

**Hypertext and Feminisms:
Voicing the Silence(d)**



Literature

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Abstract

Hypertext, the electronic linking of text found on internet has revolutionized the domain of literature. It is a linked, multilinear, fragmented and deconstructed text. Its basic tenets are in alignment with the Poststructuralist critical theory. Its characteristic features render it capable of projecting and promoting the concerns of feminists and other marginalised groups. They find a rich terrain in hypertext for their innovative ideas and hypertext, by embodying and manifesting those ideas, promises to promote their concerns. Hypertext is an embodiment of ecriture feminine and pertains to pre-oedipal stage of psychological development of a child. By taking into account some examples of activist and autobiographical hypertexts developed by the students at University of Florida under the guidance of their teacher Laura L. Sullivan, it becomes explicit how the attributes of hypertext could be utilized for criticising, exposing and subverting the patriarchal discourse by offering ample scope for not only thematic but also textual experimentation.

Technology plays a significant and decisive role in our lives. It has wide ranging effects across numerous domains of society and knowledge. Technological innovations have not only radically altered our concepts of communication and information processing but have also invaded the domain of literature. One such technological concept that has made inroads in the field of literature quite recently is Hypertext.

Hypertext is a term that was coined by Theodor H. Nelson in 1960s. Hypertext is basically the electronic linking of text that we often find on the internet. When we click on a linked image or text, we are able to access another place on the internet. Hypertext at a minimum has the following essential features: multiple reading paths; text that is chunked in some way; and some kind of linking mechanism that connects the chunks together so as to create multiple reading paths (Hayles 9: 21). Etymologically, the prefix hyper- (Modern Greek term for "over" or "beyond") signifies the overcoming of the old linear constraints of the written text. Nelson thought of the prefix *hyper* not in its usual sense of "excess" but in terms of its meaning in mathematics and sciences: "extension and generality" (Feustle Jr. 80: 216). He defined it as text that branches and allows choices "connected by links which offer the reader (and creator) different pathways using the computer" (Carpenter II, Taylor 45: 41). Students and teachers have been using hypertext for years, without calling it that, as in tables of contents, page numbers, chapters, verses, rubrications, footnotes, and indexes (Feustle Jr.80: 217). An encyclopaedia is the most common example of hypertext.

Invasion of literature by hypertext has given rise to a new genre of electronic fiction called hyperfiction and to a new creed of critics called the technocritics. According to technocritics, hypertext is that variety of text which makes no centralistic claims on the understanding of the readers, its view of things being essentially plural. It openly flouts the Western concept to base all thoughts around the idea of centres. And this is basically the point of convergence of hypertext and Poststructuralist critical theory. This convergence links hypertext to the field of postmodern critical theories quite explicitly and thereby to literature. It achieves this plurality and dynamicity due to its structural peculiarities. Its linked, fragmented and multilinear structure makes it multi-vocal, reader-oriented, dynamic and self-deconstructed text.

These characteristics of hypertext are in alignment with feminist concerns also. Technocritics and feminists both equally want to harness the potential of this medium for creative expression. Feminists find a fertile terrain in hypertext for their innovative ideas and hypertext, by embodying and manifesting those ideas, promises to promote their concerns. According to Laura L. Sullivan, feminists can take advantage of the various modern and postmodern strategies of textual production incorporated by hypertext like multiple

perspectives, collage, multilinearity and montage etc. to articulate different views and juxtapose contradictory opinions (samanthablackmon.net 20 July 2012).

Hypertext is particularly relevant to the French Feminism informed by the psychological theory of Jacques Lacan. Lacan was instrumental in opening up Freudian theory to ideas about language that proved incredibly fruitful for feminism. He said that “unconscious was structured like language” and in his opinion sexual difference is founded in language. He argues that when a child passes through the Mirror Phase, he begins to recognize sexual difference. This recognition comes with the attainment of language. It is language by which the world is known, categorized and expressed. Before the attainment of language the self and the mother are indistinguishable but with the attainment of language the child begins to construct and maintain a stable self-identity in which the self and the other are distinct. Through language the authority of the father is maintained and the connection with the mother which threatens the autonomy and the self-identity of the child is severed. Lacan’s emphasis on language again proves and strengthens the proposition that gender is a social construct and like Freud he too identified a period before gender difference (Tolan 334-35). This period corresponds to the Real phase in the psychological development of the child. It is also called the pre-Oedipal stage.

