiotic concept coined by French sociologist Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation* (p.24). This hyperreality is a phantasmic creation which is affected by the intervention of machine but it emerges as a more authentic, exact, 'real' reality than the one we perceive in the life around us.¹ Visual tools used in contemporary digitized literature are spurned by deconstruction of their tendency to freeze the fluidity of meaning by offering powerful graphic and duplication tools.

Technology constructs a form of hyperliterature i.e. a genre of electronic literature, characterized by the use of hypertext links which provide a new context for non-linearity in literature and reader interaction or in other ways it can be persistent in its content as the themes it mainly talks about are inextricably linked with the effects of cyber expansion.

Post-modernism argues that technological and economic conditions of our age have given rise to a decentralized media dominated society in which ideas are simulacra and merely inter-referential representations and copies of each other, with no real original meaning. In today's transforming world, individuals flee from the desert of the real for the ecstasies of hyperreality. Baudrillard's post-modern world is one of the hyperreality which is more real than real with more and more information and less and less meaning. This information, rather than creating meaning it exhausts itself in staging meaning and consequently bringing forth inflation of information and deflation of meaning.² Techno literature today appears in apocalyptic scenarios displaying death and destruction as a consequence to World Wars and global transformation in which writers create monstrously deformed human bodies or minds, decaying cities, nuclear annihilation, and collapsed environments that degrade humans to mere parts of machinery.

Literary arts together with visual arts constitute a hybrid text in the form of meta-narratives and visual-narratives

¹ Baudrillard defines hyperreality as, "Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal (*Simulacra and Simulation* 1994).

² See Jean Budrillard's *SIMULACRA AND SIMULATIONS* (1994). *The Implosion of Meaning in The Media* Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser(79)

witnessing the third order of simulacra i.e. a cybernetic order as defined by Jean Baudrillard. Contemporary media informs the readers about the existence of Cyberpunk, cyber culture, cyber bodies, cyborgs, cybersex and all other virtual means as modes of literary expression which lie deep underneath any literary work.³ These virtual means of expression contribute to educating us how to behave, and what to think, feel, believe, fear and desire and what not to.

Baudrillard's world is informational and bears resemblance to the world of *White Noise*: one characterized by the collapse of the real with the flow of signifiers emanating from an information society, by a loss of the real in a black hole of simulation and the play and exchange of signs. In this world, common to both Baudrillard and DeLillo, images, signs and codes engulf objective reality; signs become more real than reality and stand in for the world they obliterate.

In *White Noise*, a post-modern American fiction of 1985, DeLillo sees a new version of subjectivity as the modernist order is eclipsed by the postmodern world. DeLillo is preoccupied with the rise of technology, the power of images, the pervasiveness of media and the explosion of information. Throughout the narrative, we find inextricable human and mechanical voices; the traffic hums, Babette hums, the supermarket is filled with endless sounds and fragments of television shows continually exploit the singularity of meaning and the linearity of the narrative. Jack Gladney, who is the narrator of *White Noise*, attempts to shore up the ruins of an old order by chanting advertising slogans, which imply the end of interiority. He is oddly obsessed in the meaningless quest for transcendental meaning in postmodern era. We find him experiencing his self in the space of simulacrum.

Gladney's colleague Murray Siskind, a visiting lecturer in "living icons" (DeLillo 11) who lives in a one room apartment with a television set and stacks of comic books, and teaches popular culture courses in Elvis considers that it is useless to look the meaning of the words beyond networks, surfaces and commodities. The information society provides its own sort of epiphanies, and watching television, an experience he describes as "close to mystical," (DeLillo 28) is one of them. For Murray television proffers the Baudrillardian ecstasy of communication which is a peak experience (one that does not always materialize, but is unspeakable when it occurs) of postmodern culture. In *White Noise*, Murray narrates his experience with television and says, "It welcomes us into the grid, the network of little buzzing dots that make up the picture pattern. There is light, there is sound. I ask my students 'what more do you want?' Look at the wealth of data concealed in the grid, in the bright packaging, the jingles, the slice-of-life commercials, the products hurtling out of darkness, the coded messages and endless repetitions, like chants, like mantras" (DeLillo 23).

