Technocriticism and the Changing Contours of Literary Text/Narrative: A Theoretical Overview

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ABSTRACT:

The paper deals with technocriticism which came into being in response to the digital age marked by technological changes, particularly new media ecology which has serious bearing on the printed word/ literary text, to the extent that some would perceive it as a threat to conventional narrative. To work out intricately layered relationship between literature and newly arisen cultural phenomenon called eliterature comprising electronic literature, digital literature and new media writings, the paper builds on theoretical insights of Michael Wutz, Michael Joyce, Katherine Hayles, Jayshree K. Odin and others to first underscore facticity of

change in posthuman era caused by changing media environs that has nudged literature into a "meditative niche" and then re-align literary and cultural studies, cyberstudies with technocriticism to analyse hypertextual space, electronic textuality, electronic fictions to work out the changing contours of literary text/ narrative.

KEYWORDS: *Technocriticism, literary narrative, eliterature, flickering signifiers, electronic textuality, hypertext (exploratory; constructive),*

In rapidly changing media environs of today, it is imperative to re-locate literary text/narrative and understand its changing contours in the context of new media multiplicity. Literary narrative has already been pushed to the edge in 'post-death-of-the-author/text' scenario wherein notion of author/text/reader stands multifariously appropriated because of hypertext, electronic textuality, and electronic fictions along with their multiplex modes of production. To work out intricately layered relationship between literary text and newly arisen cultural phenomenon called eliterature that comprises electronic literature, digital literature and new media writings, this paper deals with technocriticism as a mode of interpretation that enables us to re-think literary text/narrative in the hypertextual environment characterized by multiplicity, discontinuity, fragmentation and multilinearity.

Technocriticism, in fact, came into being in response to the digital age marked by technological changes, particularly new media ecology which had serious bearing on the printed word/ literature, to the extent that some would perceive it as a threat to conventional narrative. Nevertheless, there are others who observe that literature has already moved beyond the precipice expanding scope of its representation alongside range of techniques in new "media assemblage" without compromising its vital spirit. Thus, technocriticism developed as a mode of interpreting new versions/ forms of literary texts as eliterature, e-texts, hypertexts, blogs and diverse media writings alongside electronic and digital literature. The newer versions of literary texts changed the notion of textuality considerably—a phenomenon associated with 1990s. Pramod Nayar aptly observes that in the age of "*hypertext*, simulation, computer-aided designs and virtual reality," a "whole new theory of reading" is required (Nayar 296). Technocriticism is

thus important but needs to be re-aligned with literary and cultural studies, and cyberstudies to analyze rapidly changing contours of literary narrative in the age of new media ecology.

Michael Wutz's *Enduring Words: Literary Narrative in a Changing Media Ecology* is an attempt to relocate and re-purpose literary narrative in the contemporary times characterized with digital and technological innovation. Reviewing *Enduring Words*, Hila Shachar observes that it "suggests a far more optimistic and complex relationship between literary narrative and other media. Wutz's analysis proposes that the novel not only survives in a post-print world but is also re-imagined in ways that secure its lasting role as a significant form of expression" (382). In fact, Wutz takes a positive view of the change caused on account of IT revolution which is usually pitted against the printed word. Wutz, in fact, observes that there is a "more complex relationship between literature and a changing media ecology" (384). It is quite lasting and needs to be explored keeping in mind complexities of contemporary times.

Technocriticism, as a critical theory remains mindful of the changes in technological arena alongside their impact on the socio-cultural practices. Technocritical discourse challenges and deconstructs essentialist understanding of notions such as human, nature, etc. It may be both "descriptive" (while dealing with cyberculture and science and technology studies alongside history and philosophy of technology) as well as "prescriptive" (in its media criticism, environment ethics, etc) in praxis. Donna Haraway and N. Katherine Hayles have contributed considerably in technocritical scholarship on science studies, and literature and science respectively. Prior to them, Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault also wrote even though marginally about the philosophy of technology. Even today, their perceptions are availed of by technocriticism scholars.

