RESEARCH ARTICLE

NARRATING THE LIVES ON THE SCREEN: REPRESENTATION OF CYBERCULTURE IN *KISS ME FIRST* BY LOTTIE MOGGACH

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ABSTRACT

Throughout time literature has spoken powerfully to urgent contemporary issues, cultural trends, and practices. With the evolution of the internet as an integral part of daily living, fiction's embrace of it has now fully come of age. During the last two decades, cyberspace and digital media have become omnipresent in literature as in life. The research paper explores the representation of Cyberculture in contemporary fiction. The novel selected for the research discourse is *Kiss Me First* (2013), a thriller tale by British author Lottie Moggach which chronicles the story of an isolated woman who pretends to be someone else online. The paper traces the juxtapositions of digital life in the novel that convey the experience of twenty-first-century living. It investigates how the novel reflects the impact of digital media on human culture and behavior; real life overtaken by the virtual life, internet as a substitute for physical interaction, virtual communities replacing offline communications, life faked for social media, nurturing a persona online, fixation with likes and followers, homogenization of lives and experiences, intensification of social trends, and influencers shaping beliefs and tastes. The paper further focuses on the creation of virtual identities. The online personas of the characters are examined to analyze how they create distinct versions of self online and how they manipulate their self-identities to fit their motives. It also delves into the consequences of such manipulations to the self and others.

Keywords: Cyberculture, digital life, virtual communities, virtual identities, online persona.

Introduction

Throughout time new technologies and their effects on the lives of the people have proved an inspiration for writers. No other innovation in human history rivals the internet in its range of impact on human society and culture. With the rapid development of internet technologies and the proliferation of personal wireless devices capable of accessing the virtual world from anywhere, the twenty-first century witnessed the digital revolution in its full swing. The new communicative spaces made possible by the internet are getting more and more entwined with daily life and are transforming how people live and interact. As the internet evolved to be an

entirely natural component of life, fiction's embrace of it has now fully come of age. During the last two decades, cyberspace and digital media have become omnipresent in literature as in life. The present study explores the representation of cyberculture in contemporary fiction.

Cyberculture embraces the set of technologies, practices, values, attitudes, and modes of thought that developed with cyberspace (Diago 57). Thus, it deals not just with the new medium of communication that emerged with the global interconnectedness of computers but also with the users who navigate and nourish it. Apart from being a new virtual space where people meet, interact and share their thoughts, cyberspace has become an arena where everything from paying bills to newsgathering, buying, learning, searching for a job, family interactions, and romantic relationships all take place. As more and more activities that were performed in the physical world prior to the internet moved to the digital world, profound change is being felt throughout the economy, society, and culture. The experiences lived in cyberspace began to have a tremendous impact on human beings, altering the way we think, the way we form our communities, and our own identities.

The cyberculture, as a broad social and cultural movement, rises to prominence between the 1960s and 1990s. Cyberculture in its infancy (in the 1970s) was an exclusive domain of technological experts, including scientists, mathematicians, and academicians. Early cyberculture deals with discussions on the new media, which include ideas related to growing fields of computers and electronics, the hacker's subculture, the cyberpunk movement, and the earliest users of computers and networks. It was the "project of a virtual future", the story of the "guild of the insiders" (Macek 41). By the mid-1990s, the majority of society adopted technology, and cyberculture took on a new life. Contemporary cyberculture looks upon itself as a "force driving social change, economic relations, political policy and cultural life" (Cyberculture: Society, Culture, and the Internet).

The most striking feature of cyberculture is the ever-continuing polarized debates on how culture evolved on digital platforms – whether it represents a newly evolving cultural milieu or it borrowed practices and values from existing culture recreating the traditional culture in digital form. While Castells views cyberculture as emerging from existing cultures, Poster and Webb see the cultural sphere of cyberspace as radically new, marking a drastic shift from the cultural patterns of communication, identity, and community in the non-virtual environments. Levy, the French humanist philosopher, explores cyberspace as a site of the creation of entirely new culture and contends that the cyberculture reflects the rise of "a new universal, different from the cultural forms that preceded it, because it is constructed from the indeterminateness of global meaning" (Levy 100). Although these debates on the nature of cyberculture continue, there is no denying that cyberspace facilitates the processes of cultural construction (Macfadyen 148).

