

Life in Cyberspace: A Postmodern Reading of Indra Sinha's *The Cybergypsies*

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Abstract: Cyberfiction emerged as a distinct category of literature in the last decade of twentieth century especially due to the growing influence of internet activities on the lives of peoples around the world. Creative writers across the globe have, over the last two decades, attempted to fictionalize the interface of online and offline lives of peoples, and in doing so, these writers have also dealt with the complex relationship between the real and the virtual. Indra Sinha's fiction *The Cybergypsies* is no exception. As a text, *The Cybergypsies* interrogates the traditional distinction between the concepts of the real and the virtual through the lives of a few cyber addicts who are dwellers of both the real and the virtual worlds. The central protagonist Bear in Sinha's fiction becomes a cyber addict to such an extent that he is ready to sacrifice all his real worldly pleasures in order to spend some time with the illusory characters of cyber world. Bear's involvement in the 'internet society' is so deep that he imagines it to be the real society. As the story progresses, Bear is seen to be failing to grasp the distinction between the real and the virtual. The online (virtual) and offline (real) lives intersect in Bear's mind to create a new cultural matrix lacking a proper definition. In fact, the erasure of the distinction between the real and the virtual is an issue significant in postmodern discourse, and this paper shall therefore interpret the lives of the cyber addicts from the point of view of Baudrillard's idea of hyperreal. This paper will also attempt to study the life of Bear from the point of view of Manuel Castells's notion of 'real virtuality', which, as Castells's explains, is a new kind of reality that is "experienced, has always been virtual because it is always perceived through symbols that frame practice." (as cited in Bell, 2007, p.82-83).

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The notion of the cyberspace emerged in the early 1990s and this became prominent due to the advancement in the field of information technology, and internet becoming one of the chief providers of all kinds of knowledge. During the 1990s, the internet world or the cyber world, as it is popularly known, became so very pervasive in human lives that the first generation critics of cyberculture predicted the long standing impact of cyber world on real human world. One of the first cyberculture critics, Michael Benedikt in the introduction to the edited volume of the book *Cyberspace: First Steps* (1991) draws the attention of the readers to an upcoming new world of cyberspace which would inevitably invade the secured real space of human lives. In a very enthusiastic manner Benedikt says, "the door to cyberspace is open" and the cyberspace itself is "an elusive and future thing" (as cited in Bell, 2007, p. 16). While discussing about cyberspace, Benedikt not only envisages a 'motivating, unifying vision' of the future of the human race in the cyberpace, but also asserts

that cyberspace shall lead to the emergence of a 'parallel universe' -- a virtual world different from the real world of the humans -- which shall relate to the 'mental geography' of the humans (as cited in Bell, 2007, p. 16). Apart from Benedikt's theoretical conceptualization of the concept of the cyberspace, it must be mentioned that William Gibson happens to be the first person who coined the term 'cyberspace' in his path breaking novel *Neuromancer* which was published in 1984. In this novel Gibson uses the term to "describe a 'virtual' landscape made up of all the information in the world" (as cited in Bell, 2007, p. 17). Gibson conceives the cyberspace as a large, virtual world of data and information which shall provide ample scope to the academicians and computer literates to explore the nook and corner of this resourceful virtual space. In fact, Gibson's ideas related to the cyberspace are by and large appropriated by the cyberculture theorists of the 1990s, and this is evident in Benedikt's claim that cyberspace is not a 'thing', but a 'nuanced virtual world converting ocean of abstract data and the intelligence of distant people into perpetually engaging, all-but-firsthand experience' (as cited in Bell, 2007, p.16 17-18). Benedikt's theoretical idea associated with cyberspace represents the spirit of the group of the cyberculture theorists and their engagement with and understanding of the emerging world of virtuality. When seen from the perspective of this emerging importance of virtuality within cyberculture theory, one finds that there is a tacit connection between the cyberculture theorists of the 1990s and the postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard. Cyberculture theorists like Benedikt et al believe in the prominent influence of the virtual world of the cyberspace in the real human lives, and this influence can be so strong that it may end up in erasing the distinction between the real and the virtual. In a way, therefore, cyberculture may make reality elusive and virtuality more real. This eradication of the distinction between the real and the virtual about which the cyberculture theorists are concerned is also the main point of discussion in Baudrillard's seminal essay "The Precession of Simulacra". In this essay, Baudrillard discusses at length the concept of simulacra and the contemporary trend of developing models of the real things: "It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (Leitch, 2001, p.1732). While explaining the different phases of simulation, Baudrillard conspicuously states that in the last phase of simulation an image or model representing a real thing becomes the real thing in itself and in this process the real or the original source of the virtual image or model disappears. In this connection, Baudrillard states,

Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum (Leitch, 2001, p. 1736).

