
**FORMATIONS OF CULTURE, IDENTITY AND RESISTANCE IN ONLINE
SOCIAL NETWORKS**

Dr. Lakshmi Priya N

Assistant Professor

Mahatma Gandhi College

Thiruvamnathapuram

Kerala,India

Abstract

Online social networking created a new world order where distances got evaporated and new ideas of human interactions sprout up. The cyber space provided an other space/alternate space with its own multifarious ways of functioning. Even when concrete boundaries of race, nationality, class and caste melted, new abstract gatherings of multitudes were formed within the new social scenario. Cyberculture, as a genre of subculture though liquid modern in its performance, had a politics of its own. The study focuses on the paradigm shift that happened in the personal and public portrayals of the socio political everydayness with the coming of the new age online networking. The paper was attempted to bring in to notice the subtle expressions of subjectivity and identity formations that one often leaves unnoticed or taken for granted. The paper also intends to make visible the power the scattered networks share so as to bring down government and design ever new formations of resistance, culture and everyday. The scope of the study is its contemporary relevance even after almost a decade of the inception of social sites. Everyday new formations of culture and knowledge get formed in the virtual spaces

giving ever organic realities of historically lived spaces of everyday.

Key Words- Online Social Networking, Virtual Reality, Cultural Formation, Resistance, Hyper real

Culture, with its possibilities of manifold readings, has always been a crucial space where manifestations of power relations of knowledge/culture formation get performed. The most alluring and fast spreading pattern of new age socio- cultural and inter-personal interaction is undoubtedly the fenceless, vibrant, seductive and hued panorama that the possibilities of the internet put across. Among the web links that spread worldwide, the emergence of the varied social media is the most profound outcome among all virtual innovations. The innovative range of virtual realities that the system of online networks provides makes it quite different from the already existing modes of electronic media where we are always at the receiving end. Social media provides opportunities for mutual interaction and feedback-updates with its immense by lanes of social book marking, social news, social networking, social photo and video sharing and wikis which provide platforms for debate and

discussions where each one is a participant contributor.

The 21st century networked co-existence has resulted in the emergence of networked society where societal and new media networks converge to form new virtual spaces of individual as well as collective living. Manuel Castells in an interview observes, “The definition, if you wish, in concrete terms of a network society is a society where the key social structures and activities are organized around electronically processed information networks...” A networked society mirrors, showcases and inhabits all levels of socio cultural, personal, political changes resultant of the networked digital interactions and innovative communication technologies.

Online interactions share the nature of a hypertext where relations, like information on screen, are linked to one another and spread like a network. The earlier one to one human correspondence which led to the flowering of personal relations has now changed to a different mode of acquiring a relation. Like computers being interconnected through networks human beings are also connected as networks. David Bell in his text *Cyberculture Theorists* shares his ideas of the shift from human to a machine world when he observes, What are the limits of the human in cyberspace, and can these be transcended, may be by becoming posthuman? [...] the idea that either (i) the human species is at an evolutionary dead-end, and must incorporate technologies in order to evolve to the ‘next level’; or (ii) that we have long ceased to be human, because of our increasingly intimate

relationships with non-humans, such as technological artefacts (24)

Among the multiple representations of the new media, online social networking has become the most popular form of new media. The websites used for online Social Networking are called social sites where multitude of interests and disparities merge to form vibrant virtual communities. Virtual communities form “when people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships.”(xx) Observes Howard Rheingold in the introduction of his book *The Virtual Community*. Social networking sites have generated a new virtually experienced dressed up globe for itself where ethnicity, race, colour and creed dissolve in a shared screen space where we find a select neo-global population over flowing in to each other and thereby invoking a separate exclusive mode of life and living. This newfound virtual world surpasses all the hitherto defined alleys of theoretical binary strands of centres and margins. The trajectories of established/marginalized cultural representations down the centuries have crossed divergent paths of oral, written, print, visual and presently to this fenceless and binary less arena of virtual reality. The new found world order keeps up with the concept of ‘global village’ shared by Marshall McLuhan where in technology revamps the entire world to a village spanning personal and political. Within this neo-global screen space that is being shared by mutual interest groups relations are developed like whirlpool, spreading

globally with contents and interest which can also be exclusively local in nature.

