Knowledge of Limits?: The Concept of 'Saturation' Through Hari Kunzru's *Gods Without Men*
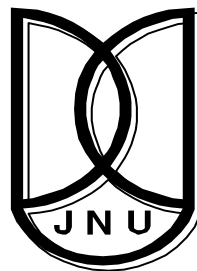
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by

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CERTIFICATE

This dissertation titled **"Knowledge of Limits?: The Concept of Saturation Through Hari Kunzru's *Gods Without Men*"** submitted by **Ms. Shubhra Dubey**, Centre for English Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy**, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.

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This dissertation titled **"Knowledge of Limits?: The Concept of Saturation Through Hari Kunzru's *Gods Without Men"*** submitted by me for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.

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For Nani, Nana, Dadi, Dada and Ma

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Shubhra

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1. Introduction

As everyone knows, that which is excessive is insignificant.

-Paul Virilio, *The Information Bomb*

1.1 Saturation: Towards a Theoretical Understanding

A lot of focus is being put across disciplines to explore and analyse the way the digital medium has lead to an explosion of data and information for the consumption of the individual "user" as well as state machinery. The role of the market is indispensable from this matrix. However, such discussions hardly ever focus on the impact of the digital medium beyond the western, post-industrial context. This study aims expand the understanding of cognitive saturation in the contemporary world beyond the context of the western world to explore the ways in which current pedagogical practices within the "third world" can respond to the challenge of what from now will be referred to as *information saturation*. While a meditation on the digital can not be dissociated from the idea of information saturation, the idea is to challenge the politically dangerous act of dissociating the idea of information saturation from its historical and political implications.

This dissertation is primarily concerned with the problem of 'saturation' in the sphere of knowledge production and consumption. Saturation is an abstract idea that I shall advance as a conceptual framework to look at the excessive proliferation of theory and information across academic spaces. The point is to argue for a certain positive aesthetics that unites "utility" and "criticality" as twin conceptual forces to resist the onslaught of information and data which has gained a fresh impetus by the digital medium. As mentioned already, the academic world can not be divorced from the discussion at hand and hence, the academia and pedagogical practices will be an overt as well as covert concern throughout this work given that the politics of production and consumption of information and knowledge is an integral part of the premises on which the arguments will based. Current studies in sciences and data management focus on information excess as a cognitive challenge as well as one that the corporate giants have to overcome by inventing newer storage machines with vaster capacities. In a classic postmodern irony, the issue of excessive information has given rise to an entire industry that spans across disciplines to analyse the way in which in the Western world has been assailed by an excess of words and pictures and

white noise. The discussion on information overload generally centres on digital media and around the quantitative aspects in gigabytes and terabytes. In cultural studies we tend to see, as Paul Stephens in "Stars in my Pocket like Bits of Data" (see information overload as divided along two categories- as a form of addiction as reflected in the term infomania, or along the lines of a natural disaster. Stephens puts information saturation as a term in the latter category, along with datanami, datageddon, dataclypse, data deluge, data smog, infoglut, data swamp and drowning in data (Stephens 2015). Either way, the studies highlight the inevitable nature of the problem of excess in the information age. Stephens also mentions how the books on the topic are dressed up either as "self-help literature or from management culture (in the form of books, seminars proprietary reports, and consulting programs)". By focusing on socio-political theory, this dissertation further seeks to formulate a link between information saturation as symbolising a contemporary moment of transition towards a new form of totality of what David Berry has called the "authoritarian-computational epistemology" (*Critical Theory and The Digital* 12) which I argue, aims to mould itself to the demands of the capitalist mode of production.

A lot of studies in the West have tried to show the larger cultural as well as cognitive impact of prolonged exposure to the impact of the digital medium. David Berry in his book on formulating a critical theory to analyse the digital medium states that:

> in contrast to the predicted emergence of the "schizophrenic", Deleuze and Guattari's notion of a new destabilizing subject of de-territorialized capital, we are instead beginning to see the augmented human offered by anticipatory computing. Elements of subjectivity, judgement and cognitive capacities are increasingly delegated to algorithms and prescribed to us through our devices, and there is clearly a lack of critical reflexivity or even critical thought in this new subject. This new augmented subject has the potential to be extremely conservative, passive and consumerist, without the revolutionary potential of a 'schizophrenic' (*Critical Theory* 12).

