FROM EXISTENTIAL ANGST TO VIRTUAL EXISTENCE:

NEW MEDIA HAND OUT THE CHANGE

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Abstract: Way back in 1943, T. S. Eliot in The Four Quartets observed that: "Humankind cannot bear very much reality." Just a year earlier, in Albert Camus's novel The Outsider (1942), the protagonist Monsieur Meursault had come to accept 'the gentle indifference of the universe'. As modernism slipped over into postmodernism, and postmodernism went from strength to strength, technology offered man a peculiar way-out of the 'indifference' of the universe and of its inhabitants towards one another, without having to bear 'very much reality'. This was the virtual reality – a life-like milieu created by computer-based connectivity. From 'global village' man moved into a networked arena which does not even have the territorial implication meant by the word 'village'. It is pertinent to explore the social, psychological, economic and cultural implications of this ever-increasing fascination with virtual existence, and how this amorphous form of existence has radicalized the sense of identity, accomplishment and togetherness. As 'reality' is 'disrealised' and 'non-reality' is 'real-ised', a day can possibly be envisaged when 'I surf, therefore, I am' is going to be the latest premise of human existence!

Key-words: Facebook, Video-games, Reality, Community, Participation, Consciousness, Show-off, Gaze, Homogenization, Pseudo-Utopian

New media is indeed new; its pervasive impact is a post-2000 phenomenon and its expansion is still far from complete. Most of us have witnessed its rise in our lifetime. Tim Barness Lee invented the World Wide Web in 1989; Google, the search-engine, was launched in September, 1998; there was no such thing called Facebook prior to the February of 2004; and Twitter came into existence only in 2006. When we use the term 'new media', we obviously do it in contrast to the 'old media' – newspapers, magazines, radio, cable television, movie et al. Aside from the near-omnipresent connectivity, one big benefit of the 'new media' over the 'old media' is that it makes the populace more of participants rather than receivers, thereby giving a sense of empowerment to the users which the old media hardly did. One's letter to the editor of a newspaper may not be published, but if one writes a blog, nobody is going to prevent one from doing that. The new media is thus 'democratic' in a truer sense. However, this participatory experience goes beyond mere expression of opinion. It enters into myriad arenas of sharing photos, video-clips, anecdotes, and making friends and breaking virtual game-challenges with just mouse and key-board, thereby building up alternative social scaffolding. And in a capitalist framework, where people throng, so do the market players, bringing economic transactions, buy and sale, advertisements. The new media has created an entire market of its own, along with opening up a new vista for traditional products. The virtual existence offered by the new media is thus not only social and cultural, but also economic and commercial.

It is interesting that the new media incorporates within itself a sizeable part of the 'old media'. Newspaper and magazine editions are available online. TV news-channels have created their own web-sites and even created 'like' pages on Facebook. Films – even black-and-white ones – can be streamed on YouTube. Just as post-modernism is at once a continuation of and reaction against modernism, so also the 'new media' is both a radical departure from and a continuity of the 'old media'. In any case, the new media has shaped our lives 'new'. Real friends have been complemented – and sometimes substituted – by virtual friends; face-to-face chat has given way to online chat; bats and balls and socks have been left in cupboard while keyboard and joystick allow entry into the intriguing world of video-games. It is a peculiar blend of individual aloofness and interactivity. It is a sense of togetherness without having to go through the hazards and responsibilities demanded by real-life friends and folks. It is about getting close, but not too close; holding friendships at suspension and acquaintances at a handy distance. The post-modern fellows have found a peculiar mechanism of mitigating the Arnoldian anguish: 'We mortal millions live alone'!