The novel selected for the research discourse is *Kiss Me First* (2013), a thriller tale by British author Lottie Moggach which chronicles the story of an isolated woman who pretends to be someone else online. The paper traces the juxtapositions of digital life in the novel that convey the experience of twenty-first-century living. It investigates how the novel reflects the impact of digital media on human culture and behavior; real life overtaken by the virtual life, internet as a substitute for physical interaction, virtual communities replacing offline communications, life faked for social media, nurturing a persona online, fixation with likes and followers, homogenization of lives and experiences, intensification of social trends, and influencers shaping beliefs and tastes. The paper further focuses on the creation of virtual identities. The online personas of the characters are examined to analyze how they create distinct versions of self online and how they manipulate their self-identities to fit their motives. It also delves into the consequences of such manipulations to the self and others.

Representation of Cyberculture

"I am linked, therefore I am", the famous words of social psychologist Kenneth Gergen capture the essence of our contemporary life mostly lived on the virtual world. Cyberspace and digital media have become an integral part of the social and cultural fabric of our daily lives. It brought about dramatic shifts in our interpersonal interaction, networking between individuals and groups, relations to time, work culture, and even the use of language. The prevalence of cyberspace in our lives is reflected in fiction; with many authors trying to tackle lives lived online in their works. *Kiss Me First* by Lottie Moggach is one such work that explores how the digital age transforms our idea of identity and reality.

Though the idea of impersonating someone else online is far from rare, Moggach takes it to the extreme by narrating the story of Tess, who plans to commit suicide after hiring someone (Leila) to take over her online life so that she can leave the world unnoticed. The fact that Leila succeeded in keeping Tess alive online by responding to her emails and updating her Facebook page as if she were Tess raises serious questions about our internet life and online identities. We have reached a stage where we live on social media pages and interact entirely through online channels, so much so that even our friends and family members would not really know the difference if someone else emailed or updated our profiles on our behalf. The question is "Do we really know whom we are interacting with online?" which will be answered later in this paper. The paper first examines how the author integrates cyberspace into the fiction and what it tells about the constantly evolving cyberculture.

In *Kiss Me First*, cyberspace appears both as part of the setting and through its incorporation in daily lives of the characters. The entire plot of the novel sparks from the internet, with the protagonist Leila joining an online forum for philosophical discussions hosted by Adrian Dervish. Soon Leila becomes an elite member of the forum and embarks on a project to impersonate Tess online as instructed by Adrian. The rest of the story chronicles the unexpected twists and turns Leila's journey takes and its consequences. For all the characters, the virtual space and digital identity are part of their lifeworld. There is hardly any distinction between online and offline lives as their real lives are swiftly overtaken by the virtual. Furthermore, digital communication is incorporated within the narrative structure with the inclusion of emails, Skype conversations, text messages, and blog entries in the text.

Moggach portrays a world immersed in digital communication, where virtual interactions have completely replaced face-to-face communications. The novel begins with a Skype call between Leila and Tess. Much of the communication between the characters takes place through online channels. Facebook is the only means of Leila's connection with the outside world, which again is limited to checking regular status updates of her friends. Leila says, "I hadn't spoken to Rashida for a few years, but had kept track of her on Facebook, and knew she had moved to Rottingdean with her fiancé, a management consultant" (Moggach 15). Online communication fosters a paradoxical kind of connection where all our friends know everything and nothing about us. Her countless friends on Facebook knew Tess as the beautiful and witty party girl, yet no one knows how depressed she really is.