Eminent French psychologist and linguist Julia Kristeva has also designated this pre-Oedipal phase by the term ‘semiotic’. She describes the opposing states of the ‘semiotic’ and ‘symbolic’. The semiotic is the most important phase in the development of the psyche of a child. Kristeva, has fully recognized the importance of the pre-Oedipal in the development of the subjectivity of a child. Kristeva characterizes the pre-Oedipal phase with a kind feminine phase and space for which she borrows the Plato’s term, “Chora”, an enveloping, amorphous, non-metric space that both nourishes and threatens. It is the site of the undifferentiated bodily space (blueberry-brain.org 3 March 2011). It is the stage that Lacan calls the Real. An infant goes through this stage just before it enters the language. The Real is important because it is the stage in which there is no law, no domination, and no patriarchy. The Real or the pre-Oedipal or the semiotic (in Kristevian terms) is also important since it is the stage, according to French feminists, that women should go in order to find their own language (academinist.org 6 March 2011).

Following the pre-Oedipal stage is the Oedipal stage which Kristeva characterizes by a metric space, for which one can use Aristotle’s term, “Topos”. The self and the self-to-space are more precise and well defined in “Topos” (academinist.org 6 March 2011). The Oedipalized system is regulated by the secondary processes and the law of the father. The child enters the Oedipal phase due to the realization of the lack of mother’s penis, which creates in him the fear of castration. This fear forces the child to renounce the mother and the infant is separated from the mother. From then on “all pleasures will be substitutive for sexuality consists of the pursuit of metaphorical alternatives, lost felicities, for a desire in Lacanian terms is nothing other than derive to linguistic substitution” (academinist.org 6 March 2011). Kristeva has called this Oedipalized system as the symbolic.

She is now famous for her distinction between semiotic and the symbolic which developed in her early work including *Revolution in Poetic Language*, “*From One Identity to the Other*” in *Desire in Language*, and *Powers of Horror*. She maintained that all signification is composed of these two elements. The semiotic element is associated with the rhythms, tones, and movement of signifying practices. “As the discharge of drives, it is also associated with the maternal body, the first source of rhythms, tones and movements for every human being since we have all resided in that body” (cddc.vt.edu 3 March 2012). In this semiotic phase speaking subject is divided, decentered and process-oriented. Her psycholinguistic research detected in the first mimetic utterances of infants, rhythms and intonations anterior to the first phonemes, morphemes, lexemes and sentences (blueberry-brain.org 3 March 2011). This stands in sharp contrast to the symbolic stage where the law of the father prevails. The mother’s lack and the fear of castration make the father an important figure, a function of the linguistic structure. The father becomes the law, in the Oedipal phase, that separates the infant

from the mother. Thus when the child discovers the language, s/he discovers the father. S/he enters the symbolic order and becomes a subject. Submission to the rules of the language is submission to the law of the father. Both the symbolic order and the law of the father are patriarchal. It is at this stage that the child recognizes the sexual differences (academinst.org 6 March 2011).

This theory relates to the concept of phallus, which is the best signifier to prove the patriarchal, dominating and hegemonic nature of the language. Since it is the centre, in Derridean terms, and since all differences are defined in relation to it, everything related to women is defined with regard to the phallus. Therefore the father and his penis have the central role in the system of language which consequently affects all other systems and discourses. According to the Ellman, the phallus is the kingpin in the bowling alley of signification; if we knock it over, all other signs come tumbling down. It takes the place of God as the absolute guarantee of meaning (academinst.org 6 March 2011).

Hence it is the patriarchal discourse that subordinates, exploits and abuses women. According to Morris “as women enter the language and learn to name themselves, they are put in their place within the social order of meaning where there is masculinity and there is its absence”. It all starts with defining the self with the mother’s lack and from then on woman is regarded as the one who lacks, who needs to be fulfilled, and who needs to be completed. She is the one who is weak and incomplete. The ‘man’ is always the positive term (the norm) and ‘woman’ the ‘other’ (academinst.org 6 March 2011).

According to the French feminists language puts women into this position, and since it is the basis of all other systems, women have to change the language. They have to create an alternative language, a language of their own to re-establish their position as women. This is why feminine writing emerged in the first place. Women’s movement for a new language started with the daily language and reached its peak in literature because through literature it reached a wider audience (academinst.org 6 March 2011). In Kristevian terms it is the language that relates to the semiotic or the lost pre-Oedipal maternal world. The world where there is no phallus, no father, no law. She argues that patriarchal discourse is constituted by his phallus and her lack. Therefore a woman cannot use that patriarchal language to speak herself.