Critical reflexivity is something that will recur throughout this work especially since the focus of this dissertation is on the academic subject who is also a "user" of the digital— primarily in the sense that criticality is indispensable to the intellectual-academic subject (unable to detach ourselves from their thinking selves even when they long to, some would even call it a curse).

While this study seeks to make a transition from understanding information excess in the Western world to reach towards the understanding of saturation in the context of Indian pedagogical practices, one does not propose to present a big-picture. Instead, by beginning the discussion on theoretical excess within the Western academia in order to move to the Indian context, the theoretical premise of this dissertation focuses on the neoliberal policies of the western market. These neoliberal policies have sought to define as well as determine the educational and pedagogical practices within the Third World. As will be discussed in the context of existing theory in the area, the inclusion of the digital has only furthered the reach of the market into the sphere of pedagogy in the west, in India and elsewhere. By expanding upon a political understanding of *information saturation* which draws on the colonial as well as neoliberal discourse within the Third World academia, the point is to find ways to respond to the challenges brought about by the digital intervention within the Third World.

1.1.1 The Phenomenological Beginning

A lot of studies on the subjective and cognitive transformation in the Internet era began by a phenomenological study of the impact of digital and electronic media on the individual authors. Sven Birkerts in *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic* Age (1996) took a rather apocalyptic take on the impact of the electronic circuit life (which he predicts will cause a cultural metamorphosis) on the humanistic values of spiritual and intellectual depths of intellectual life. The advent of the internet and the hypertext he avers will impact and transform the various facets of "literary exchange" from reading and writing to criticism. Written at a time when the research about the cognitive effects of using the World Wide Web was still developing as an area unto itself, Birkerts relies on his personal experience as well as contemporary scientific research but mostly speculative theories to look at the "intense and almost unbroken mediation" (5) by the electronic into our daily lives, and how this has determined "the place of reading, and of the reading sensibility, in our culture as it has become" (14). When Birkerts was writing, electronic age had yet to fully transition into the digital age and analogous medium was as yet a concrete presence. His electronic circuit in the book comprised of "color T.V.s with remotes, VCRs, Nintendo capacities, personal computers, modems, fax

machines, cellular phones, CD players, camcorders" (5). For him, books were the prime example that the digital could not completely take over our lives. Fast forward to 2014, in his book *Changing the Subject* the submersion into the digital ether is complete, and given the accelerated rate of change in the West, people who are outside the digital circuit and can be counted as detached observers were steadily decreasing. Birkerts himself confesses in the book to have meekly surrendered in the face of convenience. From the distant, often condescending third person commentary in *The Gutenberg Elegies* the tone shifts to a collective "we" in *Changing the Subject* which includes the author himself:

> With scarcely a double take, *we* are wading further into the ever-augmented stream of the new. Modern living finds us enmeshed in systems that we think we require, that require us, from which it is everyday more difficult to extricate ourselves. These systems all share a common digitally premised structure. They proliferate by way of digits and codes; they interlock; at *no point* do they simplify or clarify or bring us closer to our embodied physical reality. *..Most recently…we have found ourselves in transition from the "wire-bound" electrical impulse… still physically traceable- to what we now experience as essentially invisible wireless networks*. The speed, volume, and presence of information are intensified even as our awareness of its originating *context* fades further…Information and data are no longer felt to be a vast accumulation of discrete items…now we move through their midst.
>
> (12, emphasis mine)