Social networking sites are dynamically positioned arenas where people vibrantly participate in the ongoing renderings of social interactions. It's a screen-street of give and take space with its diversity of populace and perceptions. Social networks inhabit a dome which lies beyond the concepts of reality and virtuality. It's in a way a blend as well as a rupture of what both the terms intended to outlay. Derrida's use of a pair of neologism, "artificiality" and "actuvirtuality" at the beginning of the book *Echographies of Television* can well be applied in the reading of this innovative network space as well. The concept of virtual reality has shed the gown of interlaced virtuality and reality on an abstract level. Rather, it has embarked on a new age mode of absolute reality ties that are discovered and nurtured virtually. The virtual-scape overshadows the geophysical tangible socio-cultural environment as an 'authentic' dependable showground for social interaction and cultural formation. With the emergence of these 'virtual diasporas' a tremendous shift has happened in the individual as well as collective outlook (socio cultural) and being ness (personal/political). The screen space becomes the pasture where the new age patterns of cultural formations are created and reflected.

The social halo that the networks claim to exhibit is a coming together of men and manners crossing geopolitical and socio cultural hinder lands. It's a new world of networked labyrinths to which

one belongs to so much so that the members regularly spent and share much of their life detailing, routines, perceptions and attitudes in this virtual space. The communities derail the spatial neighbourhood concept while it builds up a virtual neighbourhood spanning land and race. The virtual generation with its new found social kinships redefine social roles and relations. The concept of community life moves away from geographically constructed neighbourhood to virtually experienced compatibility spanning generations and generalizations. Shirley A. Fedorak in her book *Pop Culture:the Culture of Everyday Life* observes, "The computer-mediated communication has led to the encroachment of virtual space (cyber space) in to physical space. As such the concept of community as a physical space is becoming less and less relevant" (54)

But even then it's a separatist approach of communities; as the virtual communities are formed and shared under selective frames of personal likes and tastes. The populace who share the web of a particular community gives rise to a differently bordered spatial 'land' which incorporates only a select few thereby fragmenting the globe to multiple pores of connectivity. The 20th century economically segmented haves and have-nots populace is replaced by 21st century technologically segmented in-home and out-home existence within social networking. A new sect, a different generation across birth dates, skin colours and constructed nations is being imagined in to existence forming a virtually "imagined community" whose borders are

blurred and relations/networks are fluidic that could be easily crisscrossed with a single mouse click.

The new found forms of social interaction will reflect the corresponding cultural makeovers. Networking and online social interaction and personal representation itself becomes the contemporary cultural marker or individual cultural positioning. An active participant of the social sites belongs to a particular virtually alive/present cultural group in contrast to others moving a few steps behind, blissfully ignorant of the new age electronic ramifications of cultural production and exchange. The cultural positioning that these networks represent reflects a multi-cultural souk where diverse cultural patterns crisscross and overlap one another globally and locally in this virtually shared space. The groups and internal communities within such social sites, in which those involved join, is a manifestation of their socio-cultural representations/belongingness.

The culture-halo-positions the individuals identify within specific groups of belongingness through internal communities are mini realizations of their individual as well as collective roots of traditionally wrought out cultural identity markers. Yet within the lively field of online social networking the 'tradition' hangover that has been thrust upon culture shades through these internal communities is over shadowed by the popular, fast moving and desirable instincts of contemporary cultural life. The rapid diversities that the sites provide and the ensuing participation of the members

redefine formal understanding of pent-up 'culture' to be one that is more popular in nature, a common place everyday reality and a time consuming routine in a social network.

