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THE QUEST FOR LOVE AND BEING IN POSTMODERN CYBER-DOMINANT WORLD:
A CRITICAL STUDY OF ANDREW BLACKMAN'S "CYBER-FICTION A VIRTUAL LOVE"

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to study the probability and place of Love in postmodern era of mass media and the relation between virtual and real world and selves vis-à-vis Andrew Blackman's *cyber-fiction named A Virtual Love* (2013). It is a story surrounding the themes of identity, self, love and trust. The novel shows the protagonist Jeff Brenann's several personas as a caring grandson, a naïve youngster, an angry eco-protestor and a bored IT consultant. The conflict between the real and virtual identities and the place Love holds in this cyberspace will be studied. Whether Marie loves and chooses the blogger Jeff whose ideas she admires or the Jeff she is living with who is very unlike what she had imagined. This complex, illusion-based relationship will be contrasted with the conventional, dependable and reality-based love of Jeff's grandparents. This novel will be studied using the theoretical bases of various thinkers, critics and philosophers like Lacan's 'Mirror stage', Derrida's views on 'Love' and 'Being' and Levinas' concept of 'Other'.

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Postmodern theory poses threat to and questions all that conventional theories took as granted and final. Consumerism, global capitalism and industrialisation have commoditised everything and have changed everything into products with price tags, ready to be bought and sold. Marriage, sex and lust too could not help getting into the realm of this disturbing volcano-like intensive late capitalism. Still, somehow love is yet considered an emotion, an entity that cannot be reduced to a sale or cost price. If this assertion holds true, it makes love all the more precious and valuable as a metaphysical entity that managed to remain untouched by the magnetic power of rabidly growing global capitalism.

But, what is considerable here is that there is an alternative scenario that is equally probable. It is equally plausible that true love is an illusion, a romantic belief beyond the realm of everyday reality. Many thinkers like Jacques Derrida, Levinas and Lacan question the existence of love. Derrida is sceptic about its existence beyond popular romance in the in the world we inhabit. Thus, the concept of love occupies a paradoxical and debatable position in the era of post-modernism.

But before we delve into the critical study of concept of love, it is the 'Being' that needs to be debated upon. The beginning of philosophical thinking is to ponder upon what it is 'to be'. The 'Being' is itself always already divided between the who and the what. Is

'Being' somebody or something? Whoever falls in love or stops loving is held between this division of who and what. In love, one vows to be true to someone singularly, irreplaceably but faces the dilemma that this someone isn't x or y they believed her/him to be and did not have the qualities, properties, characteristics that I thought I'd loved. The imagined, ideal image of the beloved varies from the actual existing being. So fidelity is threatened by the difference between the who and the what.

This difference between the who and what becomes even more crucial and significant in the postmodern era which is caught between the virtual and real world. Mass media and cyberspace have made real-virtual debate and difference so perplexing that one fails to understand which one is more lifelike. In fact, the two are seen as interdependent and undistinguishable by many thinkers and philosophers. The virtual cyberspace turns into real when we begin to experience and dwell in it.

When E.M. Forster and Mengham, In 1909 wrote "The Machine Stops", they predicted about a world where people will cage themselves behind closed doors and depend on machines and screens for communication with the outside world. This prediction in early twentieth century is the reality of today. In the Cyber-world, we physically engage with gadgets and machines to virtually connect with people. Texts, emails, emoticons, video calls have replaced real interactions. We feel a greater need to check our emails, texts, social updates than to be loved and to love. These are the issues on which the novel *A Virtual Love* sheds light.

The multiple virtual identities that we share online confirm to the social rules of the real world. Virtual world images are primarily visual entities that parallel Lacan's Mirror stage, an area that comes prior to symbolic linguistic structures that constitute self and consciousness. Lacan's Mirror stage describes the formation of 'Ideal Ego', that is, how one imagines oneself to be. In Lacan's theory, when the child first sees his image in the mirror, this reflection of self is seen as an external body, feeling both alienated and identified to it at the same time. This fragmented, multidimensional reflected self is similar to our virtual 'avatars' that are identities like and unlike the real us simultaneously. In the age where multiple identities are possible, one fails to see even oneself in entirety and one's idea of a unified 'I' gets distorted. Thus, Evans is correct when he says about the realm of cyber images, "Fragmentation is the truth of Existence" (51).

This holds true for the protagonist Jeff in the novel *A Virtual Love*. A girl named Marie follows the blog of Jeff Brenann, the number one political blogger of the year but faceless and silent about his identity. Marie sees him as an ideal man with opinions she could not agree more of. The novel takes a turn when another regular guy named Jeff Brenann is mistaken to be this blogger. For this Jeff, juggling multiple identities is a way of life. So, this new identity is just another game for him but as they fall in love and start living together, he is forced to leave no tables unturned to maintain this new identity to sustain his relationship with Marie. He gets trapped into self-woven web of lies. The novel shows his several personas as a caring grandson, naïve youngster, the angry eco-protestor and a bored IT consultant.

Andrew Blackman makes use of multiple first-person narratives, addressing different people as 'you' in different chapters, hinting at the fact that our identities are a sum total of how we are perceived by others. It depicts how others are usually seen in bits and parts according to different personas we adapt, without ever seeing the complete picture. Because the characters are always shown through the eyes of other characters without the narrator ever intruding the process, the reader is left to develop one's own judgement. Just like when a child in Lacan's mirror-stage looks in the mirror and "assumes an image" (2), similarly, what we see ourselves or others to be is just a fragmented or partial reflection of us or them.

