

PATCHWORK GIRL: A HYPERTEXT FICTION

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The contemporary literary firmament is discerned with certain novel types of narratives and techniques. Critiquing the texts of this era can unleash multiple layers of signification. In this post-Gutenberg era, words and imagination have become digital as humans inhabit in an e- world. The world of online literature, also known as 'e-literature' includes writings of the modern times, which underline the impact of digital services and it has tried to break the somnolence of the printed works. Literary genres take the forms of emails, SMS, blogs, messages, twitter updates, and many more. The era of digital revolution has led to the emergence of a new literary art form made probable by the computer's capability to capture the book's linear page-turning mechanism and endow with multiple links between screens of text in a nonlinear web-work of narrative or poetic elements. Among these innovations, 'Hypertext' fiction is the most germane which is believed to have copious possibilities in the future. In the e-literary genre, introduced in the 1990s as an avant-garde, even the basic concept of fiction is redefined, as the 'net author' or the 'hypertext author' replaces the author.

Though critics censure the genre as 'humorless digital post-modern joke', it still gives an opportunity for the readers to think about the future of literature. The paper proposes on the study of the concept of hypertext fiction with special reference to Shelley Jackson's *The Patchwork Girl* (1995). The study also intends to look at the genre through the perspective of Reader Response criticism. It throws light upon the postmodern scenario where the 'net authors' creates a metanarrative that dissects the age-old concept of 'novel-writing'.

Invented by Ted Nelson in the 1960s, hypertext connects texts, pictures, music, programs and so on to each other. When one link is selected, information related to that object can be viewed. The icons selected to view associated information are called hypertext links or 'buttons'. Hypertext narratives are electronic literary works belonging to various genres, which constitutes numerous hypertext links.

Hypertext fiction is a genre of electronic literature, where the reader has the privilege to choose links to move from one node of text to the next, and in this manner knits a story from a deeper pool of potential stories. The links are helpful in providing supplementary information, in which case they are similar to footnotes or endnotes. According to George Landow in his *Critical Theory and New Media in an Era of Globalization* (2006): "Hypertext opens major questions about story and plot by apparently doing away with linear organization. Conventional definitions and descriptions of plot suggest some of them." (221) Hypertext fiction illustrates the role of context in generating meaning which can in fact disrupt the traditional ideas of genre. The multiple pathways of the hypertext links lead to a shared authorship between the author and the reader.

The Reader Response theory opens new prospects to hypertext fiction since it involves the reader's active participation and the meaning of the text lies somewhere between the text and the reader's mind since the reader takes the narrative forward. The reader does not tread through a set path and is thus able to control what hyperlinks to follow. Another fascinating factor is that there can be multiple links to follow within each page popped up by a hyperlink and some of these links can take the readers to pages they have visited earlier. The links help in digging deep into the text. A hypertext fiction piece will be different for everyone who reads it, as Jean Clement in the article "A Fiction Hypertext: Birth of a New Genre?" writes: "Every text is a route - every reader advances in the text and reads while making a path for himself. This

progression can be cheerful or sad, direct or winding; it can take a short-cut or follow the main road formed by the succession of the book's pages. There are as many paths as there are readers, and there are a thousand ways of reading a book." The arrival of this novel concept has expanded the horizon of every expression and act to a potentially global level. The tapering down of a narrative to a particular locale has been de-centered as it tries to map all the places negating the possibility of an all-controlling centre.

Hypertext fiction is closely related to Julia Kristeva's concept of 'intertextuality' where each link becomes potential texts. This intertextual nature of hypertext links challenges and redefines traditional literary themes. Most hypertext fictions are perceived to be pastiches, using earlier works to create an entirely new one. They also facilitate collaborative projects, where many authors contribute to a text. Hypertext fiction narratives need not be complete, since they never goes to the publisher to be printed. Only a handful of hypertext narratives have been critically examined. One of the best among them is Shelley Jackson's *The Patchwork Girl* (1995), a pastiche which is regarded as a work of electronic literature. It was written in 'Storyspace', a software program for creating, editing, and reading hypertext fiction and published by Eastgate Systems in 1995.