The virtual existence riding on the new media needs to be analysed vis-à-vis our humdrum existence in our quotidian life. The prime fascination for the virtual existence, especially social media, is profoundly psychological. 'Existence' normally entails a physical presence. Virtual existence is one such existence where one is paradoxically both 'there' and 'not there'. To borrow expressions shamelessly from Shakespeare, it is 'an airy nothing', but given 'a local habitation and name', it assumes an undeniable presence. The options of logging in and logging out -- opportunities of entry and exit at any opportune or disadvantageous moment – offer a sense of ease and assurance which is hardly available in the world of brick and mortar. The new media prompts us to interact with people whom we would not have probably talked to, if we met each other face-to-face. In his book *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* Michael Heim writes: "Virtual community seems a cure-all for isolated people who complain about their isolation. Locked in metal boxes on urban freeways, a population enjoys socialising with fellow human through computer networks." The world of virtual reality is indeed 'metaphysical', not in the sense that it transcends physicality, but in the sense that it effectively bypasses physicality. In the online world, one would not face the nervous tension that the eponymous character in T. S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* encountered in 1915. Nearly a hundred years later, a Prufrock-like figure has the privilege to make stealthy steps into the hushed corridors of not-so-few dubious corners of the labyrinth called internet without any unformed fear. To go back to Michael Heim, he writes in *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*: "Virtual realism parts with realism pure and simple. Realism often means lowered expectations. "Being realistic" often implies reducing or compromising ideals." One wonders whether Keats' flight on 'the viewless wings of poesy' in his celebrated poem *Ode to a Nightingale* – in today's world – has its counterpart in wandering across the networked horizon. Perhaps the word 'forlorn' sometimes rings in the netizens' ears as well, prompting them to log off the virtual world. Oriental philosophy often calls life 'maya' or an 'illusion', and we now require the comforting illusion of virtual world to sustain the illusion called 'life'!

In Samuel Beckett's 1953 landmark play *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon asks Vladimir: "Do you think God sees me?" The underlying angst is that if God does not see us, we live merely in the eyes of one another. In Beckett's another play *Happy Days*, Winnie can bear her existence in sand-pile, provided 'Someone is looking at me still.' In fact, being viewed by others is a necessary part of our basic sense of identity. Social media offer an easy way to grab others' eyes in an unprecedented way – a way unavailable either to Estragon or to Winnie. Facebook always gives the impression that one is being watched by many others, even if exactly who and how many people are watching remain pleasantly ambiguous. Interestingly, Facebook also potentially offers the complementary pleasure – the pleasure of a voyeur. Thanks to the access to the profile of numerous users, one has the pleasure of viewing other people without being 'caught' to be watching. Facebook thus offers everyone the feeling that s/he is winning the contest of 'gaze'. It allows people to be seen and heard the way they want to be seen and heard. The operational motto is 'seeing is believing'. One does not have to put one's entire personality under scanner. However, this same advantage makes the Facebook world slippery, as other users are also operating from behind a carefully constructed persona. It is a pseudo-Utopia where technological interactivity assumes the implications of life. A report on

Facebook-obsession in the leading Bangla daily The Anandabazar Patrika dated 05.01.2014 quotes the eminent sociologist Ashis Nandy as saying: "There is no society. There is no family. Lonely people are, therefore, looking for family on Facebook." With increasing urbanization and dispersal of people across regions and countries for livelihood, Facebook has created a space for coming in serious and casual touches with known and not-so-well-known faces. The Facebook-obsession has other aspects as well. As the report rightly suggests, it is also a narcissistic phenomenon, providing a feeling of 'mini-celebrity' status. It is also about, to borrow the Eliotian expressions, striking a balance between 'expression of personality' and 'escape from personality'. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus rues 'the divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting' to be the essence of existential angst. In the virtual world man gets to create, construct, or at least choose, his own 'setting'. With its 24 x 7 presences and relentless pour-over of visual, audio-visual and typed scraps, virtual existence is like a stability in flux. If anything brings fatigue to this existence, it is not emptiness, but abundance.

The new media is ostensibly democratic, egalitarian and non-hierarchical. It offers unbarred access to anyone and everyone. Seen thus, it almost appears benignly socialist. However, the 'new media literacy' is still quite low in most countries, even as the size of people having internet access is steadily increasing. According to a PTI report of September, 2013, which cites a study by the research firm Juxt, there are 14.32 crore internet users in India. However, India's population is currently more than 1.2 billion. Studies also show that most internet users in India are male, middle class and young. So existence in the virtual world is also about existence amidst a particular class and section of people. Furthermore, the free flow of information on internet is being hindered by commercial strategy. Many contents on internet allow a miniscule preview, demanding money for the entire text, thus compromising with the basic assumption of free-flowing information. Even Facebook, which commendably proclaims: "It's free and always will be", is becoming less than egalitarian, with its increasing conversion into a place of show-off. Joshua Heller in his blog *How Facebook Killed Orkut in Brazil* comes close to calling 'selfie-s', i.e. one's pictures taken by oneself, 'digital analogue' to plastic surgery. Heller writes here: "Users upload glamour shots of themselves….They post updates about their exciting lifestyles….Social networkers are editing their autobiographies to curate ideal versions of the self." A show of socio-economic status is quickly taking the Facebook world toward the suffocating material world. Even virtual existence is far from the banes of swelling of ego. Wherever man moves, he is in the habit of making the place typically quotidian. To add to this, the Facebook world is getting increasingly politicised in the literal sense. In India, major political parties are taking to social media to reach out to the public, especially the youth. Heavyweight political leaders have created their own Facebook profiles to convey their views. Thus virtual existence is no longer free from mundane political power-play. The virtual existence is not blissfully apolitical by any stretch of imagination. Virtual existence is, therefore, an engagement with life in a different mode.

