

Concept of Identity in Real and Virtual World

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Abstract

Identity is an ambiguous term which has been used in many different context and purposes in recent years. The fundamental paradox of identity is in its meaning in Latin itself. The term in Latin root 'idem', meaning "the same," nevertheless implies both similarity and difference. Our identity is unique in one sense that it is what distinguishes us from other people. Yet on the other hand, identity also implies a relationship with a broader collective or social group of some kind like national identity, gender identity, or cultural identity, for example, we imply that our identity is partly a matter of what we share with other people in a society. The need for love and care is a basic need in human life. As people cannot get them easily in real world in the myriad of chaos and pretension, they travel to the virtual reality to have their needs fulfilled. The emotions and feelings one feel in the virtual world is as real as a human being can express and feel. This sense of gratification which human beings get from the virtual world becomes an addiction as time passes. But is it right or wrong to get that sense of gratification from a reality that does not exist? This paper attempts to address the issues created by mass media among the citizen of modern world.

Keywords: Reality, Identity, Social Media, Technology, Hyperreal.

Anyone living in twenty first century is always surrounded by machines, technology and gadgets all the time. Living in the virtual world more than the real world makes us question the reality of living world in an age of digitalization. How real is the virtual world? Computers, videos, news, games create a different reality which today's youth believe in. The mind gets tricked to believe in a different new reality. Reality is always in question. As we are living in an era of digitalization, reality, identity and self is created day by day. There is no fix set of ideas and views that we can believe it. After world war's traumatic experiences, the whole idea of human evolving towards something better was in question. Reality is generated in computer generated environment every day. Major philosophers like Plato, Rene Descartes, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and Jean Baudrillard questioned the nature of reality in the world around us.

It's very easy to believe in these alternate reality. As it's takes a lot of patience and time to even make small changes in present world, the idea of a different reality which can be

related as a favourable and acceptable reality seems so easy to believe in. With the use of artificial intelligence (AI), photographs, movies, videos, mass media, news....

David Evans Bailey of Auckland University of Technology discussed about Hyper Reality in a journal publication:

Throughout the human era, we have distorted and changed what we see to fit what we want to see. This engagement with the hyperreal has been occasioned even before the digital age – what we might refer to as the ‘pre-web era’. This indicates that perhaps our own desires may have some bearing on ‘reality’ or that desiring a different ‘reality’ to that which is in front of us prompts us to alter it more to our satisfaction (Bailey 8)

Is it possible to know what is reality? Even when something really good happens in our life, we have a terrible feeling and we question if this is the reality. Like in the movie *Total Recall* (2012), the actor asks all of a sudden that he is having a terrible thought that “What if all this is a dream?”.

Even after seeing a lot of movies and videos we start to question the world itself we live in. We start to feel the loss of love and affection in this world as compared to the world created in Korean and Bollywood movies. The reality looks so believable in Harry potter’s movies that we start to believe in that world completely.

Various philosophers in history have raised questions about the nature of reality. It’s a major discussion in postmodern world. The first major philosopher to raise the question on the nature of reality was Plato. According to his theory of *Mimesis*, Plato says that all art is mimetic by nature and art is an imitation of life. He believed that ‘idea’ is the ultimate reality and as art imitates idea, so it is imitation of reality. According to this theory then everything around us all that mass media shows, belongs to second order as all of them are twice removed from reality. Even reality is second order as it is a representation of the ideas in brain of human beings. Dr. P.V Mehta in the article “Plato and Aristotle” says:

He gives an example of a carpenter and a chair. The idea of ‘chair’ first came in the mind of carpenter. He gave physical shape to his idea out of wood and created a chair. The painter imitated the chair of the carpenter in his picture of chair. Thus, painter’s chair is twice removed from reality. Hence, he believed that art is twice removed from reality. (Mehta 1)

The notion of simulation, simulacra and hyper real propagated by Jean Baudrillard in the postmodern world helps us to understand the notion of reality in virtual world. According to him we live in a world saturated with mass media, news, signs and technology that have become ends in themselves, and for which we have never known originals. Pramod K. Nayar in his *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory* explains this concept:

...we only have signs without an external reality, copies without originals. we cannot distinguish between real and artifice any longer because there is no ‘real’ we can recognize: we only know the image of the real. (Nayar 49).