The self-portraits projected through these social networking sites seems to be the most dynamic and diverse depiction of presentation artefact of webbed networks. It's a manipulated space where multiple selfhoods, personal and social, are created and re-created. Throughout the personal as well as social interactions shifting subject positions

(intended/projected/hidden/disguised) are created/manipulated upon the politics of visibility/virtuality and designs of spatiality. It's a maneuvered space where multiple selfhoods, personal and social, are created continuously. The representation/production of 'self' and the 'other' in such networked sites seems to be multiple and deferral in nature; esp. in situations where ones identity can be faked. A lot many manifestations of the self (represented and repressed) ironically remain invisible or masked within this very notion of virtual visibility. A person's identity no longer depends in a corporal, solid, tangible makeover. s/he rather get detached from every sense of 'factuality' and 'actuality' and go for a self-representation of "artificiality" and "actuavirtuality". An online page, wikipedia, shares that the idea of "Disembodiment" in identity formation in a social site. "...once the user is online, the need for the body is no longer required, and the user can participate separately from it. This ultimately relates to a sense

of detachment from the identities defined by the physical body.”

Each person will have accounts in different social sites through which they share their personal, emotional, ideological and creative self. The mode of representation can be entirely different in each site. There are also situations where a single person will have multiple profiles within a social site. Such situations prop up questions regarding reality and representation which is the shrewdest challenge one faces with regard to the credibility criteria within such networks. In an article titled “Social Networks blur reality and representation” Anna Roitman comments, While aware of the many advantages of the social networks, and being an active user myself, I can not refrain from wondering about reality and the representation of it in those networks. The page contains the name and picture of a person that I seem to know, but is the representation of him or her the way they choose to do it on their web page or is it their true self? Moreover, these networks have driven information from reality into the virtual world and it is popping back into reality many times. (www.thecommentfactory.com)

Keeping in pace with Baudrillard, these representation can be viewed as varied manifestations of culture and media that tend to claim a supposed reality. Within a network they have a hyper-real existence of third order simulacra where all reality is replaced by signs of endless simulation. The only choice seems to be to view the virtual space as a place of free play where multiple selfhoods, real or

fake, crisscross over one another. It’s an entirely innovative mode of virtuality where interactions get shifted to be with ideas, attitudes and perceptions (flowing freely and abstractly) rather than with tangible selfhoods with concrete and consistent makeovers. The notion of the presence of the self has become so much brittle and fluidic in nature that within a social network site it is now possible to disappear and to abort oneself all of a sudden and get reborn according to ones will.

Within this free play of selfhoods created and recreated we find a total absence of a binary upon which a selfhood is defined. It’s not a person’s relation with the world around that defines his/her self. But rather the self is in a fluidic state where mini realizations of existence overlap one another. The self is expressed as well as repressed simultaneously. The virtual re- presentation/identity of a person wholly depends up on and celebrates this liberty to project, promote, mask or disguise the self. An online article: ‘Identity Construction and Self Representation in Facebook observes. The way people represent themselves in the virtual and physical worlds has similarities and differences.

Thus, online networking spaces are sites where people may construct and share their identities, rather than being just a platform where one “keeps in touch.”

This multifaceted possibility of self-networking has naturally given rise to varying modes of psychological ramifications which gets reflected in the general concerns and

confusions relating to online identity, online relationships, issues of privacy, social interaction, risk factor and the like. Cyber psychology deals with similar issues rapidly on the rise, especially in social sites. Online psychological behavioural pattern of the members very much depends up on the trust, security, easiness, risk, deception and privacy which get reflected in relation to the representational dualities of authenticity and deception, expression and repression, naturalness and manipulation.