The idea of hypertext fiction is older than the computer. The history of hypertext fiction can be traced back to 1987 even before the creation of the *World Wide Web*. The first hypertext fiction to capture the attention of the readers worldwide was the work *Afternoon a Story* by Professor Michael Joyce. Robert Arellano's *Sunshine 69* (1996) was the first hypertext novel to be published in World Wide Web. After 2001, the trend of hypertext fiction began to decline though the times later saw the evolution of e-books. Novelist Paul LaFarge in his article, "Why the Book's Future Never Happened" states a reason for this:

This is not a flaw in the medium, though; it's a failure of craft. With two exceptions (Shelley Jackson and Geoff Ryman, whose hypertexts *The Patchwork Girl* and *253*, respectively, may be the first classics of the genre, both for the quality of their prose and because they found ways to make their fragmentary forms feel purposeful), the early hypertextualists just weren't good enough writers to carry off such a difficult form. Because it is a difficult form. Hard as it is to write novels, hypertexts are harder, because you don't have the spring-loaded crutch of linearity and "arc" to support your work; the sections have to be readable along multiple paths; they have to be richly related in multiple ways; and they have to keep you reading,

Shelley Jackson's *The Patchwork Girl's* narrative is based on two books. They are Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), a science fiction and *The Patchwork Girl* (1913), a children's novel by L. Frank Baum. The text includes quotations from these books and also Derrida, Donna Haraway, and other writers. The story is about Mary Shelley's female monster, the companion that Victor Frankenstein destroyed even before its creation was completed. The narrative is a set of illustrations of parts of a female body that are stitched together through text and image. Where the work starts is left to the reader to decide. The narrative of the story is divided into five segments, titled: "A Graveyard", "A Journal", "A Quilt", "A Story", and "Broken Accents." The purpose of the work is to not only make the reader realize the anatomy of *The Patchwork Girl* as an entire system but also make them realize that all the fragments must be "patched" together so that a unified composition is created. "I am buried here. You can resurrect me, but only piecemeal. If you want to see the whole, you will have to sew me together yourself. (In time you may find appended a pattern and instructions - for now, you will have to put it together any which way, as the scientist Frankenstein was forced to do.) Like him, you will make use of a machine of mysterious complexity to animate these parts" (*The Patchwork Girl*). Robert Coover in his article "Literary Hypertext: The Passing of the Golden Age" explains the idea in detail: "The very choice of the central metaphor of *Patchwork Girl* was alone a stroke of genius: the patching together of a new body, whether of flesh or text, from linked fragments of other bodies, also of flesh, also of text, once dead, now given new life, new form, if somewhat strange and "monstrous." The work is divided, like the senses, into five linked sections, and one of these is the raiding of the graveyard for body parts and for the stories attached to their previous owners. Thus, from the outset, this patching together of a physical body from disparate but

harmonious parts was linked to a similar patching together of story materials, the body becoming text, text body, a traditional theme given its true hypertextual configuration with this multiply coded, larger-than-life patchwork girl.”

Each segment leads down to a clue that takes the story in multiple directions through various linking words and images. Jackson uses recurring graveyard imagery in order to continually invite the reader to resurrect Mary Shelley's monster. The text is an oft-cited example of cyber-feminism.

A graphic sketch of a naked woman is central to the narrative which illustrates the objectification of women. The reader is supposed to click on different body parts of the graphic female body so that they can journey through the text. Obvious references to the mistreatment of women in society are also present at various points within the text. The text exclusively features female characters including the monster herself, which makes Jackson's pastiche strikingly distinct from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Like the American feminist critic Elaine Showalter, Jackson also uses the tradition of 'piecing, patchwork, and quilting' which makes her work of art question the notions of existing gender roles. Thus, *The Patchwork Girl* becomes one among the very few successes among the hypertext fiction genre.

Many critics still consider web-literature as a trivial genre. As Coover says, it is “noisy, restless, opportunistic, superficial, e-commerce-driven, chaotic realm, dominated by hacks, pitchmen and pretenders, in which the quiet voice of literature cannot easily be heard”. On the other hand, hypertext gives an opportunity to break the rules of literature since it is devoid of a shape. The riotous loll the hypertext offers is pitched against the slow and solicitous nature of traditional literature. The readers get a chance to contribute, review and redirect the course of the narrative.

Shelley Jackson states that; “There's no question that hypertext will lose or never acquire those readers for whom a fated slalom toward the finish line is the defining literary experience; hypertext's not built for that. Probably it is because linear text's so well built for it that it has become the dominant narrative style in the novel. But there are other reasons to read.” (“Stitch Bitch”) As for Paul LaFarge he has an undying hope for a better future for hypertext narratives: “Just as the novel taught us how to be individuals, 300 years ago, by giving us a space in which to be alone, but not too alone a space in which to be alone with a book so hypertext fiction may let us try on new, non-linear identities, without dissolving us entirely into the web. It may give us room to concentrate on dispersion, to focus on distraction, and in that way, possibly, to get a sense of what we are becoming before the current sweeps us away. In the end, this isn't a question of what hypertext can do for fiction, or for the novel; it's a question of what fiction, and in particular the novel, can do for hypertext. Hypertext is here to stay, but the novel's future may depend on the answer.”

The 'netizens' today give paramount importance to digitalization in everyday life. Even kindergarten kids are not unfamiliar with the use of laptops and tablets. This e-world indeed is an Elysium of digitized literature and it opens up a world of possibilities for hypertext narratives which manifest intertextuality, depth in plot and author-reader interference.

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