Thus the image, photos, videos, games and literature constitutes our knowledge of reality because we cannot difference between reality and representation. As a result, there is a

collapses in differentiation and we are no longer able to see an image as reflecting anything other than a symbolic representation of signifiers in culture, not the real world.

Jean Baudrillard was fascinated by how media affect our perception of reality and the world. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, he interrogates what happens in a world that is ultimately denied all access to the real and in which only simulacra and simulation exists. We experience something called 'Death of the Real'. We live our lives in the realm of hyper reality, where we connect more deeply to things like television sitcoms, music videos, media, pornography, news, virtual reality games, or Disneyland, things that merely simulate reality. Our television "friends" are more real than the flesh and blood human beings around us. Often in India we come across neighboring aunties discussing about characters in television serials as if they are talking about their relatives and friends. Women eagerly wait for the next episodes of serials in star plus as if their life depends on the character's action in the serials.

Reflecting on the famous work by Baudrillard *Simulacra and Simulation*, Shahar Fisher of the website 'The Cultural Reader' says:

In the chapter 'Precession of Simulacra', he describes three orders of simulacra. The first in which reality is represented by the image (map represents territory). The second order of simulacra is one in which the distinction between reality and representation is blurred. The third order of simulacra is that of simulation which replaces the relationship between reality and representation. Reality itself is thus lost in favor of a hyper reality. Baudrillard famously gives the examples of Disneyland and Watergate to demonstrate the function of the third order of simulacra and the production of a hyper reality. (Fisher 2)

The role of social media in our life cannot be ignored. We connect more through email, Facebook, Instagram, twitter, WhatsApp more than direct human touch and face to face talk. In some cases, we are so used to hiding our true selves behind social media that we feel nervous and uncomfortable when we come in contact before real human beings. Literature is a mirror of society. As in the era of digitalization society is evolving on a daily basis the subjects of literature are no more traditional. The novels of today talk about the problems of communication in virtual world in great details.

Does discussion in social media like Facebook, Twitter bring a wider access of views in a democratic country with a population of billions in which it is difficult for every voice to be heard? Due to BBC and other media a particular kind of story gets highlighted as a result other news go into background and people discuss on this topic in dinner. They do not talk about these issues face to face as they used to do previously by spending time together sitting and discussing news over tea and biscuits. Is the incursion of social media leads to disconnection in direct face to face connection? In fact, we get nervous and edgy if we're away too long from our computers, e-mail accounts, laptop and cell phones. Now the 'real world' lays in tatters, the hyperreal map still quite intact. The mass media and news create a world of virtual reality which we believe in. The virtual reality is created with the help of mass media. This is criticized in plays like *The Balcony* by Jean Genet where he explains the problem of mass media.

FIRST PHOTOGRAPHER: we'll do our job, don't worry. (To the bishop) Get set for prayer, because the world ought to be bombarded with the picture of a pious man. (Genet ,9)

As arts and humanities scholars it is our duty to find out how communities change due to exposure to mass media, news, social media where truth is fabricated on a daily basis. Violence is so easily and comfortably presented in video games and television serials that when people saw the bombardment of World Trade Centre by al-Qaeda they thought that they are experiencing a scene from video game.

Television as an intrusive actor in domestic space is overtaking lives of people from work, play, social relations and leisure. The hyperreal displaces the real and renders it useless, thus turning the spectators into one of simulation, as we become simulated according to television events. Personal relationships within the home are destroyed as face-to-face and interpersonal communications are diminished due to media. Reality is 'miniaturized'—television replaces our desire for human relationships or ideals.

