

FAN-FICTIONS AND THE ACT OF EVERYDAY: QUEERING SOCIAL MEDIA SPACES

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Abstract

The queer desire to find a home in people and places is a life long journey for many. It is also an everyday process. With the changing times, public spheres have changed and social media spaces have come to the forefront to create a dynamic and ever-changing mass mediated platform. Social media's ability to provide individual and collective space is a part of the larger discourse regarding sexuality. People who are unable to articulate their sexuality or make sense of it because of their heteronormative upbringing are provided with numerous examples and lived experiences that can help with their sense of self. Hegemonic and normative understanding of the world could be challenged through such spaces. When mass media adheres to norms of invisibility, I argue, fan-fictions helps to subvert non-normative sexualities. Queer fan-fictions and its creators are gradually changing the way queer people are represented in the media. Such 'fics' never become part of the canon or the parent text, and are often written according to the reader's likings. The unexplored territories within canonical or popular texts are given nurturing space in fan-fictions. In such an age, fan-fictions become sites for free and democratic representations of queer people and their lives. Though they are not without flaws, in the absence of any other media platform, fan-fictions prove to be the only space which depicts queer people as they are. This paper, therefore, aims to analyse the role of social media in the everyday life of queer women in India through fan fictions, with focus on L Manovich's "Practice of Everyday Life." It also explores the queer desire to find shelter in virtual communities through discourse analysis and how fan fictions, in many ways, offer a feeling of belonging among queer women as it prompts them to write their own stories.

Keywords: Social media spaces, queer women, subversion, fan-fictions, everyday lives.

Introduction

The queer desire to find a home in people and places is a life long journey for many. It is also an everyday process. With the changing times, public spheres have changed and social media spaces have come to the forefront to create a dynamic and ever-changing mass mediated platform. As L Manovich argues "...the details of the everyday lives of hundreds of millions of people who make and upload their media has become public. What was ephemeral, transient, unmappable, and invisible became permanent, mappable, and viewable" (Manovich 324). Digital media's ability to provide individual and collective space is a part of the larger discourse

regarding sexuality. People who are unable to articulate their sexuality or make sense of it because of their heteronormative upbringing are provided with numerous examples and lived experiences that can help with their sense of self. Hegemonic and normative understanding of the world could be challenged through such spaces. At the same time, it is important to note that, disciplining of non-normative bodies is a media tradition; transgender and intersex bodies are constantly scrutinised and bullied in digital spaces. So, subversion is not achieved with such representations. Queer fan-fictions and its creators are gradually changing the way queer people are represented in the media. Such 'fics'

never become part of the canon or the parent text, and are often written according to the reader's likings. The unexplored territories within canonical or popular texts are given nurturing space in fan-fictions. In such an age, fan-fictions become a practice of everyday media lives of queer people. Though they are not without flaws, in the absence of any other media platform, fan-fictions prove to be the only space which depicts queer people as they are. This paper, therefore, aims to explore the queer desire to find shelter and home in virtual communities amidst the phobia and misrepresentation in the other digital platforms.

With new and interactive virtual spaces, queer people's stories are being rewritten. Such spaces which consume every living hour of people can also be carved into a tool to push back against the heteronormative systems of the world. A paradigm shift has occurred in terms of representation, visibility and recognition. It is not a novel idea to argue that social media narratives have brought about a major change in the relationship between the reader and the author. When anybody can be an author the canon is disrupted and through this gap various other voices emerge without the aid of an authority, say a coloniser or a patriarch. The author figures are directly addressed in the platform and are held accountable for their work. Although this is not a foolproof system, the rigid gender constructions are questioned and contested by queer activists and organisations. Instagram and Facebook handles of Vanaja Collective, Dhisha, Queerythm and Queerala are great examples. But what fan fictions bring to the table is completely different. Fan-fictions are the existing textual form of digital media in which people write fictions and their writing is influenced by the readers of said fan fictions. When visual media

adheres to norms of invisibility, I argue, fan-fictions helps to subvert non-normative sexualities.

Methodology

The paper uses discourse analysis to trace the history of fan-fictions and to place it in the contemporary socio-cultural context. The evolution of fan-fictions along with the digital media has brought changes to the format of fan fictions.

Results and Discussions

Queer fan-fictions and its creators are gradually changing the way queer people are represented in the media. Fan-fictions, stories involving fictional characters that are written by fans and often posted on the Internet, are the remaining textual form of social media, and have added more strength to queer visibility all over the world. Richard Berger says. "In the 1960's, a highly sexual and transgressive form of fan-fiction (fanfic), termed "slash fic," would subvert and make homoerotic the heterosexual relationships depicted in the TV series, Star Trek. Later, in the 1990s, the internet would facilitate a boom in these slash writing, as the web provided anonymity coupled with a potentially globalised audience. Slash communities started to form online, and new queer canons have emerged" (Berger 173). Fan-fiction writings provide writers the freedom to portray their loved characters however they want. Such 'fics' never become part of the canon or the parent text, and are often written according to the reader's likings. The unexplored territories within canonical or popular texts are given space in fan-fictions. Fan-fictions in the online media have provided nurturing spaces where the contributor's work is appreciated and given feedbacks. Berger argues that slash writing provides a space where writers can explore and articulate their own sexualities and

identities. The anonymity associated with slash writing also helps the process to run smoothly. Usually, fan-fiction writers are known by nick-names that they give themselves before joining the fandom or fan community. Sheenagh Pugh in her essay “The Democratic Genre: Fan-fiction in a Literary Context,” argues that fan-fictions happen in the gaps between canons, the unexplored or insufficiently explored territories (Pugh 26).