Jeff finds it usual to maintain different personas on different social sites he maintains and finds it easy to carry all of them without ever wondering which of these his real self is. This truly is the scenario for everyone who is a part of cyberspace. The online virtual identities have become so inevitably a part of us that they seem more real to us than our real, physical self. This is what Jeff's unnamed childhood friend expresses in the following lines about how connected and close she feels to Jeff through the medium of social sites.

We were both hooked up to Skype, so we could see each other and chat just like we were together. I mean, video calls for as long as you want, completely free. ...We had mobiles, emails, instant

messaging. How much more communication do you need? In some ways, it was even more real than real life.... Better than one of us having to get dressed and leave home and drive from one flat to the other, other, then having to stay sober to drive back. Reality's overrated. (46-47)

These lines depict how this virtual world has become more realistic and dependable for today's tech-dependant beings than communicating and sharing face to face. This exactly is the reason why Jeff fails to understand and adapt to the life Jeff's grandparents lead whom he goes to meet every Sunday as they brought him up after his parent's death. Their understanding and concept of time and space does not go with Jeff's fast-paced life

lacking rest and peace. Jeff's grandfather understands this difference and rightly describes Jeff's state of mind when he comes to meet them.

You would always have to be doing something, even if there was no purpose to it. As a child you could never sit still, and as a teenager it was worse. When your parents died and you came to live with us, you said it was as if you had died as well. Our house was boring. We were boring. There was nothing to do. You buried yourself in your computer, and when you were forced to spend time with us, you just kept looking around, waiting for something to happen. (14, 15)

The novel explores the great difference in perceptions between older generation's relative slow paced life and today's instant world where everything seems to be a click away. The post moderns find the older gradually moving world monotonous and meaningless and vice-versa. Blackman has aptly captured both in stark contrast with each other. A critic Relph aptly describes the concept of authentic time and place in his work *Place and Placelessness* to be one which is:

A direct and genuine experience of the entire complex of the identity of places- not mediated and distorted through a series of quite arbitrary social and intellectual fashions about how that experience should be, nor following stereotyped conventions. (64)

If Being and Existence can be categorised as complex and indeterminable, it is inevitable that Love too has lost place and stability in such an order of things. I make use of Derrida's 'hyper-realism', which I apply here to the concept of love by marking off a number of traits of this love, which mark the realm of the hyper-real. When Derrida asserts that the thing itself always slips away, this is asserted in the name of a love of the under constructibility of the wholly other. This wholly other is the one who is the object of love and needs to be kept safe. Levinas has in mind the same thing when he remarks that love "is a relation with that which always slips away" (4). That is why Derrida says that to love means:

To surrender to the other, and this is the impossible, would amount to giving oneself over in going toward the other, to coming toward the other but without crossing the threshold, and to respecting, to loving even the invisibility that keeps the other inaccessible. (74)

This is what Marie experiences when her imagined, ideal image of Jeff does not go with the one she is living with. Tired of making efforts to either make the Jeff whose political ideas she admires on the blog talk about his personal life or to make the real life Jeff share his intellectual ideas, she finally concludes that despite this ambiguity in the personality of Jeff, the comfort and happiness she experiences being with him is not worth losing. This precisely is the reason why she chooses to be with him despite the whole range of doubts that trouble her all the time. She decides not to cross what Derrida sees as a 'threshold' that has to be maintained to respect the other as the other, "respecting, loving even the invisibility that keeps the other inaccessible". (74)

Marie first gets attracted to the blogger Jeff because he reflects the ideas she has been brought up with. He seems to be a reflection of what she had always imagined the ideal to be. Thus, she seems to love not the person Jeff but her own idealistic ideas that she sees in him. This exactly is what Jacques-Alain Miller sees the process of loving to be. According to him, the lover seeks to complete himself, to fulfil the lack s/he has which the other seems to be having the capacity to satisfy. Miller opines, "To really love someone is to believe that by loving them, you'll get to a truth about yourself" (25). Lacan too believes that love provides one

a feeling of self-identification, even if it is illusory. He defines love as, "That is what love is. It's one's own ego that one loves in love, one's own ego made real on the imaginary level." (142)

This ideal image of Jeff fails to match the reality of another Jeff whom Marie gets to know in real life. The virtual image does not coincide with the real image. But it is not only Marie who experiences this real-virtual conflict. Jeff himself is leading a distorted and fragmented life. He is a different person when he is with his grandfather, a different one when he falls in love with Marie. His friends know an altogether different him who dislikes his job and is an active Eco-protestor. Along with these diverse shades of his personality, he maintains various virtual personalities on different social sites. Probably he himself does not know which of these present the actual him. Like every postmodern youngster, he is leading his life in bits and pieces and these parts, even if joined together, cannot present him in entirety because there are huge gaps and contradictions among these multiple selves.

It is thus self-deductive that the probability of love is much less in the times when the object of love is not static, never perceived in its totality. Thus, what one falls in love is just an idea, an illusion that is formed of the other according to the part of them one gets to know. That fragment which is known or shown too can be as unrealistic as the virtual images. Thus, love holds a highly sceptic position in this global, materialistic market. Love either ceased to exist or exists just as an ideal notion which we, the post-modern beings are trying to copy or attain in fragments.

This is what even the ending of the novel suggests as Marie fails to recognise the man whose ideas she observed so closely and rather finds it more convenient to be a part of the created, deceptive world of another Jeff, being conscious all the time that he is not what he had always thought him to be. This personality of Jeff is nowhere close to the thoughts and ideas that made her fall in love with him even without meeting him. Here, however, it also needs to be said that this is what Derrida meant by saying that people often fall in love with the idea of what they think the other person to be. It is the ideas they like that appeal her/him, not the person who holds them, thus contradicting the conventional thoughts about falling in love.

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