In the novel, the cyber world is depicted mostly through the eyes of the narrator Leila. Initially, the author presented Leila as an antithesis to rest of the world, the rest of her generation, as someone who maintains a minimal social media presence, which adds to her allure. Putting up things online never appealed to her, especially anything personal. It seems both pointless and impolite for her to volunteer unasked-for information (Moggach 8). Placing her on a higher pedestal with her rational and matured take on digital life, Moggach portrays the seductive power and limitations of a life lived online. Leila comments on her generation's obsession with having a lengthy friend list, "It was like at Christmas, when everyone would give everyone else a card whether they liked them or not, just so they'd get one back in return and could compare the thickness of their hauls over lunch" (Moggach 16). Through Leila's observations, the author presents the trends and foibles of the digital age and its generation - the obsessive trend of clicking and posting selfies, the intensity with which superficial friendships are celebrated on Social media, repeated sharing and cherishing of useless content, and displaying everything online with regular status updates.

> Sometimes I'd follow the links they were all getting so excited about but they'd always turn out to be some idiotic thing, like a photo of a kitten squashed into a wine glass or a video of a teenager in Moscow singing badly in his bedroom. And always, these pictures of them dressed up to the nines, sucking in their cheeks, cocking one leg in front of the other like horses... It was same with their status updates... Their lives were filled with banal drama. I remember that Raquel Jacobs wrote once that -OMG!!! - She had dropped her Oyster card down the toilet. I mean, who needs or wants to know that? It seemed incredibly stupid and pointless, yet they responded to each other as if these things were interesting and important and funny, using all this made up language like whhhoooop, or misspelling words like hunny, or abbreviating words for no reason, and putting XXX at the end of everything they wrote. (Moggach 18)

However, soon it is revealed that Leila is also someone who finds solace in the virtual world. She turns out to be an obsessive woman leading a secluded existence, finding work online, spending hours surfing the internet and playing online games. She always struggled to fit in socially and retreated further into her shell after her mother's death. Leila developed inappropriate behavior and fixations as she got more and more engaged in the Red Pill community. Adrian and his thoughts influenced her, changing the way Leila viewed her life and actions, and thus she agreed to take up the project he assigned, even without thinking of the gravity of the task. Furthermore, when she started impersonating Tess, she fell in love with Tess's life and allowed it to dominate her own. Eventually, the lines between the reality of her life and the fantasy of Tess's life blurred and she began losing her sense of identity. In his book, *Virtual Politics: Identity and Community in Cyberspace*, David Holmes observes that Individuals who enwrap themselves in cyberspace, due to its excessive simulation of reality and dissolution of time and space, run the risk of losing all sense of identity and community (26-45). The cyber reality is integrated so much in to her life that she describes even her emotions and mental state in a language that resonate with a form of machine intelligence, "…it was as if my brain was offline" (Moggach 326). Tess always showed her best side, the side which she wishes to put forth, in the virtual life. The constant need to perform before her social media friends and followers further depressed, alienated and isolated her. Tess, ultimately tired of her wild and volatile life, decided to withdraw from the society, leaving Leila to handle her internet presence.

The novel also represents the reemergence writing culture in the cyberspace, where most of the exchanges between interacting individuals are done with writing. The new writing culture is accompanied by evolution of a new kind of language which Turkle explains as a "kind of hybrid: speech momentarily frozen into artifact, but curiously ephemeral artifact" (183). Turkle further points out:

> In the new writing, unless it is printed out on a paper, a screenful of flickers soon replaces the previous screen, In MUDs as in other forms of electronic communication, typographic conventions known as emoticons replace physical gestures and facial expressions. For example, :-) indicates a smiling face and :-(indicates an unhappy face. Onamatopoeic expletives and a relaxed attitude towards sentence fragments and typographic errors suggest that the new writing is somewhere between traditional written and oral communication. (183)

Moggach made the text simulate the digital formats as much as possible, by using font and structures that set the digital text (emails, instant messages and chats between the characters) apart from the traditional text narrative. Throughout the novel, digital texts are italicized, with many emails running between three to four pages. The chatspeak, which include smiles, abbreviations, acronyms, lower cases, use of capitalization to equate shouting, lack of capitalization and punctuation, sentences without proper grammar and sentence formation, is also presented in the text. For example: "Esther Moody wrote back *Thnx u r star xxx* when I advised her how to change her Google settings from Autofill" (Moggach 19); "The message read: *Leila, I've been watching your progress on the site with great interest. Fancy a F2F?*" (Moggach 29).

