Digitising the Gendered Subaltern: A Reading of Female Identity in Cyberspace

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Abstract

The term cyberspace that appeared first time in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), denotes this parallel virtual universe that emerged with the advent of Internet. Cyberspace is an area in social life where individuals can come together to freely discuss and identify social problems, and through the discussion influence political action. It is a public space open and accessible and may available to any member of the society. It is a discursive space in which individuals and groups congregate to discuss matters of mutual interests and, where possible, to reach a common judgement. Same time some cyberspace interventions offer a feel of being at an exclusive private mood. But even then, cyberspace can be seen as a sphere where people involve in a kind of political participation is enacted through the medium of talk and realm of social life in which public opinion can be formed. Public and private here vary along a dimension of visibility: the transparent versus the secret, hidden and confidential. The implications of power relations can be evident in this contest point. In the capitalist economy along with class based exploitation, gender too continued to be a factor to be oppressed. Gender is a social construction. It is open to variations in meaning and content based on cultural and social conditions. As capitalism entertains phallocentric world order women are forced to continue their secondary position. This paper deals how gender identity works in cyberspace.

Keywords: Cyberspace, Cyberfeminism, Discourse, Cyberculture, Commodification

The emergences of new digital technologies of Information and Communication have accelerated the rate of change in the global economy and socio-cultural practices. The advent of the Internet is considered a social revolution rather than a technological revolution. It has caused the emergence of a new culture named cyber culture. The word "cyber culture" is used in a variety of ways, often referring not only to certain cultural practices born of computer technologies, but also to specific subcultures that champion computer-related hobbies, art, literature, language and so on. It is not just the culture that results from computer use, but culture that is directly mediated by the computer. Cyber culture is a way of thinking about how people use digital technologies to interact, how people live together as a community based on the use of the Internet. It refers to ways of life in cyberspace or ways of life shaped by cyberspace. Cyberspace is a matrix of embedded practices and representations in the virtual world. It examines how computer and information technologies take the dynamics of culture and social relations in dramatically new directions. Jakub Macek points out that the cyber culture is an ambiguous, confusing, unclear term describing a set of issues. It can be used in a descriptive, analytical or ideological sense. Therefore, Macek emphasises

that cyber culture has a multiplicity of meanings.Thinking about cyber culture involves thinking about representations, meanings, images: about the ways in which we assemble particular narratives, about how the technologies have changed, are changing and will change our lives.

Cyberspace cannot escape the social construction of gender because it is constructed by gendered individuals. Male users traditionally outnumber women in computer mediated communication. Cyber feminism is a popular avenue of contemporary feminist interventions in technologically mediated structures of power. The word cyber feminism was coined by Sadie Plant. Cyberfeminist founders like Sadie Plant (1997), Susan Luckman (1999), AnnaMunster (1999), and Donna Haraway (1991) have long purported a utopian vision of cyberspace where gender inequalities would cease as soon as the virtual world became accessible to women. The cyber feminist venture is to challenge the male centred culture of the internet by imprinting their own models of open and accessible computer-mediated communication onto the new technologies. It draws heavily on postmodernism and psychoanalysis and challenges the ideology that technology can save the world. Cyber feminist activity is frequently utopian in its outlook. The cyber feminist exemplars are women for whom information technologies have become a central part of their everyday lived practice. They advocate that on cyberspace it is possible to construct a female centred alternative to the overwhelming cultural dominance of men with regard to matters of technological agency. Cyber feminist discourse gives voice to the women of within computer culture.

Cyber feminisms have flourished in a number of Anglophone western nations like Australia, New Zealand, North America and Western Europe. Originally it is based on Plant's conceptualisation that information technology is a realm in which women should feel at ease. Plant argues that cyberspace is intrinsically a female space. Computers do not serve man's interest, for virtual reality destroys his identity. According to her, software systems are used as man's tools, his media and his weapon; all are developed in the interests of man. Women's liberation, according to her, is sustained and vitalized by the proliferation and globalisation of software technologies, all of which feed into self-organisation, self- arousing systems and enter the scene on her side. A programme of feminist intervention is not ultimately desirable for all ideas required to sustain a conception of identity which unites or negotiates women's place in the cyber space. But Plant links the desire to establish a sense of identity to essentialist attempts to construct intractable biological defences of ideological inequalities.