As stated above, in view of the facticity of change in posthuman era caused by changing media environs that seems to have "nudged literature into a meditative niche" (Wutz 25), technocriticism has emerged a new theory of reading/ interpretation. *Modern Fiction Studies* devoted a special issue on articles on "Technocriticism and Hypernarrative" in 1997. In fact, the writings of Katherine Hayle (*Chaos Bound*) and Michael Joyce bring together cyberstudies, literary and cultural studies. Technocriticism views text non-conventionally as it no more follows beginning-middle-end sequence paving way to text that may be re-arranged, transferred and re-

structured on screen. Even the comments on the arrangement/ rearrangement of textual items may be displayed simultaneously anytime alongside viewing other texts. As Trinh T. Minh-Ha aptly writes that the story now does not begins or ends: "It [the story/narrative/text] appears headless and bottomless for it is built on differences. Its (in)finitude subverts every notion of completeness and its frame remains a non-totalizable one. The differences it brings about are differences not only in structure, in the play of structures and of surfaces, but also in timbre and in silence . . . . The story circulates like a gift; an empty gift which anybody can lay claim to by filling it to taste, yet can never truly possess. A gift built on multiplicity" (qtd. in Odin 598). Thus, the narrative has a non-definite/definitive frame. It is built on differential operation of its structures and sub-structures thereby leaving a scope for further intervention by the reader who can fill it to taste given the possibility of display of comments, pages of other texts alongside notes simultaneously as the text is being read on screen.

The technocriticism as a theory views texts as a "*network*" or a "*city of texts*" a la Michael Joyce in *Of Two Minds: Hypertext, Pedagogy and Poetics* (1994). The reader is returned to the same "lexia" (unit) again and again in the branching narrative. Hypertext having opened the possibility of a seemingly absolute flux without ever craving to reach a destination, it is the art of "tracing" and "navigating" which itself is the object/ point of consideration. The "lexias" (units) are in arbitrary succession, disjointed and irregular. "The text and the reader therefore exist *in the in-between zone of transformation*, and navigation" (Nayar 297). Likewise, computer codes, programmed languages offer "flickering signifiers" (Hayles) on screen, and global command can rearrange the whole text proving the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified. Nevertheless, one can go back to a link, "undo" it or "recall" any "lexia" at will. Taking cue from Jayshree K. Odin and Jay Bolter, Nayar further observes that "The text can mutate itself instantly and the reader is part of textual topology. The gaps or "in-between spaces" are the sites of potential where the reader may inscribe her/his body-subjectivity, articulate and also interrupt as s/he traverses along the paths (298).

In view of the above, rapidly changing media impels/enables us to re-think literary text via pushing it into domain of "network of texts" (Bolter)/ hypertext opening the possibility for the reader to choose any path of her/his choice as each is equally valid. In such a scenario, "the reader's relationship to the text changes radically. A text as a network has no univocal sense; it is

a multiplicity without the imposition of a principle of domination" (Bolter 25). Therefore, a different technocritical endeovour is required to re-define/'re-purpose' literary text and at the same time stay critically watchful of this "unrestrained velocity" (Wutz 25) with which the literary narrative is changing and which is computer and media generated. Printed text/ narrative provides us with a temporal latitude and space for reflection which stands in contrast to post-literary forms of information dissemination. If acceleration in the pace of the process of transformation be the defining criterion of the present, printed texts can provide retreat from the above mentioned "unrestrained velocity," which most of us would agree, has challenged/ jeopardized the "meditative mode" (Wutz 25) of enjoying, interpreting, disseminating and critiquing literature. Nevertheless, Jayshree K. Odin, a post-modern literary theorist seems mindful of this dimension as she underscores the need to look into the social, political, and historical strands that interweave the "subject of representation" through hypertextuality. But she underscores a different mode of subject embodiment when she observes that "Techno-enthusiasts have imagined computer-human interaction in cyberspace resulting in disembodiment. It can, however, be seen as a new mode of embodiment marked by moments of instantiation as well as desubstantiation". The "moments of instantiation" and "desubstantiation" suggest about the "changing topology that maps the constantly shifting, interpenetrating, and folding relations that bodies and texts experience in information culture" (Odin 599).

Having moved far from its univocal and closed aesthetic character, literary narrative space has now become multi-vocal, open, non-hierarchical and non-linear on account of constant interaction between the reader and the text. Being virtual in its form, hypertextual reading (to be more precise, tracing/navigating) is devoid of an objective as it is "journey-as-navigation" (Harpold 128) which constantly keeps shaping/ re-shaping the objective temporarily/transiently on account of the fact that the whole process is marked by Derridean deferral, which at one level impedes the penultimate signification, at another paves way for other significations infinitely. In hypertextual environment, thus, it is the reader/navigator on whom the onus lies to read/navigate the lexias placed arbitrarily/randomly in a fragmented and discontinuous manner:

> Series of lexia in hypertext fiction in random sequence produce a textual surface that is fragmented and discontinuous, so that no two readings of such a work are similar. In the

hypertextual environment, the viewers/readers do not disperse along the information superhighway, but are active decoders of the path that they create in a proprioceptive act where inside and outside coalesce in a space constituted of moments of textual embodiment and disembodiment (Odin 601).