The reception of fan-fictions is majorly from a point of view of queer positions and readings, and the silenced voices in history are given voice through fan-fictions. Earlier fan-fictions were politically subversive and queer portrayals were detrimental to the queer community, later on slash transformed to playful or “carnavalesque” portrayals. In the twenty first century, with searchable databases and archives, fan-fiction sites have become authentic, and tend to reflect on the forms it seeks to comment on. With its place in the web, slash writings have become more pornographic than its earlier versions. “Femslash” or “femmeslash” is the lesbian sub-genre that emerged within fan-fiction writings. All the mainstream fan-fictions promote gay relationships, which are read widely and have more readers than lesbian pairings will have. “It is now perhaps more visible and less subversive, but it still acts as a community for lesbian, gay, and bisexual people; a community that often enacts its transgression and subversion through play, rather than necessarily direct politics” (Berger 183). Fan-fiction archives also produce paintings, cartoons, and ‘gifs’ apart from writings, thus providing a creative and innovative space for the fandom. YouTube videos based on such fan-fictions are also gaining importance, and so, the bleak portrayals of queerness has altered to give space for newer and numerous categories of queer

representation. Though they are not without flaws, in the absence of any other media platform, fan-fictions prove to be the only space which depicts queer people as they are. Thus, it becomes a third space for the marginalised people within queer communities.

Conversations that happen in and around fan fictions should also be considered relevant to this study. Like any other digital media platform, people from all over the world can engage in and comment on the posted text or artwork, for free. Such engagements deviate from the ordinary communication between people as these are non-linear and non-hierarchical, and unlike the other genres of literature, created and consumed free of cost. Therefore, fan fictions are inherently political. Tabitha Carvan argues, “to protect itself and its users from legal action, Archive of our own forbids its fan fiction writers from profiting in any way. Writers aren’t even allowed to link through to digital ‘tips jars’... In addition to the legal limitations, many fan fiction authors defiantly don’t want to earn money from their writing, taking pride instead in the community’s anti-capitalist ‘gift economy’ of exchange and collaboration.” Of course she was talking from the point of view of cisgender women mostly, which is the most spoken about aspect of fan fictions. Many studies, including Tabitha Carvan’s, underplay the role of the LGBTQ youth in the popularity of fan fictions worldwide. For a closeted person in a homophobic society, such sites allow a place for bringing out the queer cross-identifications and not being judged. People sometimes fail to understand that the perspective of the queer people and queer communities are involved in creating the space queer-friendly. So, in order to understand fan fictions, we have to detangle it from its cisgender chains. “Fandom is not only a

subversive space in which binary gender categories are imagined as permeable but also a space in which identities transcending the binary are made visible and, thus, possible. If fandom is opposed to hegemony and the regimes of the normal, then it shouldn't be just subject to binary labelling. The labelling of this space as "female space" will invisibilise the majority of the fans," argues Jennifer Duggan. The idea of fandom had a bloom recently because of K Pop and other musical bands. These fandoms are a welcome space for all genders, especially women to talk about their sexuality and desires without shame. Fan fictions paved the way for this phenomenon, in a way.

Conclusion

The form or the format of fan fictions in this digital world stands out from the other social media platforms in many ways. It is to be noted that academics, particularly, have a tendency to keep certain genres as higher forms of literature "such as youth media, activist media, and political mashups, which are indeed important but do not represent more typical usage by hundreds of millions of people." (Manovich 321) There are fan fictions of different kinds and like any genre of literature, there are some not so good fan fictions, too. People assume that because of the unusualness of the genre, the quality of the text is subpar. Academicians and researchers in Humanities tend to look down upon fan-fiction writing because of its genre. When people argue that fan fiction, as a genre, is not authentic, they are endorsing the mainstream heteronormative view that people who can publish have to be cisgendered men or women. The cost of the book and its acceptance by publishers and readers are all based on this. It is of great importance for trans and gender queer people, especially young people, find

stories that upturn the accepted social body images and respective narratives and also to know that their existence as who they are is addressed and acknowledged without it being accompanied by shame or guilt. The hierarchy that existed between the author and the reader and their subsequent relationship and availability is here to stay, to say the least. In the current scenario, a large number of Indian youth is heavily invested in fan fictions as readers and writers. Literature departments are unaware of the wealth of writings that come from the young generation of writers and their influence on the queer community. People who had valorised readership among young people are neglecting to learn about the role of author function in today's world through fan fictions. Fan fiction sites have become place for comprehending the various aspects of queer lives which may not be discussed in other self narratives in social media. The genre of fiction helps in detangling the complexities of queer identities. This need for fan fictions, as argued before, comes from the absence of queer characters in the mainstream media and literature. TV shows are riddled with queer baiting and representation there is only a feeble attempt at glorifying the queer community without going into the details. These repeatedly used shallow storylines have made it impossible for queer people to present themselves freely and not be overshadowed by straight upper caste white characters. The characterisation of queer characters is universalised without taking into consideration the layers of identity an individual has.

Queer portrayals in the mainstream shy away from addressing the caste-class complexities without humour. In the name of representation, they inevitably present the stereotypical loud gay man with a lot of money and flamboyance. Movies, especially, refuse to spend time on learning

sexuality, thus, the mainstream is erasing a large section of the society and their life stories. Life stories of people are erased because of under/misrepresentations and erasure of cultural history. This linear portrayal messes up the external realities of queer people and their lived experiences to a great extent. Accurate representations of queer bodies are becoming scarce, in spite of social media revolution. The need for authoritarian governments to control social media platforms is testimony to their need to control sexuality in public spheres. Unlike other media, digital space and its role in visibilising or invisibilising queer bodies is far-reaching and impactful. Fan fictions, therefore, are digital tools which help in making queer bodies visible and provide a space and a community to call home.

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