This enveloping that Birkerts speaks of has already given rise to speculations about reduced attentions span, collective ADD. Since the entire economy of the internet works on data production and consumption, indifference and detachment are the enemies of the medium. The Baudrillardrian spectacle of the hypereal seems a reality as most content on the internet seems designed to shock, awe or inspire some kind of emotion. As the infrastructure and bandwidth expands, the Internet has increasingly shown the tendency to absorb other media. One is no longer obliged to watch t.v. programmes or listen to radio over T.V.s and radios. Instead there is YouTube or Netflix or websites to listen to the Radio. Moreover, one sifts from site to site, one leaves data traces that reveal information about my preferences. Carr says, that as the Net absorbs the medium, that "medium is re-created in the Net's image. It injects the medium's content with hyperlinks, blinking ads, and other digital gewgaws….the result is to scatter our attention and defuse our concentration" "Is Google Making us Stupid" 2008). Carr also uses the example of Frederick Winslow Tailor, as the person

who used stopwatches to time the workers of a factory to improve production by increasing efficiency of the labourers who were mere "hands". Carr argues that the way Taylor developed a precise set of instructions for the hands, Goggle and the likes, seek to create that "one best method", an algorithm to collect, arrange and manipulate data to govern the life of the "mind", to "carry out every mental movement of what we've come to describe as knowledge work". Carr describes how the

> idea that our minds should operate as high-speed data processing machines is not only built into the workings of the Internet, it is the network's reigning business model as well. The faster we surf across the web- the more links we click and pages we view- the more opportunities Google and the other companies gain to collect information about us and feed us advertisements…the last thing these companies want is to encourage leisurely reading or slow, concentrated thought. It is in their economic interest to drive us to distraction". ("Is Google Making us Stupid")

A lengthy discussion on the Internet of Things in the second chapter will discuss this submersion at length.

1.1.2 *Information Saturation* as a Culmination of the Two discourses of Postmodernism and Cybernetics

Information saturation itself is a rather vague term used by digital scientists, philosophers, individual users of the Net as well as theorists working on proliferation of knowledge. In the western context *information saturation* as a philosophical concept has been explained in the first chapter as a culmination of postmodern aesthetics as embodied in the late-Barthes such as *The Pleasures of the Text*. The postmodern aesthetic lead to a proliferation of excess which in turn received further impetus from the digital medium. Further elaboration can be done by looking at the way the postmodern renunciation of meaning, coherence and political responsibility was sacrificed in the face of submersion into the process of reading and writing. The chapter will trace this Barthian Hedonism as growing almost parallel to the institutionalisation of what came to be called cybernetic studies. These two parallel, bipolar drives cut across the disciplines of humanities and sciences - one that sought to streamline communication and data via the electronic medium and the other being the postmodern aesthetic that seek to celebrate fragmentation and fetishes difference. This growing consciousness of information (theory as well as data) inundation can be

seen as informed by these two simultaneous cognitive impulses of wanting to collect and categorise existing knowledge and to consume and celebrate theoretical proliferation as an end in itself. I argue that both these impulses are informed by the enlightenment era confidence in the empowering potential of information. The more, the better. (Berry, 15)

This work shall try to unpack the term in three ways. The first being its historical situatedness as explained in the preceding paragraph by looking at the origins of the cybernetics and postmodernism almost simultaneously to study the conditions that enabled the onslaught of informational excess as something welcome, in fact celebratory and this in turn as opening up of a new paradigm based on rationality, computation and collation. This postmodern aesthetic of an irreverent attitude towards authority, coherence and meaning became deeply entwined with the inroads made by the new market as has been explored at length by authors such as Frederic Jameson. The first chapter spans across three trajectories of the technical, the postmodernist against the background of evolution of capitalism. To expansively show this development is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Hence, instead of delving deep into the multilayered evolution of the three in the present context, the discussion shall remain limited to the reification of commodity culture in the academia the form of financial pressure and the consequent professionalisation as postmodernism ripened and digital and electronic medium gained currency all across. Theory rose magnificently to understand the deep impact of new media, just the market ethic continued to invade academic spaces. The first chapter shall explore these interconnections, albeit in a cursory fashion to establish these three core points that shall continue to be the focus in the following two chapters.