Within social sites life is presented in a nutshell on screen, tagged to random routines of social networking, thereby sketching new pathways of human cultural formation. The chronicles of social networking, the most popular current communication medium, have shaped the way the contemporary world thinks and behaves. The decade old subculture genre has established itself as the most dynamic segment of popular culture. Shirley A. Fedorak's observation on popular culture as possessing its own power; generating political commentary and activism, mirroring changing social values and societal practices, resisting mainstream hegemonies, and even influencing the way we understand the world around us is exactly applicable to this innovative mode of social interaction that positions it as an undeniable segment of popular culture. The new medium rules and defines our senses, shape and reflect our cultural positioning and identity formation and opens up fields of resistance and alternate 'realities' thereby establishing it as the most powerful and dynamic method of

contemporary socio-cultural representation.

Each social site and each individual involved is in themselves a narrative in their attempts to find personal as well as collective voices of self-representation. Social networking proves to be a place where shades, ethnicities, nationalities and geo politics dissolve and disparities co-exist. Its claim to be a new found world order makes it move a step forward from all sorts of mini pockets of existing hall marks of resistance based on race and class and creates benchmarks of a new mini realities and resistances sprouting in a virtual space. Social networks place itself against deconstructed centres and margins. It claims to be a place of no binaries where selves and representations reflected, created, confused and manipulated are always in a fluidic free play. It's a place where multiplicities, both personal and political merge outside the binaries of high and low. It gives birth to a new globe where the human races shed individual halos and belong as a 'body' less/single bodied multitude. A disembodied figure less 'figure' exists as a collective thought or for a collective cause. Michael Hardt's and Antonio Negri's concept of multitude propagated through the text with the same name observes the concept thus, As a first approach we should distinguish the multitude at a conceptual level from other notions of social subjects, such as the people, the masses, and the working class.

The multitude, in contrast is many. The multitude is composed of innumerable internal differences that can never be

reduced to a unity or single identity-different cultures, races, ethnicities, genders and sexual orientations: different forms of labour; different ways of living; different views of the world and different desires. The multitude is a multiplicity of all these singular differences [...] in the multitude, social differences remain different. The multitude is many coloured [...] thus the challenge posed by the concept of multitude is for a social multiplicity to manage to communicate and act in common while remaining internally different.

This notion of an all-inclusive mode of co-existence and the new world order that it perpetuates has resulted in dashing currents of diverse, magnificently blended mode of claiming life within the virtual territory. The human race that gathers in this space-less neo-global 'screen space' etch a history that reshapes the contours of power defined by the 'empires'. Along with information and entertainment such social media has recently proved to be the harbingers of socio-political deluges, toppling down power structures and causing riots and revolutions. Accurate and specific information and updates shared through social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter ignited the vast spread of collective resistance and revolts against the autocrats in the Middle East. Social media acted as a catalyst in the all-encompassing revolts bringing together the masses across streets and borders to collective thoughts of resistance.

The multitude gathered on screen and walked out in to the streets demanding change and asserting their self and claims of freedom. The Tunisian *Jasmine Revolution* that started with minor street protests in SidiBouزيد following the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in response to the violation of his basic survival right by the officials gave a head start to the chain of resistance movements that soon spread the entire territory. Resistance attempts were initially blocked by the authorities by blocking websites and arresting the activists. But the online social networks, blogs and news sites gave a boost up by updating current information of the protests. These screen spaces became a central location for dispatching information about locations and plans of protests, places to share video footage of what was going on in the streets, and gathering public opinion and support. Online activism started with the hash tag, #SidiBouزيد that spread along Twitter to places within and beyond the Middle East. An article posted in the Atlantic summarizes the situation thus,

"People had protested in the streets before. Revolution had been in the air. It wasn't clear that this time would be different..... One early sign that Tunisians felt Facebook could be useful: Back in July, bloggers Photoshopped a picture of Mark Zuckerberg to show him holding up a sign that read, "Sayeb Sala7, ya 3ammar," the slogan for a freedom of expression campaign late in 2010.