Thus, Baurillard's concern is about the disappearance of the notion of real in the 1980s when due to the impact of consumerist cultural trends all over Europe and allied with it the impact of Western science and philosophy on the lives of the people created a desire for unreal things (Leitch, 2001, p.1730). Vincent B. Leich comments on the influential cultural trends of the 1980s which according to him helped Baurillard to shape his discourse on postmodernism, "There are no longer natural needs that human work strives to satisfy. Rather, there are culturally

produced 'hyperreal' needs that are generated to provide work and profits. ... Consumer society provides a 'precession of simulacra', a parade of images that project a life that consumers are encouraged to try to live" (Leitch, 2001, p.1730-1731). So, there are issues related to the real/virtual binary which were seriously interrogated by Baudrillard and the group of cyberculture theorists, and in keeping this link between postmodernism and cyberculture alive, I would attempt to read Indra Sinha's novel *The Cybergypsies*. *The Cybergypsies* (1999) is in many ways an experimental novel and it is very often placed under the category of cyberfiction. This paper shall discuss the different techniques used by Sinha in *The Cybergypsies* which make it a prominent postmodern text.

As an experimental text, *The Cybergypsies* narrativizes the interface between the real and the cyber world, and the complex relationship between the two. The interesting encounter between these two worlds is presented in the text from the point of view of the chief protagonist named, Bear who prefers the exciting life of the cyber world than the drab and monotonous life of the real world. The text, therefore, sheds light on the nocturnal encounters of Bear with his different friends of the cyber world and while recording the interaction between Bear and his friends, Sinha faithfully presents the anxieties and excitements of cyber people in a cryptic language that relates to the language of the cyberculture. Sinha defines the text in the subtitle by stating, "A frank account of love, life and travels on the electronic frontier", and this evidently connects with the aspect of travelling explicit in the title of the text. The title 'cybergypsies' means to explore the lives of the people residing in the virtual world of the internet, who are not different from the real life nomads, always changing places, identities and communities. Like nomads, these temporary dwellers of the cyber world are liberated individuals of a new cyber socio-cultural matrix constantly travelling to get connected to new communities and friends in the cyberspace. This aspect of travelling in a virtual domain that is shapeless, directionless, and decentred is similar to the postmodern view of life. The narrative structure in consonance with the decentred lives of the characters living in the virtual domain is typically unstructured encouraging free play of words and random changes in time scheme. When the text begins the readers are informed about liberated life of Bear in the virtual space, and this highly exciting life of Bear is captured in a language that lacks decorum and decency: "It's 3 a.m. and I'm online to Jesus Slutfucker. JS informs me that he's typing one-handed, knuckling open a beer with the other ... *i' m b etter off w i thou t t he bitch...*" (emphasis mine, p.1). In the quoted text, the readers encounter a different kind of language which is a blend of the communicative language used in the cyber domain and the conversational language used by people in real life. The conscious use of unrequired spaces between words and letters in the italicized portion of the quoted text symbolizes the freedom in the cyberspace. Bear's friends belong to a community interested in playing an internet game popularly known as Shades. This game can be played by multiple players and each player, according to the rules of the game, can earn points by giving surprising blows to the opponents. A player while playing this game has to possess weapons which may be required in fatal combats. When Bear

introduces the readers to this new game, he states,

Shades is like the real world, random and unpredictable. Fighting skill depends entirely on the players ... You must know where the Strange Little Girl is, because strength and stamina is restored by touching her" (p.78).

In Bear's analysis, the game of Shades is equivalent to the encounters of friends and enemies in the real world, but this surprising connection between real and virtual world establishes the idea of interpreting the real life from the point of view of virtual life. That Bear sees the real world through the lens of virtuality is evident in this quoted text. Like Bear, his playmates of the game Shades are intimately connected to the virtual world. Bear tells us about Jarly (one of his playmates of Shades) who is a serious cyber addict, and his addiction has reached such a level that all his real life anxiety, tension, and crisis are the outcome of his failure or success in the game Shades. Jarly is aware of the overwhelming influence of the virtual world of games in his life, and he also understands the fact that he cannot escape from this trap of virtuality. Describing Jarly's addiction to and involvement in the activities of virtual space, Bear very succinctly point out, "Jarly's real life is not 'real' life but the life which is lived in the worlds to which this tiny hole in the wall leads" (p.81). The 'tiny hole' refers to the small hole in his room through which a telephone wire passes, and this telephone wire is the lifeline of Jarly, because it is the gateway to his world of games in the internet. Jarly's addiction to Shades is more complicated an issue, because, apart from wasting his time in virtual world, he also is wasting a lot of money in paying internet bills, and this issue is let known to Bear by Jarly in one of his conversations:

Shades addiction is killing me. I've been trying to give it up, Bear, but it's hard, man, worse than ciggies. I've got to get some fucking brass together and I need some help. What I need ... (p.83)