Robert Coover in his article on "The End of Books" (1992) calls Michael Joyce's landmark hypertext story, "Afternoon" as "[t]he granddaddy of full-length hypertext fictions." Coover quotes what Michael Joyce wrote in the on-line journal *Postmodern Culture* that hyperfiction "is the first instance of the true electronic text, what we will come to conceive as the natural form of multimodal, multisensual writing" (qtd. in Coover). He finds it hard to decipher what it actually is:

> No fixed center, for starters—and no edges either, no ends or boundaries. The traditional narrative time line vanishes into a geographical landscape or exitless maze, with beginnings, middles and ends being no longer part of the immediate display. Instead: branching options, menus, link markers and mapped networks. There are no hierarchies in these topless (and bottomless) networks, as paragraphs, chapters and other conventional text divisions are replaced by evenly empowered and equally ephemeral window-sized blocks of text and graphics—soon to be supplemented with sound, animation and film (Coover).

Michael Joyce categorizes hypertext into "exploratory" and "constructive hypertexts." The constructive hypertexts "require a capability to act: to create, to change, and to recover particular encounters within the developing body of knowledge . . . . These encounters, like those in exploratory hypertexts, are maintained as versions, i.e., trails, paths, webs, notebooks, etc.; but they are versions of what they are becoming, a structure for what does not yet exist" (Joyce 11). The exploratory hypertexts are devices that help the reader navigate, and thereby, what John McDaid says, "facilitating the exploration of an information space." Whereas in the exploratory hypertexts, the reader still remains in the recipient locale/ "audience mode" (McDaid 214) with distinction remaining intact between what the author does compared to the reader, in constructive hypertexts, the reader is accorded ample space to interact with/ connect to the (hyper)text, thereby responding to it. In this sense, constructive hypertexts are kept open compared to

exploratory ones wherein the possibility of the reader's participation by way of responding/commenting stands minimized.

In hypertextual space, the issue of the construction of the narrator, or reader through radically new mode of reading is crucial. Katherine Hayles insightfully observes in her article on "Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers" that

> The construction of the narrator as a manipulator of codes obviously has important implications for the construction of the reader. The reader is similarly constituted through a layered archeology that moves from listener to reader to decoder. Because codes can be sent over fiber optics essentially instantaneously, there is no longer a shared, stable context that helps to anchor meaning and guide interpretation. Like reading, decoding takes place in a location arbitrarily far removed in space and time from the source text. In contrast to fixed type print, however, decoding implies that there is no original text—no first editions, no fair copies, no holographic manuscripts. . . . What binds the decoder to the system is not the stability of an interpretive community or the intense pleasure of physically possessing the book that all bibliophiles know. Rather, it is her construction as a cyborg, her recognition that her physicality is also data made flesh, another flickering signifier in a chain of signification that extends through many levels, from the DNA that in-formats her body to the binary code that is the computer's first language (89-90).

Thus, the literary text/ narrative which signifies a fixed/static printed text contravenes the textual fluidity in the hypertextual culture, wherein authors keep gathering information and shaping it up into something that is yet to come into being. Readers too, trace their own, newer paths but, the context that constantly keeps emerging takes the whole discourse beyond issues pertaining to continuity and discontinuity thereby rendering the notion of context itself "obsolete" and "redundant" a la Mireille Rosello (133). Odin, however, suggests that it would be better to understand hypertextual space as "an always emergent context of embodiment marked by novelty and creativity. Thus the readers reading in the hypertextual environment are engaged in a "reflexive body writing" characterized by moments of textual embodiment (pattern) as well as disembodiment (randomness) as they trace their own unique path through the weave of multiple texts" (606).

Summing up, it can be averred that consequent upon multiplex developments/ innovations in cyberspace and internet, conventional way of viewing literary text/ narrative has

undergone radical change particularly because the reader is of paramount importance in today's textual topology. Technocriticism as a theoretical mode of interpretation stays choicelessly aware of the changing contours of literary text/ narrative in the hypertextual space so that it can efficaciously negotiate with this unique environment. Benefiting from literary theories such as structuralist, poststructuralist (deconstruction), postmodernist and cultural studies, technocriticism aligns itself with cyberstudies and literary studies to be able to provide us with tools and strategies to deal with this newer phenomenon wherein literary narrative and its criticism have shifted from printed word to on-line mode due to media multiplicity. The hypertextual environment characterized by poststructuralist sense of indeterminacy, multivocality and plurality alongside the postmodernist sense of fluidity, contingency, discontinuity, fragmentation and nonlinearity determine the scope of technocriticism as a theory which blends and benefits from various approaches, perspectives and methods to study, or stay critically watchful of "unrestrained velocity" (Wutz 25) in todays's hypertextual environment and cyberspace not only to re-interpret but also to 're-purpose' literary mode of communication.

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