The novel also provided an insider's look into the virtual communities and kind of relationships and intimacy built on them. With Adrian as an internet influencer, followed by millions of people all over the world who regularly views his blog and pays to get subscription to his forum, the novel also explores the emergent influencer culture. It portrays the extent to which blogs and bloggers are celebrated, the social and economical capital of these internet celebrities and the value people attach of being a blogger or a member or commentator in blogs. The novel have references to popular culture, which include references to google and other well known websites which have become part of our daily lives, and also references to beliefs, values, online practices and habits of different characters. The novel also addressed notions of privacy and security in cyberspace in relation to conceptualizations of identity and lying on the web.

Identity Construction and Self Presentation Online

Today we spend most of our time presenting and representing ourselves in the virtual world. The new media platforms, particularly social media, provide us with endless opportunities for identity expression, exploration, and experimentation (Gunduz 85). They allow us to produce a narrative of our lives, to choose what

to present and what to remember. We can create and edit images of our lives and curate our identities online. People create multiple identities online, and those identities could be different from one another and to their offline self (Turkle 177-209). All the major characters in the novel present themselves differently in the digital world. Leila is an introverted woman who prefers to spend her time alone and purposely avoids conversations and social situations. Nevertheless, online she is *Shadowfax*, an elite member of the philosophical forum Red Pill, who regularly contributes to the forum and engages in active debates and deliberations. In Red Pill, Leila presents herself as a deep-thinking rationalist who looks at the world with an abstract perspective with no interest in the seemingly shallow concerns that preoccupy other people of her age. But in real life, Leila regularly following her friends' status updates, even judging them by what they post online and keeping them as friends on Facebook, although she hates most of them. She reasons, "... if I unfriended everyone who wasn't my real friend, then I would only have Rashida left [...] I was a free thinker, afterall. But I had a vision of my profile : Friends (1)" (Moggach 99).

Tess's Facebook page is dazzling, with good looks, happy faces, expensive clothes, and a seductive smile. Her gregarious, whimsical, and highly social online self deviates much from her real self, a hopeless and desperate one alienated from her family, suffering bipolar disorder and wanting to die without leaving a trace. "You would never have guessed from the picture - from any of the photos on her Facebook - that she was anything other than happy" (80), says Leila as she pores through Tess's social media pages. To all appearances- A long list of friends, groups, tagged photos, spontaneous shots at parties, picnics and pubs- her page "looked perfectly normal" (77). At the same time, Leila observes the contradictions between what Tess tells about herself in their conversations and how she presents herself online. Tess hates children and mostly refers to them as "ankle-biters and little squints" (78), yet she had posted twenty-eight photos of her fondly holding friends' babies. Leila also notes that the pictures posted on her Facebook "were often carefully selected to show the subject at their best, whereas those taken casually were more likely to be truthful and reveal something of their character" (Moggach 81).

The internet predator, known by his screen name Adrian Dervish, successfully created and staged his cyber self as a 'web guru'. His online persona as well as the website is crafted perfectly that no one ever doubted or questioned his true identity and intentions. In his esteemed podcasts, he narrated mind-expanding things in a cozy way and impressed his audience with his warm, intimate accent and his ability to articulate and argue persuasively. He built a like-minded virtual community, a group of freedom thinkers, whom he knows can be easily swayed by philosophy ideas and discussions. He then targets the vulnerable ones and grooms them for his task by making them feel privileged by rankings and special statuses.