A cause of concern served by the virtual existence is the possibility of homogenization of culture. An amalgam of multifarious people is toeing the same paradigm of projection. The linguistic effect of virtual existence also deserves discussion. English has been the predominant language of computer and internet. Hence it is no surprise that the language of communication in the virtual world is overwhelmingly English. At best, native languages are struggling to fit their pronunciations into the alphabet of English, leading to extensive use of hybrid language-forms. It would require a separate study to appreciate fully to what extent the internet and our virtual existence are contributing to the subversion of major Indian languages. However, one thing is for sure; the new media has reinforced the hierarchization of native languages vis-à-vis English and the diminished status of the former.

Interestingly, it is not just adolescents and adults who find themselves attached to the virtual world, but also children. For them, it is primarily the video games. In a sense, computer-based video-games have taken the place that fairy-tales used to take to children of earlier generations. Today's children listen less to fairy-tales of monsters and princess; instead, they are busy to kill the 'virtual' monster with a 'virtual' axe and 'marry' the 'virtual' princess. One wonders whether the feminists have a cause to fight here as well. In *TheSecond Sex* Simone de

Beauvoir complains that in fairy-tales women are held captive; men come and rescue them. Beauvoir writes in *Childhood*, the opening chapter of Part IV *The Formative Years*: "Woman is the Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Snow White, she who receives and submits. In song and story the young man is seen departing adventurously in search of woman; he slays the dragon, he battles giants; she is locked in a tower, a palace…." The same stereotype is largely maintained in the arena of video-games as well. Most video-games offer children the scope to sharpen the basic instinct to dominate and control. One no longer wants to read about or listen of the heroes; one wants to 'play' the hero with a hearty aggression. It gives a sense of accomplishment one always craves for but does not easily find in the 'real' reality. Hence, children are often happier with their online lives. And it also probably has its function in conditioning children to 'perform' – a demand that post-modern capitalist and commodity-driven society constantly makes. After all, if the motto of Shakespeare's *King Lear* is 'ripeness is all', if the motto of *Hamlet* is 'readiness is all', the bottom-line of modern world is 'performance is all'. The video-games adolescents and grown-up people play give a sense of power in a more sophisticated way. If it is a football-game, one can even buy clubs, change footballers, act as manager of the clubs, choose the play-ground, and even choose the referee. It gives a feeling of omnipotence; the gamer is all-powerful in that arena of game. It also gives numerous choices which 'real' world rarely gives. It is a never-never land moulded so thoroughly upon reality that it seems 'realler' than 'real'. In the 'real' world, one at times feels helplessly helpless like Kafka's protagonists, but the virtual world never makes one feel helpless. The simulated world, unlike the mundane world, is at one's mercy.

In Samuel Beckett's 1953 cult-text *Waiting for Godot* – a play that encapsulates man's dreary existence in a dreary world -- Vladimir and Estragon, the two tramps, famously complain: "Nobody comes. Nobody goes. It's awful". One is tempted to wonder whether sixty years down the line in today's world they would take refuge to the virtual arena, making a lot of things 'happen' in the online world. Isn't the virtual world an attempt also to keep in abeyance the silence and emptiness that bring ontological angst to one's mind? Another question at hand is: 'What should be the status of this virtual existence?' when the first wave of modernism lashed, the so-called 'objective reality' depicted in the Victorian times was questioned. Modernist ethos put an emphasis on human consciousness. Virginia Woolf famously declared in her 1921 essay *Modern Fiction*: "Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged. Life is a luminous halo." If there is no such 'objective' reality, if it is consciousness that constructs the 'reality', the virtual existence is not as ethereal as it is sometimes held. In any case, the quest for connectedness – the epigraph of a famous novel by E. M. Forster is 'only connect' – at least finds an assured, albeit limited, manifestation by virtue of a virtual world. It would not be inappropriate to imagine a picture of early twenty-first century man pushing the Sisyphean stone with one hand and handling the touchscreen of an electronic tab on the other!

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