Technology, as revealed by postmodern literary practices, attempts to commodify and simulate the realms of hypermarket i.e. the product of capital and it stages the meaning instead of creating it by means of consumptive process of consumerism. The capacity for simulation that lies within commodities rests within the unlimited mass productive quality of the factory and the fact that each commodity is seen as none other than an object. Thus, the novel *White Noise* explores the cyber bourgeois life-style that California represents throughout the plot.

The air born toxic events, a dense threatening cloud of dangerous chemicals provide a particularly frightening image of technology. A man from SIMUVAC, which stands for Simulated Evacuation, explains the toxin's deadline to Jack, but only in vague, abstract terms. He tells Jack that SIMUVAC is using their experience here, at the airborne toxic event, in order to prepare for a disaster simulation. He states, "SIMUVAC vehicles were everywhere. Men in Mylex suits patrolled the streets, many of them carrying instruments to measure harm" (DeLillo 122). Jack tells Murray about his SIMUVAC experience, how he now has the seed of death planted inside of him. The two of them talk about death in the modern era and about how death always adapts to our technological advances. Jack's fear of death resembles his perception of reality of life as collection different sounds. Babette, Jack's wife, has secretly been taking an experimental drug called Dillard in order to relieve her fear of death. SIMUVAC is a model for the real that is perceived as actual, and, "the real cannot surpass the model... it is the real that has become the alibi of the model, in a world controlled by the principle of simulation" (Baudrillard 82). Thus *White Noise* is perceived as a heterophonic novel which is saturated with media aurality and accousmatic interjections.

To explain the second dimension of techno-literature, American fiction writer Shelley Jackson's hypertext *Patchwork Girl* published in 1995 offers a clear reflection of the impacts of technological advancement on writing of literature. A hypertext is an interactive literature with its use of text 'links' in multiple ways to other texts. It has gained popularity in mid 1990s. The term hypertext is coined by Theodor Nelson in 1960s who defines it in *Literary Machines* (1981) as a non-sequential writing-text that branches and allows choices to the reader, best read at an interactive screen. It needs a special software storyspace (Eastgate System) or HyperCard. Michael Joyce for the first time published the first hypertext, - *Afternoon, a story*.

A reader of a hypertext has a variety of choices to move from one textual node to the other. Depending upon his selection of these links, he creates a story of his own. The writer of a hypertext willingly assigns authority and independence to the reader of the text and in this way the origin of a work in the hands of the writer is transferred deliberately to the hands of the reader as its destination point

³ Haraway describes the cyborg as "a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self" (163). For further explanation see Haraway, Donna. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991. 149-181

for interpretation and comprehension.⁴

We can replace the term hypertext for hypermedia for its World Wide Web structure. It has Derrida's mutability and mobility, Roland Barthes' 'galaxy of signifiers' and speaks in poststructuralist ways of multiple entrances, mazes and interiors. It has multiple beginnings and ending depending upon reader's choices. According to Katherine Hayles in *Flickering Connectivities* in Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl: the Importance of Media-Specific Analysis* (2000), "Within a print fiction, readers decode a durable script to create in their mind a picture of the verbally represented world. With an electronic text, the encoding/decoding operations are distributed between the writer, computer and user" (Katherine Hayles 28).

Patchwork Girl takes inspiration from *The Patchwork Girl of OZ* (Frank Baum 1913) and *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley (1818). The plot of the novel revolves around Mary Shelley's second monster, the female companion that Victor Frankenstein began creating but then destroyed, was secretly finished by Mary Shelley herself. The monster becomes Mary Shelley's lover and travels to America and goes through different adventures.

In *Patchwork Girl*, a female body is stitched together in different parts and every part follows a link to the other. These bits and pieces in hypertext reveal implosion of meaning. It consists of 323 lexias and 462 links.⁵ The title page offers the reader a choice of five major starting points (which form the corpus of *Patchwork Girl*); a graveyard, a journal, a quilt, a story and broken accents. Whatever starting point the reader chooses, he is bound to find further connections existing there. A link labeled as 'a graveyard' leads to the statement, "I am buried here, you can resurrect me, but only piecemeal. If you want to see the whole, you will have to stitch me together yourself" (Jackson Lexia One).⁶ While reading *Patchwork Girl*, a reader seems baffled with the idea that whether he is reading Shelley Jackson's commentary about creating hypertext or the *Patchwork Girl*'s feelings on being pieced together by hyperliterature. It is because the electronic nodes that a reader navigates to proceed in the novel not only instruct the reader about the content and form of the hypertext but also highlight the thematic coherence operating side by side with textual formation. The form along with the content makes *Patchwork Girl* more of a commentary about a mosaic girl of cybernetic nature. This concept takes the critics to get in to a new debate about cyberfeminism- an aspect of feminism in the light of contemporary techno sensibility.

