

**Hyperreality in *The Facebook Sonnet* by Sherman Alexie**

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**Abstract:**

The ultimate goal of many people nowadays is to propagate an idealized version of themselves and their lives and post it in the perfect world of social media. The line between the real world and the fake world of social media is blurred to an alarming degree. Thus, this article examines the notion of hyperreality in *The Facebook Sonnet* by the Native American writer Sherman Alexie. The theory of the French theorist Jean Baudrillard in his book *Simulacra and Simulation* 1981 helps analyze the concept of the hyperreal world which the poem highlights. It has been concluded that the poet warns against people's reliance on hyperrealistic representations of the real world and replaces them with reality. Moreover, he utilized satire and the classical form of the sonnet to emphasize the universality and danger of this issue.

**Keywords:** (hyperreality, The Facebook sonnet, Sherman Alexie, Jean Baudrillard).

## الواقعية الزائفة في قصيدة سونيتة الفيسبوك للشاعر شيرمان اليكسي

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### الملخص:

إنَّ الهدف الامثل للعديد من الناس في الوقت الحالي هو خلق نسخة مثالية عن أنفسهم وحياتهم ونشرها في عالم وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي المثالي. الخط الفاصل بين العالم الحقيقي والعالم الوهمي لوسائط الإعلام الاجتماعية مشوه إلى درجة مقلقة. وبالتالي، يفحص هذا المقال مفهوم الهايبروالية في "سونيت الفيسبوك" للكاتب الأمريكي الأصل شيرمان أليكسي. تساعد نظرية المفكر الفرنسي جان بودريار في كتابه "المحاكاة والتمثيل" ١٩٨١ في تحليل مفهوم العالم الهايبر واقعي الذي يسلط عليه الضوء القصيدة. تستنتج هذه المقالة بأن الشاعر يحذر من اعتماد الناس على تمثيلات العالم الواقعي الزائف واستبدالها بالحياة الواقعية. علاوة على ذلك، استخدم الشاعر أسلوب السخرية والشكل الكلاسيكي للسونيتة لتسليط الضوء على عالمية وخطورة هذه المسألة.

الكلمات المفتاحية : (واقعية زائفة ، سونيتة الفيسبوك ، شيرمان اليكسي ، جون بودريار).

### Introduction:

There is no doubt that technological advances have changed our lives forever, they facilitated many tedious tasks, and thanks to technology the world truly has become a small village. Nevertheless, despite the numerous positive aspects, there are equally important drawbacks to consider. One of the most important drawbacks is people's perception of reality itself. We live in a world where the line between what is real and what is not is blurred to an alarming degree. It is not an exaggeration to say that many

people's internet persona is far more important to them than their real-life persona, and this is both alarming and dangerous.

As a matter of fact, we are all guilty of spending more time than we like to admit glued to our small screens interacting with the latest updates from our friends and family or scrolling through an endless loop of perfectly designed content to match our own taste, thanks to highly sophisticated algorithm. In a 2023 article, Zsila and Reyes confirmed that social media have a significant impact on user's mental health. Mindful use of social media platforms can satisfy people's social nature and improve their sense of belonging, but it can also lead to "tremendous stress, pressure to compare oneself to others, and increased sadness and isolation." (Zsila&Reyes,2023, p.1)

Ironically, the dilemma is that many social media platforms are tailored to keep users glued to their phones by the gratification of serotonin in the brain which is a feel-good hormone. Nevertheless, the overuse of such platforms can actually cause stress, depression, anxiety, and the fear of missing out. This research focuses on the distorted perception of reality due to social media which can lead users to be stuck in a situation that evokes Plato's allegory of the cave. In Plato's allegory 'The cave' he presents a group of prisoners chained facing the cave's wall only. These prisoners are forced to watch shadows of objects cast by a fire behind them as they give names to these shadows. From the viewpoint of these prisoners, these shadows are the only reality they know of because the cave represents their entire world. until one of them manages to escape, to his shock he discovers there is a bigger world and the shadows are not an accurate representation of reality. When he comes back to inform the rest of the inmates, they refuse to believe him. ( Ferguson, 1922)

Many comparisons can be made between the previously mentioned inmates and today's addiction to the small screens. Social media users spend hours interacting with shadows of reality, consisting of edited and cheery-picked content presenting idealized images of people and their lives. Therefore, many people have lost sense of what is real and this is the dilemma of the post-modern man Because of the major technological breakthroughs which shaped our society and influenced our daily lifestyle.