Women should write from their “Chora”, say feminists. The “Chora” is associated with the mother’s body. It is unrepresentable. Hence women’s language should come from the “Chora” which is the place we know from the semiotic but have forgotten when we entered the symbolic. The “Chora”, according to Kristeva, precedes everything that is symbolic. It is a place of rhythm and movement. There is a kind of regulation in the “Chora” as well; however this not a regulation according to a law as in the symbolic. According to Kristeva the “Chora” is a modality of significance in which the linguistic sign is not yet articulated as the absence of an object and as the distinction between real and symbolic. She emphasizes the regulated aspect of the “Chora”; its vocal and gestural organization subject to what one shall call an objective ordering. Morris opines that an order of meaning that is very different from the phallogocentric symbolic order is the basis of feminine writing. Thus, “Chora” is the place in woman’s body that gives birth to her language (academinst.org 6 March 2011).

Even if there is no conscious attempt by the women at creating a language that comes from the “Chora”, yet sometimes there are eruptions of the semiotic in the symbolic order. These eruptions are mainly poetic such as silences, contradictions, ambiguity, rhythm, music, meaninglessness and deviations from the grammatical rules (academinst.org 6 March 2011). Some critics call such language erupting from “Chora”, *écriture féminine*.

“Helene Cixous posits the existence of an incipient “feminine writing” (*écriture féminine*) which has its source in the mother, in the stage of the mother-child relation before the child acquires the male-centered verbal language” (Abrams 97).

In her opinion this prelinguistic and unconscious potentiality manifests in those texts that are deviant. Such texts by “abolishing all repressions, undermine and subvert the fixed signification, the logic, and the “closure” of our phallogocentric language, and open out into a joyous free play of meanings”(97). Hypertext being non-linear, anti-hierarchical and decentered exemplifies *écriture féminine*. Its dynamic structure resists closure. It is multivocal and has ability to juxtapose different views and contradictory opinions. It does so by incorporating multi-linearity, montage and collage. In hypertextual environment no absolute meaning exists. It encourages free play of meaning, plurality and multiplicity. These characteristics of hypertext make it an appropriate medium for feminists to voice their concerns. In fact it is an appropriate medium of expression for all the marginalised groups that have been silenced and excluded by the patriarchal discourse.

Barbara Page in her essay titled “Women Writers and the Restive Text: Feminism, Experimental Writing and Hypertext” discusses the tendency of the contemporary women writers to alter not only the themes but the formal structure of the text. She further quotes from a useful collection of essays by Ellen Friedman and Marie Fuchs titled “Breaking the Sequence: Women’s Experimental Fiction.” She posits that Friedman and Fuchs both jointly trace a sequence of authors who wrote to subvert what they considered as the patriarchal assumptions governing traditional modes of narrative. They begin with Gertrude Stein, Dorothy Richardson, and Virginia Woolf, and then lead to such contemporaries as Christine Brooke-Rose, Eva Figs, and Kathy Acker. They write:

“Although the woman in the text may be the particular woman writer, in the case of twentieth-century women experimental writers, the woman in the text is also an effect of the textual practice of breaking patriarchal fictional forms; the radical forms - nonlinear, non-hierarchical, and decentering - are, in themselves, a way of writing the feminine.” (par.1)

As hypertext is non-linear, non-hierarchical and decentered, it can be effectively adopted for feminine writing. By harnessing and tapping its potential, feminists can develop and use it for voicing their concerns and also for subverting the patriarchal discourse.

Laura L. Sullivan who is a hypertext theorist and technocritic has also spelled out the ways in which hypertext gives voice to the feminists. She posits that hypertext allows the feminists to –

To combine the best of both modern and postmodern strategies of textual production such as multiplicity of perspectives, collage (single-screen juxtaposition of text and image), montage (juxtaposition through linking), the juxtaposition of autobiography with social critique and with a critique of dominant media representations, the reappropriation of mass-mediated images and the recontextualization of dominant ideological signs, the articulation of the voices and experiences of previously silenced female subject, and the combination of conceptual experiential, and emotional knowledge, including knowledge from the unconscious, where much oppressive ideology lies internalized and often repressed (samanthablackmon.net 20 July 2012).

Sullivan describes two types of hypertext that she has developed in her classroom- the autobiographical and activist hypertexts. She describes autobiographical hypertexts as those that require students to interrogate their positions within social history and entertainment narratives and such hypertexts in her opinion have produced deep transformations in individual students. The activist hypertexts on the other hand, according to her are, collective projects in which students produce penetrating institutional critiques. She opines that these

hypertexts produce both personal and social transformation and she believes that feminist theory also points towards such transformations.