That Jarly needs money is clearly understood by Bear, but Bear cannot help him, and so he remains unresponsive to Jarly's need. The virtual space, as the text reveals, is seductive in nature making human beings believe in the events which occur in this world, and it disconnects people from the reality of life. The cyber world appears to be a hyperreal domain wherein virtuality substitutes reality. In this context, one needs to consider Baudrillard's take on postmodernity which is based on the concept of simulation. Tim Woods, in his discussion on postmodernism refers to Baudrillard's book *Simulations*, in which, the idea of hyperreal is defined from the point of view of representation of reality—the representative image or model becoming more real than the real object that is represented—a state of being surrounded by virtual images or models without any connection to reality. Hyperreal is, as Baudrillard theorizes, "a generation of models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (as cited in Woods, 2010, p.26). Wood interprets the concept of hyperreality as the "state where distinctions between objects and their representations are dissolved, and one is left with only simulacra" (as cited in Woods, 2010, p.27). In Sinha's *Cybergypsises*, the players of the game of Shades are cyber addicts, and their love for the virtual game

disconnects them from the true realities of life. These people feel at home in the cyber space—a space that is surrounded by images and models of real objects—because, it liberates them from the monotonous life outside this space. Even if the space is unreal, yet it provides all kinds of entertainment to the players, so they like to be a part and parcel of this simulated world. Apart from Baudrillard's notion of 'hyperreal' which sheds light on the issue of disappearing reality in the text, Manuel Castells's notion about reality and how it is perceived through the lens of virtuality is an interesting issue to deal with and interpret the text from a different perspective. But, before elaborating Castells's take on real/virtual divide, some important events in the text need to be discussed. Though Jarly is a cyber addict, Bear is no less a lover of the game of Shades. There are chapters in the text which significantly focus on Bear's intimate relationship with the playmates of the game, and his coming to terms with act of role playing in the virtual space. Every character in the cyberspace assumes a fake identity and based on this fake identity the characters engage in roleplaying. Women playing the role of men, and vice versa is a common feature in cyber world. In case of female characters, names are often misleading, because many naughty men often use different female like names to play with the emotions of other male characters. Bear, in his conversation with one of his cyber friends states the common perception regarding identity in cyber world: "You know as well as I do that most 'women' on these games have testicles" (p.116). Bear's interaction with the roleplayers in virtual domain is so frequent that he sees his real life wife as a roleplayer. Seeing the real world through the lens of virtuality, Bear at one point of time talks about his wife in an enigmatic manner, "I stare at my wife's neat figure, fair hair touching her shoulders, green eyes glinting at me, slanted like almonds. How well, how little, I know her. She is a mystery to me. Like the sea, deep, quiet, but imbued with immense, giant, horrific strength. Who is she roleplaying?" (p.99). Bear's inability to see his wife distinctly different from the characters of cyberspace highlights the complex relationship between real and virtual. Is reality distinct from virtuality or is it a matter of perspective? Bear and Luna (one of his cyber friends) converse with one another to find an answer to this question. Luna attempts to define 'real' as a big idea which embraces all human experiences. Luna believes that the concept of real "is just one more label" comprising of everything that is present around human beings, "All of these things, impossible to disentangle, comprise the actual reality of 'now'" (p.126). Reality, from Luna's point of view, is an overarching concept embracing varied aspects of human existence. According to her, different versions of reality are attached to human life, and human imagination is also a form of reality, known as 'transcendental reality' (p.127). She believes that cyber zone is a space of 'transcendental reality' because it allows its dwellers to live freely without any inhibitions or restrictions. Luna concludes by stating that the different forms of 'realities' associated with human life are inseparable,

'because they are actually all the same thing' (p.127). In Luna's interpretation of reality, the virtual space is seen as an extension of real world, and in her analysis of overarching reality the existence of real/virtual binary disappears. This kind of interpretation is really thought provoking because Castells (one of the eminent cyberculture theorists) formulates the concept of 'real virtuality', quite opposed to the popular concept of 'virtual reality'. Discussing especially the impact of digital media on human life, Castells attempts to define reality through the lens of virtuality, because the culture of digital and technological media has transported human beings in a simulated world where reality has become elusive. Quite contrary to Luna's take on reality, Castells believes that the virtual is the base of the real, "reality, as experienced, has always been virtual because it is always perceived through symbols that frame practice" (as cited in Bell, 2007, p.82-83). In fact, Castells is not interested in separating reality from virtuality, he rather proposes a new idea of experiencing reality through virtuality. Instead of prioritizing real over virtual or vice versa, Castells argues in favour of merging the two radically different ideas, and his concept of 'real virtuality' is "to integrate virtuality as core to our reality and to our experience... So we cannot oppose what is real and what is virtual because virtual is a fundamental part of the real" (as cited in Bell, 2007, p.87). When seen from this perspective of Castells, Bear and his group of friends in the cyber zone seem to be not the residents of a purely virtual world, but the typical dwellers of an imagined space where they roam ceaselessly to find new homes, new pleasures, and new communities. The cyberspace as a dynamic world gives scope to the residents of this space to liberate their desire, and in so doing make people like Bear, Jarly and Luna escape from the boredom and fixity of real life. Cyberspace is therefore not unlike the real space, it is rather a space that subverts the governing principles of real life. In fact, Sinha rightly conceptualizes this cyberspace as an imagined space which upholds the idea of utopia. I would like to conclude my article by stating what Sinha says regarding cyberspace, "The big themes of the human imagination—freedom, the quest for meaning in life, yearning to escape oppression of all kinds, the creation of political and moral utopias—all these are also themes of cyberspace" (p.148).

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