The native American poet, writer, and filmmaker Sherman Alexie expressed his concern regarding this dilemma in his poem *The Facebook Sonnet*. He was born on the 7<sup>th</sup> of October, 1966 in the town of Wellpinit which is a Spokane Indian reservation near Washington. His father was a Salish Indian where as his mother was a Spokane. His writing was about his cultural identity and the lives of Indian Americans, these writings gained him a considerable fan base and he won the National Book Award and the 2010

PEN/Faulkner Award. He had a rough childhood because he was born with congenital hydrocephalus which is a very serious condition for which he underwent surgery when he was six months old. Although the procedure was successful, he suffered from serious repercussions including seizures additionally his physical activity was affected for he was not as active as other children. Thereby, he found refugees in books, he was an avid reader, and by the time he was twelve, he managed to read every book in the Wellpinit School Library. He departed from his hometown school and went to an all-white high school, although he felt somehow isolated being the only Indian student, he was class president and an honor student. This experience gave him access to white mainstream culture. (Grassian, 2005)

In 1985, he began his college education at Gonzaga University where he studied for two years but he dropped college due to heavy drinking. After getting attacked by a knife in Seattle, Alexie had an epiphany and decided to pursue his college education at Washington State University. At university, he joined a poetry course which inspired him to write poetry and pursue writing as a career. His first published book was a collection of poems entitled *I Would Steal Horses* (1992). He became a prolific writer publishing over 25 books in poetry, novels, and short stories, he is also a filmmaker. Some of his most well-known works include *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, *Reservation Blues*, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, and *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me*. His works tackled themes of contemporary life in America and focused specifically on the experiences of Indian Americans. (Kuiper, 2023)

Due to Alexie's focus on matters of ethnic identity and his cultural heritage, many studies examined matters of identity in his literary writing, overlooking matters of contemporary concern that the writer tackled.

### **Literature Review:**

Although, the concept of hyperreality might initially feel a little bit complicated, however, due to its relevance in today's context it is easily comprehensible. Many movie adaptations depict a post-modern dystopian life in which people rely on shadows of reality, a society that is controlled by machines and technology. Such movies capture the essence of what it means to live in hyperreality like *The Matrix*, *Inception*, *Blade Runner*...etc.

In his paper entitled *Traumatic Hyperreality in Don DeLillo's White Noise*, Khaleel focuses on postmodern notions of hyperreality, media saturation and simulation to dissect the nature of postmodern American society by analyzing the novel *White Noise* which depicts America as a media-dominated society where people are brainwashed by constant

media exposure. He concludes that people live for a short while in the fake world of technology represented by television, the mall, Facebook, and Disney Land until they finally have to face the dreadful realities of death, horror, and wars.

In the same vein, the article entitled *The Hyperrealities in Cyberpunk Novel Free to Fall* by Lauren Miller employs Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality to textually analyze the images of technology in the novel. The article concludes that there is simulation of simulation in *Free to Fall* and the analysis confirms that Americans create their own fake paradise by relying on hyperreality.

Additionally, Margaret Atwood's post-apocalyptic novel *Oryx and Crake* depicts a post-natural society that is controlled by an artificial environment, Pourgharib and Pourebrahim make use of Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality as a medium to showcase examples of simulacra and hyperreality in the novel

### **Theoretical framework:**

The French sociologist, poet, photographer, and philosopher Jean Baudrillard first proposed the concept of Hyperreality In his book 1981 *Simulacra and Simulation*, to demonstrate the condition of the post-modern world. He tried to explain how today's culture is the result of a constructed reality. Baudrillard noted that reality is being replaced by a sign system that replaces the real and appears even more real than reality itself. When first published in 1981, his ideas were viewed as highly controversial and problematic. Nevertheless, the validity of his ideas can be seen in today's world where reality is lost in representation and replaced by replicas of its image. Baudrillard defined "hyperreality" as "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (Baudrillard, 1994, p.166)

The hyperreal is an object that has been reproduced so many times that the present version bears no resemblance to its original. According to Baudrillard, modern technology, media, and consumer capitalism are to responsible for this problem. The theory of hyperreality has been influenced by Baudrillard's early semiotics work, he borrows concepts such as signs and symbols to explain what he means by hyperreality. So, it is important to be familiar with the terms simulation and simulacra as used by Baudrillard. Simulacra are the tiny pieces, or signs and symbols, that make up the

contemporary appearances that we take to be true, According to Baudrillard, these are not just duplicates of the original; rather, they have become the truth itself. When representations of things become so influential that they blur the line between the original and the representation and it starts to have their truth, it is called simulation. Accordingly, When we are unable to discriminate between what is genuine and what is only a representation of the real, we are in the hyperreal. Signs and symbols are employed to depict reality.

In post-modern culture, people become so reliant on abstraction and maps to the point that we lost our connection to the real world which precedes the map. "The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—that engenders the territory" (Baudrillard, 1988,p. 166). Moreover, Baudrillard suggests that the modern world is not only artificial, because for it to be called artificial, a sense of reality has to exist to counter its' artificiality. He states "It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real" (Ibid)which means that we have reached a point where we cannot even grasp or be in touch with anything real.

he argues that there are three "orders of simulacra", the first order which he associates with the pre-modern period, although, the image is an allusion, it is a clear representation of the real. In the second order which he associates with the nineteenth-century Industrial Revolution, the differences begin to break between the image and the copy due to the rapid increase of copies, such rapid production leads to misrepresentation and hides an underlying reality by imitating it so well that it threatens to imitate it, so it still has an element of truth in it. Finally, the third order which he associates with the postmodern world where we are constantly confronted with copies of things that precede the real thing that we consider them to represent, thus it shapes our understanding of reality by

blurring the lines between the real and the copy until ultimately, the copy replaces the real.