For cyber feminists, the Internet is an idealised public sphere, a space epitomising the much heralded level playing field. It gives a chance to challenge the existing notions of subjectivity. In cyber space, women choose to identify themselves as males whenever they need/want. This cyber-sex-change is a means to explore different facets of oneself in social interaction. It is an act of reification of existing inequalities of power structure. Cyber feminism lags behind in admitting this condition.

In cyberspace, by simply using a feminine name anyone can experience sexual harassment or achieve male entitlement by assuming a male name. The emergent of digital body is still gendered, classed, raced and geographically located. Cyber feminist practice can be viewed as an ideological crutch of technological determinism, for it holds that the political

problems of today will be resolved as technology brings the world steadily closer to a cyber utopia. This needs to be far more challenged within cyberfeminism itself.

Feminism is a real life political movement. So the representation of real life should reflect in cyber feminist activities. The dialectics has to be constructed to connect the experience of real life and virtual life. The experience of the browser/ interlocutor is constructed in cyber space. The relevance of the lived experience of the browser/interlocutor negates the cyber feminist utopia.

The cyber space has done great impacts on lives of women. The first time it was the text of Nirbhaya movement which could reflect and accelerate the urge to change the condition of women. The very next occasion was the murder of Jisha, which had been tried to veil by media. The two incidents have made some activists to call cyber space as the text of/for women. But how much they are accessible and desirable to women's liberation movement in a country like India where vast majority of women still are denied basic rights is a question of discussion.

The study is supposed to read cyber space as well as cyber feminism as a discourse of neo liberal ideology on the performance of gender roles. The study explores gender conscious of the virtual space is formed how Foucauldian theories of power and hegemony are explored in the construction of cyber cultural discourse. Discourse, as the culturally are ideologically stabilised made, colludes with the existing hegemonic power to substantiate their dominance. For discourse is self- generative; it is often characterised by a common methodology and a common approach to a particular practices or modes of representation. The term discourse is used in different disciplines like critical theory, linguistics and philosophy in different ways with different forms of analysis and purposes.

Discourse provides cross-disciplinary methods of analysis. Discourse analysis is a method of enquiry which studies the structures of texts and considers both their linguistic and socio-cultural dimensions in order to determine how meanings are constructed. In Anglo-American context, discourse analysis concentrates on various forms of oral communication from an interactional and ethnographic perspective, and investigates how power and authority are distributed in verbal exchanges. The French stream of discourse analysis, which follows the works of Foucault, Althusser, Pecheux and Bakhtin, constitutes its object very differently, concentrating largely, though not exclusively, on materials in its social, political and institutional contexts. Discourse analysis does not favour the "high" cultural disciplines like literature, philosophy and history. It employs methods developed in areas such as content analysis, narratology, textual semiotics and *ideologiekritik* to permit studies of all manifestations of discourse in everyday life. Discourse analysis theory proposes that relations of power in our society affect and shape the way we both communicate with each other and create knowledge.

Cyber space is the domain of people who have the cultural wealth like education, time and money. It moots technologically-mediated future of self – publishing and self promotion;it posits physical technological enhancement as a departure from the limitations of contemporary society. It is difficult for the vast majority of people to access user or consumer status because of little purchasing power. Cyber feminism is also a part of global market economy, for it offers commercial operators an attractive and lucrative niche. It pitches commodities to a young, educated demographic of women with significant disposable incomes. One particularly strong area of commercial exploitation of cyber feminist market

has occurred in the area of publishing, for it provides vital exposure and credibility. The cyber feminist texts reaching the market tend not to represent the more radical or oppositional work being done in the area because they meet the demands of the publishing house. Cyber feminisms seem largely limited to address the totalising cyber feminist identities as well as the partial identities.

Millar's observation in *Cracking the Gender Code* seems true that while the western feminists may see themselves as "cyborg", as they use digital technologies for creative and professional purposes, less advantaged women like as those who assemble computer equipment or enter data experience "cyborg" life in a profoundly different and exploitative way. Cyborg stands in sharp contrast to the experience of difference that comes emerges out of the forced exclusion from political and social mainstreams. Since oppressive factors lie unaffected in social system, the cyber space is also the discourse of the dominant group. It can turn out to be a derivative discourse as in the case of literature, but the ultimate end remains unattained unless there is a conscious material drive.