The promise of the social media to filter a sense of togetherness and revolutionary solidarity was later carried

on to the rise of Egyptian Revolution toppling down the throne of Hosni Mubarak. The means, method and the outcome of the *Jasmine Revolution* that went ahead gave the impulse for Egypt's *Lotus Revolution*. The public brutal murder of a youngster named Khalid Mohammed Saeed by two members of the state police triggered public unrest which gradually caught fire, esp, thru online networks and finally blew up the government. Photos of Khalid Saeed's disfigured corpse spread through online communities. A page titled 'We are all Khalid Saeed' was launched in Facebook by Google Marketing Executive, WaelGhonim where millions from entire globe gathered to kindle their fortitude of resistance and self-wrought revolutions. WaelGhonim commented on the race of networked correspondence in CNN thus, "this revolution started... in June 2010 when hundreds of thousands of Egyptians started collaborating content. We would post a video on Facebook that would be shared by 60,000 people on their walls within few hours. I have always said that if you want to liberate a society just give them the internet." Along with such networking sites correspondence was carried along other sources like text messaging, blogs, YouTube etc. The virtual space initiated a deluge of population from every walk of life. Social network interactions had a sensitive togetherness feel when compared to other electronic mode of sharing like blogs or YouTube where one's self is almost blurred. Whereas social networking profiles gave a more concrete, though fluidic, idea of an individual and his/her individual and collective causes through its

methods of sharing, discussions, photo and video sharing and general participation for the common man.

The difference of control and ownership between the old media and the new media was the major reason why such a track of resistance was made possible. The old media like radio or television are more controlled by the government and therefore not a tool of mass upheaval against the power holders. The new media on the other hand, i.e., the internet, is largely controlled by the people. Though the government can occasionally ban its use or specific websites, its reach is more global and individualistic. Ever since its inception social sites function not only as virtual spaces of cultural formation but also as modes and spaces of resistances and awareness that gathers momentum according to the need of the hour. If Jasmine Revolution was the first of the sort, today ever new pathways of resistance and visibility are claimed throughout the globe through these sites of online interaction. The crowd flows from within the screen space to the streets demanding rights and justice. Social sites have become an organic reminder for the state of the way in which the people would like them to be governed. The policies and prospects the state puts forward are largely affected by the multitude and their assertive collectivity. Pierre Levy in his book *Cyberculture* observes, "Technology is responsible for neither our salvation nor our destruction. Always ambivalent, technologies project our emotions, intentions and projects into the material world."(xv) Culture has always been a problematic term with its ability to read

through and reflect the societal hegemonies. The shifts and patterns of societal and technological evolution carries with it the story of multifarious cultural formations and vice versa.

When life shifts from physicality to virtuality and back we tread new pathways of living coloured by multiple intertwined layers of existence /survival/resistance/assertion histories that form the ever rolling represented social cultural markers. In this virtual-sphere the current power dominance of vertical hierarchy positioning are eroded by horizontally scattered hyperlinked networks; on screen and off screen. The shift of socio-cultural individualistic and collective existence and innovative methods of interaction and co-existence brought about a revolutionary change of perceptions, attitudes, ideas and approaches to life and living.

The everyday life of a generation became so popular and fluidic that borders and binaries blurred and a new self-conscious civil society came in to being. This in turn led to politically charged up revolutions that presently sketch histories of their own. The new age social media has redefined the age old concepts of neighbourhood, community, nationalism, togetherness, sharing, collective gathering, resistance, revolutions and the like. The abstract 'space' of virtuality replaces all the hitherto defined landmarks of technological innovations and resultant socio-cultural, political and territorial ideas and modes of understanding. We are left on the ground wondering and gazing magnificently at the mesmerizing current

of webbed links and its immense possibilities in the infinite virtual skies brought about by the enormous leap of life and claims of survival and resistance that the nowhere positioned networks of virtual realities leads and lightens up to us. This metaphor of the virtual skies is probably the exact way of approaching the virtual networks where the notion of time and space and fixities are fluidic, that know no boundaries and possibilities skip and shift scope and labyrinths.

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