> The way the site worked is that once you've posted your fifteenth comment you graduated from being an NE, which stands for Newly enlightened, to a fully fledged member. Most people remained at that stage, but a small number were invited to take an online test [...] and, if successful, you got access to a special forum where discussion was on a higher level. It was a subscription, twenty pounds a month. (Moggach 28)

Adrian's mode of operation is to convince desperate individuals with considerable fortunes to commit suicide after giving him money and hiring others to impersonate them online, which allows them to slip away from the world unnoticed. He was very particular about keeping all his online interactions confidential and maintained a safe distance from his followers. Thus the anonymity offered by the virtual platform allowed him to hide behind his screen name and escape without leaving any trace. Conor also utilized anonymity in online interactions to build a flirtatious relationship with Leila (impersonating Tess) by pretending to be a widower.

The contrast between the real and online selves of the characters reveals that they engage in strategic self-presentation online. Leila hides behind her screen name *Shadowfax* and later takes the identity of Tess, whereas Tess presented an ideal self online. Adrian created a false identity as a charismatic web guru. The way people create, maintain, and manipulate their online selves depends on their motives (Attrill 14-33). As Gunduz explains, "for some, it's a way to escape from the reality, to some others, it's the virtual reality; yet for great sum of people it is sometimes more important than the real reality" (86). As a loner who finds it enormously

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challenging to connect to people in the real world, Leila finds solace in playing games online and meeting people in virtual communities. Leila's use of the virtual world as a means of escape can be understood using Czikszentmihalyi's flow theory. According to the theory, any enjoyable experience resulting in a loss of self-awareness helps people achieve a state of psychological flow (Atrill 25-26). The online role-playing game offers Leila an opportunity to be someone else, to flee from her offline life, and immerse herself in a world where she can play around with her self-concept. Leila experiences the same flow while impersonating Tess online, as she puts it, "I immersed myself in building up Tess's in building up Tess's life, imagining what she was going to wear that day, and have for her lunch, and the next thing she was going to buy for her new flat. It was like having an avatar, but much better" (Moggach 130). Studies posit that individuals who feel inhibited in their social interactions use the internet to compensate their social needs that cannot be fulfilled offline (McKenna and Gleason 10). Leila, who always felt constrained by her social isolation, could bypass her obstacles, at least temporarily, in virtual life as Tess. It provided her an opportunity to soothe herself by socializing, a life that may be practically off her limits in the physical world. Impersonating Tess, she succeeded in charming Conor, and it was a good chance for Leila, who had known little success in dating, to have a love life.

As a person suffering from bipolar disorder, Tess is social and isolated, ecstatic and depressed, and amicable and hostile. None of her friends or family members knows the weaker side of Tess. Her confidence and happy life is fully faked for Social Media. She hides her depressed state from everyone by presenting an ideal image of herself online. By omitting a major aspect of her life (illness) and sharing selected parts of herself online, she staged a strategic self presentation online. While Adrian used anonymity for predation, Conor used it to build a flirtatious relationship by faking his identity. Thus a close analysis of the major characters in the novel proves that all of them present different versions of themselves online and the self- identity they present depends on their motives.

Conclusion

An analysis of the fictional representation of cyberspace in *Kiss Me First* by Lottie Moggach enables one to comprehend the social and cultural significance of cyberspace in the digital age. By portraying a world immersed in digital communication, the novel mirrored the contradictions of the digital age: connection and isolation, exposure and concealment, homogeneity and fragmentation. Cyberspace and communicative spaces made possible by them have altered the way we interact, form our relationships, communities, and our own identities. It has resulted in the evolution of a set of practices, values, attitudes, and trends unique to the cyber world. The exploration of the virtual identities of the characters shows that they present themselves differently in the digital world. Cyberspace enables people to form multiple identities and to create a narrative of their life. They create and edit their self-identities depending on their motives. Moggach, through this work of fiction, demonstrates that the connection comes with consequences. The fiction's portrayal of cyberspace might have felt a bit darker in 2013 when it was published, but proves more than right nearly a decade later. Thus, it can be concluded that Moggach, through the portrayal of cyberspace and digital life, has effectively represented and critiqued the cyberculture in her fiction.

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