### **The Facebook Sonnet**

Published in the print edition of the May 16, 2011, issue Of the New Yorker. Sherman's poem *The Facebook Sonnet* is a severe critique of the way people utilize social media platforms such as Facebook and the damaging consequences of its misuse. Alexie confirmed in an interview with Bill Moyers in 2013 that he doesn't have a Facebook account because he has real friends "I don't have Facebook friends. I have friends," (Bill, 2013) Thereby, he emphasizes that he values experiencing life in reality instead of experiencing it through a screen. Alexei's poem aligns with Baudrillard's ideas; Facebook or social media platforms are the hyperreality where enhanced images are presented as the real causing people to confuse the fake with real even worse to replace the fake with the real.

The Facebook Sonnet is a satirical poem about how humans use social media. He starts the poem by welcoming the users to the fake world of Facebook revoking a feeling of nostalgia, however, the first lines convey the message that because of Facebook people are stuck in the past, reliving their childhood in other words they are not in touch with their reality

Welcome to the endless high-school  
Reunion. Welcome to past friends  
And lovers, however kind or cruel.

Let's undervalue and unmend (1-4)

Alexei employs the form of the Shakespearean sonnet and several sound and poetic devices to convey his message. The poem has 14 lines, and unlike traditional Shakespearean sonnets, the meter in it differs, each line is a tetrameter (4 feet) rather than the usual pentameter (5 feet ). The meter varies, in some lines begin with a trochee, such

as "welcome " and "childhood". A trochee is a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable.

As mentioned, Alexie uses the pattern of a Shakespearean sonnet with alternating rhymes in the quatrains (first 8 lines) and a rhymed couplet at the end (last 2 lines). The octave (first eight lines) and sestet (last six lines), which comprise the sonnet's two main portions, frequently introduce a change in viewpoint or theme. The octave of this poem extends a warm greeting to Facebook members, enumerating its benefits such as the ability to relive memories. The text takes a somber turn as it highlights the dangers of living in the past and ignoring the present. The sonnet's structure highlights this change.

Thereby, Alexie took A classic poetic form from the past and utilized this form to discuss a current issue. The sonnet form was penned by some of the finest authors in history. Through the use of this format, Alexie raises the criticism of Facebook to a more universal plane. It implies that the concerns he brings up regarding social media and interpersonal relationships are not merely fads but rather represent more profound human experiences. Using this format, Alexie discusses the banal and possibly harmful features of social networking. The sonnet's 14 lines and particular rhyme system give the poem's criticism a feeling of structure, whereas, Facebook is messy and possibly chaotic, with past and present colliding and well-manicured online personalities that might be deceiving. This orderliness of the sonnet form contrasts with the arbitrary world of Facebook.

Additionally, Alexie uses enjambment through more than one line to add a sense of flow and continuity. He uses repetition in the words "lets" and "lets" in a sarcastic manner, to emphasize the speaker's critique of social media.

The poem criticizes Facebook for pushing its users to offer a sanitized, idealized picture of themselves. This speaks to concerns about how people's perceptions of reality are skewed by social media and how they become cut off from genuine connections. Despite the promise of connection, Alexie portrays Facebook as an "altar of loneliness." This taps



into a broader anxiety about the isolating effects of technology. We connect online but may feel more alone in real life.

In this sonnet, Alexie satirizes different aspects of society. He says:

Let one's search for God become public domain.

Let church.com become our church. (11-12)

This line emphasizes the fact that social media nowadays have total control over all aspects of our lives, it has replaced even religion and it allowed everyone to easily pass judgments regardless of others' feelings or positions. He clearly states that social media has become our new reality and there is no escape from it in the concluding couplet of his sonnet he says:

Let's sign up, sign in, and confess

Here at the altar of loneliness. (13-14)

The repetition of “let’s” emphasizes the poet's satirical note, that since social media is everywhere and is so easily accessible to everyone, there is no need to leave our houses and interact with people in person. Although the goal of these platforms is to facilitate communication, they isolate people and become an “alter of loneliness”. Overall, Alexie poses a relatable issue that most people are guilty of, whether we admit it or not. He invites readers to appreciate our lives and not get consumed by the addicting fantasy world of social media.

### **Conclusion**

The current paper examines hyperreality in Alexie's poem *The Facebook Sonnet* by utilizing the theory of Jean Baudrillard in his book *Simulacra and Simulation*. In this poem, Alexie warns people against the downsides of the overuse of social media. He utilizes the classic sonnet form to emphasize that this issue is universal. Additionally, the entire poem is a satire to invite people who are addicted to social media to the damaging consequences of their addiction which distorts their perception of their reality. Additionally, the study concludes that Facebook is the hyperreal where enhanced images

of people and their lives are presented instead of the real and this leads many people to substitute real life with the fake world of Facebook.

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