Virtual reality offers a space to construct actual physical self as well as texts where the users create and maintain an idealised fantasy self completely separate from their real world selves. Cyberspace offers a variety of ways to subvert traditional ideas of gender. At the same time it has also erupted into a kind of super patriarchy, for the erasure of female identity is intensified on the cyberspace. Woman's body is fetishized in cyber space. The surveillance of women's movements and bodies results in the construction of hyper masculine consumer and erosion of female social life. The duplicated identities on the cyber space reduce the strategies to resist new manifestations of power. The Internet has created a hyper realised version of men's patriarchal access to woman, intensified surveillance and cyber stalking.

Cyber space communications are of two types- expressing the true identity and anonymous identity. The differences between the two results in similar discourses surrounding women and how they are expected to perform their gender. Cyber space has begun to have severe and far reaching impacts on the way people worldwide react to gender. Facebook, Twitter, online video games and so on are the virtual spaces where massive amounts of time and social transactions are made online and are simultaneously reshaping and reinforcing societal ideas surrounding gender roles.

Much feminist scholarship has examined the reach of patriarchy and its influence on language. According to Judith Butler modes of written and verbal language dictate reality and produce subjects in the process language is medium of constructing subjectivity and identity. According to Dale Spender language is our means of classifying and ordering our world: our means of manipulating reality. This becomes even truer within cyberspace, where gendered, raced, classed, and sexualized subjects are constructed and produced through more abstract channels. Unlike the social environment, where language can rely on other bodily cues and face-to-face contact, in cyberspace we have *nothing but language* to rely on as a reality-shaping force.

Alternate identities can be produced on cyber space because women could insist on anonymity. Therefore cyber feminists label the Internet as an "idealised public sphere". Cyberfeminists collectively argue that cyberspace, rather than creating a hyper masculine

reality, actually enables women to choose gender more consciously, present themselves in ways unimaginable in the physical realm, and experiment with gendered realities or identities in a relatively safe and constructive space that wards off traditional policing of gender. If women choose to perform as "men," they can do so freely and without restraint on the cyber space. Women can try on power structures on the cyber space. They can assume different identities, races, genders, sexualities, classes, locations, and nationalities. They can enter and exit virtual spaces previously denied to them without constraints only by assuming an alternative identity.

Contemporary media and communication policies framed in India, especially Digital India, fail to recognise power differentials in the "right to communicate" between different classes of citizens in the information society is context. It valorises user participation where the user is the product. As connectivity and access become the normal, gender concerns in media policy are reduced to the imperative for women's inclusion. But the gender gap in cyberspace remains unabridged.

Feminism is a real life political movement. So the representation of real life should reflect in cyber feminist activities. The dialectics has to be constructed to connect the experiences of real life and virtual life. The experience of the browser/ interlocutor is constructed in cyber space, not of the characters. The browser/ interlocutor transfers the real life experience to virtual representation. The cyberspace is inevitably accessible to those who enjoy power. As long as women are identified to body, women must remain as gendered body in cyberspace.

Voyeurism, fetishism and scophophilia can be easily exercised in cyber world for social surveillance is absent there. The virtual reality is dominated by subjugation and objectification of women. Virtual reality, as any other superstructure, reflects the hegemonic ideology of the real world.So women remain a digital subaltern community.

Cyber space is parallel to real life, but it constructed similar to real life condition. Cyber space is a hyper real condition. In cyber space female identity is twice mediated in addition to the conventionally mediated gendered discourses. Pornography, pornophotography advertisements and computer games reflect this hyper real condition. The cyber sex creates fourth order stimulation. There are some inherent dangers specific to social media. Lumpanisation and pseudo satisfaction emerges out of the regular use of social media is detrimental to the construction of true female identity. It shows that cyber space cannot overcome commodification. The female identity mediated by hyper reality and cyber space proves that what cyber feminists advocate seldom practice in virtual reality. The post feminist condition put forwarded by cybernetics is rarely appropriated in cyber cultural practices. In fact, patriarchy finds new strategy to enslave women in cyber culture discourses. Cyber culture has strong influence on contemporary society. So it remains essential to point out limitations of cyber feminisms to transform cyber space into a world for potential empowerment.

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