She describes an autobiographical hypertext developed by one of her students Sage Linsenbaum (1996). Linsenbaum chose to examine the Holocaust and the figure of Ann Frank. She made use of the figure of Ann Frank as the social history level of her hypertext. She scanned in her picture and on the entry pictured wrote “I just called Greg to ask if he liked me the way I liked him and he said yes!! I freaked optically out of my mind! I LOVE HIM!” (samanthablackmon.net 20 July 2012). Underneath that picture she wrote –

This was the extent of the depth of my diary when I was young. Granted I was much younger than Ann Frank when I wrote this. However my problems only grew in degree, not in substance. At least not to the point where I had to pray for my life, and the life of my family as we hid in an annex above my father’s office trying to hide from Nazi Germany (samanthablackmon.net 20 July 2012).

Sullivan remarks that “by using her diary as a historical artefact and comparing her childhood self to Ann Frank, Sage sees how far she has come and also understands the privilege of her own life in relation to Ann Frank’s” (samanthablackmon.net 20 July 2012).

Sullivan has also given some examples of activist hypertexts developed in her classroom. Some of her students designed an activist hypertext that gave two contrary pictures of the University of Florida. This activist hypertext focussed on the financial dimension of the university. The students designed two contrasting brochures of the University of Florida. The first brochure was a parody of University’s own self-representation and imitated a spa or a resort. It was very colourful and featured images of swimming pools and exercise rooms and employed a figurative and hyperbolic language to extol the luxurious environment for students at the University of Florida. The second brochure on the contrary represented the real experience of being a student at the University. For this brochure students used black and grey colours and the images of gears and machines, “evoking the metaphor of university as a factory.” Thus this counterpoint was used by the students to point out the discrepancy between the “university’s self-representation and their experiences as students at University of Florida. From all the research that they did and the information they collected only the ideas pertinent to university as resort or as a factory were included (samanthablackmon.net 20 July 2012).

This project provided two contrasting fragmented pictures of the same university. This example illustrates how fragmentation and multivocality made possible by hypertext can be put good use by the creators of hypertext to document the contradictions within which the females in our culture live, opines Sullivan (samanthablackmon.net 20 July 2012).

Sullivan and her students have exploited the attributes of hypertext to expose the patriarchal setup and the truth value of the traditional view of research as based upon objectivity, to examine more concretely the connections amongst media messages, the lives of the people and social dimension of sexism through juxtaposing and linking. Hypertext according to her can also juxtapose the rational and the emotional realm to break down the dichotomy and transcend the binary logic. She and her students have achieved this effect by including their dreams, letters written with non-dominant hands, images, recipes and poems in the hypertexts created by them. This unconscious dimension of hypertext in her opinion is not only a counter to the patriarchal ideology of privileging of rationality over emotions but it is also an acknowledgement of the power of mystical forces (samanthablackmon.net 20 July 2012).

The culmination of hypertext and feminism has opened up new arena for textual and thematic experimentation. According to technocritics hypertext promotes a synthesis of the best features of different

feminist theoretical positions. It also helps in transcending the essentialism vs antifoundational debates and the arguments about focussing political action at the level of signifier or at the level of the system. It helps to transcend the binaristic thinking. Feminist hypertexts also highlight the “subjective, situated, experiential and emotional nature of research” and at the same time expose and criticise the political, economic, and institutional nature of sexism and other oppressions. In Sullivan’s opinion in the feminist hypertexts the “Deconstruction of subjects, ourselves and others, are situated within deconstruction of texts of the dominant culture, including those texts produced by the mass media.” She hopes that the production and consumption of feminist hypertexts will produce deep transformations both at the personal and social level (samanthablackmon.net 20 July 2012).

Amid all these hopes, aspirations and controversies hypertext and feminisms are making breakthrough in the mainstream literature. Hyperfictions like “Patchwork Girl,” “its name was Penelope” and “Afternoon, a Story” are considered as classics and have put up many challenges before the readers and the critics. Their potential to exemplify, and enact strategies and features of hypertext renders them open to multiple interpretations and poses intellectual challenges. In a developing country like India hypertext can be utilized for voicing social, political, economic and developmental concerns. The contemporary issues of rape, molestation, child abuse, female infanticide, economic instability, corruption, poverty, urbanization, environmental pollution etc., can be given a creative and innovative expression using hypertext and this will in turn help in sensitizing the government, common masses, institutions and organizations.

Technology is the future of mankind and so is hypertext. The liaison of technology and literature is sure to open up new avenues for authors, critics and readers. Hypertext has provided a fascinating mode of expression to marginalised groups and some groundbreaking hyperfictions have captured the imagination and attention of technocritics who believe that hypertext has the ability to deconstruct and subvert the patriarchal order that has for long abused, exploited and misrepresented the feminine.

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