In his book *The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*, Landow (1997) has considered the technologies that open new horizons in literary and cultural theory as revolutionary, and has stated, among other things, that computer technology and cyber literature, at last, enable

to put things described by poststructuralist and deconstructionist theories into practice, and has concluded that the experience of reading a hypertext opens up several important ideas in poststructuralist literary theory. According to Landow, Roland Barthes' ideal text has been materialized in hypertext and the ideas by J. Derrida, M. Bakhtin and M. Riffaterre have been expressed in hypertext.

Technoliterature is recognized by its loss of real (in Baudrillard's terms), and the absence of a singular identity. The narrator of *Patchwork Girl* stitches the identity of a hypertext and pursues her reflection on the complex relationship between technology, writing, and the body. She puts the acronym "M/S" into play to disrupt the textual genealogy and stage a complex redistribution of subjectivities along the invisible lines traced by the hyperlinks on the surface of the textual body. As demonstrated in Katherine Hayles' essay *Flickering Connectivities* in Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*, "Jackson's subversions of her publisher's proprietary claims continue in a section entitled "M/S," a naming that invites us to read the slash as both dividing and connecting Mary Shelley and Shelley Jackson" (Hyles 38).

Shelley Jackson Narrates in *lexia Interrupting D*, "The phantom, the phantasm, the simulacrum of living discourse is not inanimate; it is not insignificant; it simply signifies little...This signifier of little, this discourse that doesn't mount much, is like all ghosts: errant" (*Lexia Interrupting D*). Shelly Jackson's patching up of the different chunks of the text by creating hyperlinks underscores her intent to juxtapose her cybertext with postmodern critical theories epitomizing the inherent themes of hyperfiction in contemporary era. She mentions Derrida as one click on "Derrida" in the *lexia* entitled "Mementos" (body of text/mementos) will reveal the full extent of the hyperlinked sentence which fleetingly appears encapsulated within a red box: "Derrida will come home mumbling about a she-monster who beset him in the woods," and lead the user to another textual fragment aptly named "Interrupting D". Shelley Jackson intersperses intertextual fragments excerpted from *Disseminations* (Derrida, 1981) with her own works through a process of textual hybridization and dissemination which keeps fraying *Patchwork Girl* at the edges.

While reading the text it keeps haunting the reader's mind that is the pieced anatomy of the title character and the patched architecture of the computer novel horrid or does it make a framework for intertextuality. This is explained in the *lexia* lives and livers as, "[...] If a person can have a phantom limb, cannot a phantom limb also have also a phantom person? In fact, it seemed to me that each of my parts brought with it a trace of the whole person who was once

⁴ Roland Barthes in *The Death of the Author* (1998) makes the point that the origin of a work may lie with the author, but its destination is with the reader. This liberty of reader fairly suggested by Barthes is explained as "... [T]he birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (386).

⁵ The term *lexia* George Landow appropriates from Roland Barthes to denote the screen that usually equals the "page" of a fictional work, written, distributed and read in acybertext format.

⁶ As Katherine Hayles has demonstrated in her analysis of this cyberfiction ("*FlickeringConnectivities*"), the process of writing itself is repeatedly associated with the feminine acts of sewing and quilting, as well as with the processes of severing and suturing, per-formed in any act of surgery, traditionally a "masculine" occupation.

attached to it. There was a crowd, a whole gaggle of persons, competing for the space occupied by my one limited body. First one, and then another would take precedence. I'd be overwhelmed by the driving spirit of Agatha, or succumb to the gentle blandishments of Constance. [...]” (Jackson 1995, a story/ séance/ lives and livers).