This always create a feeling of dichotomy in creating an Identity can be seen also shown in the history play *Coriolanus* in Shakespeare. Caius Marcius Coriolanus is the quintessence of roman embodiment of bravery and valor. He represents the ideal roman hero. But when it comes to social and practical aspect of Rome, he is one of the worst enemies of populace. His search for his own identity remains unfulfilled as identity depends on social constructs along with personal ideal. He thinks himself a dull actor and suffers the crisis of identity as he cannot help being himself despite all social and political constructs.

On the other hand, the notion of technology and digitalization as somehow shaped entirely by existing social relations is biased. Crudely, this approach sees technology as simply a matter of what people choose to make of it and as if it has no inherent qualities and is regarded as essentially value free. David Buckingham in his book on *Youth, Identity and Digital Media* says

This ignores the fact that technologies have inherent potentialities or "affordances": it is much easier to use them for some purposes than for others. Relatively few of these affordances are inevitable: the history of technology is full of examples of unanticipated consequences and even subversive uses. Even so, the forms that technology takes are largely shaped by the social actors and social institutions that play a leading role in producing it, and in determining where, when, and how it will be used, and by whom. (Buckingham 12)

Raymond Williams talks about "structure of feelings" in *preface of films*. The term refers to the different ways of thinking vying to emerge at any one time in history. Technology is both socially shaped and socially shaping. Its role is thus determined by the uses which it is put but it also contains constraints which limit the ways it can be used. The ways are largely determined by the social interest of elite class which controls its circulation, production and distribution.

Adolescence is a period of mood swings, intergenerational conflicts, search for identity and an enthusiasm for risky behavior. The identity is molded by every single input from various sources including technology and mass media. Instead of believing in whatever any adult says, adolescent try to question everything with whatever logic they believe in. Mass media, technology and peer pressure plays a major role in shaping these logic and ideas. The question of whether online identities is more or less honest and truthful than offline ones has been a major question of debate in recent days. What we perceive of our surroundings are due to our memory. It's not possible to know the whole truth about the

reality. We perceive reality through our senses. It is not possible to look at reality in total views are biased by a lot of rules, regulations, custom, tradition, social, cultural constraints.

Spending more time on the virtual world tends to distort the physical world around us. We sense the world around us with our senses. Jacques Derrida lays his presuppositions in a very important essay called 'Structure, Sign and Play' in the *Discourse of the Human Sciences*. According to him there is no absolute truth or fixed center. This places limits on what it is possible to think or believe or feel. Absolute truth provides certainties which is a luxury we cannot afford in a postmodern world.

Hence there is no ultimate reality, instead the only relationships that we can know are within the system of the world which he calls discourses. For him ultimate reality is only a series of these discourses.

As there is no fixed center, there should no longer any limits on what it is possible to think or believe. We should literally be able to think anything and believe in anything. Marcus Honeysett explains in an article named "Assumptions Behind Derrida's Theory of Deconstruction":

We can be playful and flexible about the way we think, when we realize that "truth" and "falsehood" are simply wrong distinctions to make. Indeed, they are just a destructive and harmful manifestation of that power structure. Therefore, we must stop considering everything in life, culture and thought in relation to absolute truth. To not do so is, for Derrida, oppressive and immoral. Derrida's ideal of play or flexibility therefore completely denies the possibility of absolutes or of God. (Honeysett 4)

Thus it's really difficult to say how real is the virtual world. In a world where reality is questionable, where people do not know what to believe in, where we all are living among hyperreal signs and second and third layers of meaning it's very difficult to question whether to trust the reality that is created by virtual world on a daily basis. We cannot even be sure that it is an alternate reality as we do not know the future. Identity is in crisis in postmodern world. Human desires are endless and we believe in reality according to our desires. So is there an end to human desires? How to know what's real and unreal? Can human beings become totally unbiased and courageous enough to see the world as it is.

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