The core concepts one notices while reading *Patchwork Girl* are collage, links, narrative, reproduction, fragmentation, intertextuality, birth, creation, and dissemination.⁷ It also highlights female gender as queer, patchwork, cybernetic sexual being and a monster. In *Patchwork Girl*, one of the important metaphoric connections expressing flickering connectivity is the play between sewing and writing. Mary Shelley narrates, "Until the tiny black letters blurred into stitches and I began to feel that I was sewing a great quilt" (journal/written). This lexia is linked with "sewn", "I had sewn her, stitching deep into the night by candlelight, until the tiny black stitches wavered into script and I began to feel that I was writing, that this creature I was assembling was a brash attempt to achieve by artificial means the unity of a life-form" (journal/sewn). Shelley Jackson explores both the meaning and the form as in 'birth' lexia, the creature claims to have been born many times including both 'under the needle' and 'under the pen'-which precludes setting hypertext and paper sides by side rather than placing them in clear opposition. She encourages the reader to patch up the scattered chunks of text while performing the tenets of deconstructionist theories taken up by early hypertext thinkers such as George Landow. She explicitly states her view on the body in *Patchwork Girl* in the lexia "body of text/body": "The body could be said to be the writing of the soul." Her *Patchwork Girl* becomes an exploration of the "female" body. The monster is made "like a quilt," pieced together from multiple parts, and becomes a hybrid—a multilayered metaphor for body and text.

In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard states, "Of all the prostheses that mark the history of the body, the double is doubtless the oldest" (95). He has emphasized on postmodern techno tendencies to create life artificially in the context of post-structuralist critical theory. While searching for the answer to the question of the "phantasm of auto-genesis", Baudrillard states, "Cloning radically abolishes the Mother, but also the Father, the intertwining of their genes, the imbrication of their differences, but above all, the joint act that is procreation. The cloner does not beget himself: he sprouts from each of his segments ... The Father and the Mother have disappeared" (Baudrillard 96).

Similarly, Shelley Jackson does not beget herself: she sprouts from each of her segments that are inextricably connected by scars and seams, each representing a part of Jackson's persona. The patched-up and scarified body of the monster stands for the discontinuous structure of the work

itself while inviting the user to touch her with the pointer of her mouse and make choices. The invisible hyperlinks that run through *Patchwork Girl* obtrude, obvert and obliterate the textual zone they dislocate upon activation, temporarily disrupting the flow of the narrative while opening it up to new intertextual relationships, bits of critical theory, literary works, and instructions from the user's manual for Storyspace. A reader of a hypertext thus finds it impossible to reverse.

Today's hyperreal world offers diverse modes of expressions and gives liberty to the reader's response for comprehending meaning and shaping it according to his cognitive bent. These diverse modes require certain writing practices and technological expansion.

Consider this quotation from Hayles:

"Because electronic hypertexts are written and read in distributed cognitive environments, the reader necessarily is constructed as a cyborg, spliced into an integrated circuit with one or more intelligent machines. To be positioned as a cyborg is inevitably in some sense to become a cyborg, so electronic hypertexts, regardless of their content, tend towards cyborg subjectivity. Although this subject position may be evoked through the content of print texts, electronic hypertexts necessarily enact it through the specificity of the medium" (Hayles 13).

The contemporary world of hyperfiction relates everything hyperreal, uncertain, oscillate, and ambivalent where the real is never real but beyond the real. Modern technology increasingly dominates the world, and the domination is likely to become more pronounced in future, because of the fast developments that tend to subdue creative human thinking and expression. It will unlock diverse paths for the writers and readers to interpret the literature closer to what it aims to stage in. Both DeLILLO and Shelley Jackson attempt to articulate the power and pervasiveness of technology which has turned human beings into cybernetic beings in today's world known as cyber space.

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⁷ Arnaud Regnauld states in his paper *Interrupting D: Patchwork Girl's Syncopated Body* (2009) about the nature and formation of a hypertext with its intertextual relationships as "The invisible hyperlinks that run through *Patchwork Girl* obtrude, obvert and obliterate the textual zone they dislocate upon activation, temporarily disrupting the flow of the narrative while opening it up to new intertextual relationships, always contingent on

the user's physical intervention and mental interpretation of the various sources Shelley Jackson rehashes: bits of critical theory, literary works, and instructions from the user's manual for Storyspace intermingle and inform each other(1)."

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