The drive of the makers and thinkers at Google and other such companies, those who think of the brain as a malleable but essentially computational mechanism that someday they hope to best is something that has been commented upon extensively (Nicholar Carr "Is Google Making Us Stupid"). The internet is driven by search engines who hope to not only replicate the human brain but to almost make it redundant. As Carr says, the entire enterprise seeks to find that one algorithm that helps store, categorise, manipulate and disseminate information as an extension of the mind a--besting" of it. We have already given over the ability to store, calculate, spell and even type entire sentences to the various programmes. Hari Kunzru's *Gods*

without Men is a novel that is deeply aware of the cognitive and ethical problems of such an enterprise.

The novel collapses time and geographical space in order to piece a narrative that is awe-inspiring in its ambitions. From the mythopoeic world of the coyote (the anthropomorphic creature of the native North American lore) to the alien-subcultures of the 60s and the 70s to the contemporary story of a couple with an autistic child, the narrative is expansive to say the least. Sven Birkerts uses the term lateral expansion to understand the communicative medium of the internet which discourages in-depth, contemplative reading. Similarly, Kunzru's novel skims over epochs and the narrative can be seen as proceeding via a lateral expansion in that the narrative zips through the many subplots as one narrative interrupts another. The novel can be seen as a very palpable tussle between meaning, coherence and the almost-hyperlinked form of the novel. There are some chapters that are linked to the next one through a certain character, while there are chapters that do not yield meaning beyond themselves. However, in what I consider the most significant subplot of the novel, there is a machine that is used by one character to plug into the stock market in order to collect and sift and manipulate data for personal gain. The character, Cy Bachman is a widely read person, reading mystic philosophies from across cultures to look for that one "algorithm" that will explain it all. The fact that all this is directed at unethical means is reflected in the fate of the character himself, who dies. The narrative seems to be a cautionary tale against the sanitising impulse to rid human experience of ambiguity and error in order to render it completely computational and rational. The fact that the novel ends with a postlapsarian revelation is telling of the deeply spiritual nature of the author who seems to suggest that human experience across generations has been riddled with events that can not be understood, neither can they be explained. The most interesting aspect and the one directly related to the idea of information excess are the inclusion of magic-realist elements across the narrative are, as will be argued, function as logical loopholes. There can be n number of theories to explain what happens in these subplots. Additionally, the novel is so well researched and spans across such vast terrains that to understand all cultural, technical and philosophical references will be a humongous task. The best experience of the novel would be one that involves the digital medium and deep, contemplative (re)reading. The fact that it is self-reflexive as a narrative, extensive in its references

and at the same time takes recourse to the elements of the literary form of the novel and other literary traditions shows that Kunzru seems to be pointing towards adopting a criticality that is both lateral and horizontal in its approach; a criticality that skims across and yet plunges the reader into philosophical and existential depths. The title of this dissertation includes a phrase (knowledge of limits) from the narrative where Lisa, having had a deeply upsetting emotional and spiritual experience is starting to explore philosophy of life from a more conservative point of view. The narrative pits her views against her husband's who almost as a counterfoilfoil, is insatiable in his hunger for explanations, is rational and unyielding. The word knowledge comes up a total of eleven times in the narrative as it explored the intense is the human drive to unravel the mysteries of life. In Lisa's context too the idea is that "knowledge, true knowledge, is the knowledge of limits, the understanding that at the heart of the world, behind or beyond or above or below, is a mystery into which we are not meant to penetrate". As will be argued the problem of *information saturation* is that of uncritical consumption. Knowledge of limits as will be explained is not that one should not know, but that the idea is deeply twined with the questions of criticality. The project of "knowledge for its own sake" needs to be challenged in the face of growing chasm between what is taught and what is felt outside the classroom. The digital medium forces us to rethink our fundamental understanding of our lived realities. As the wireless network continues to envelope us in more intricate networks, it is more important than ever to take stock of out critical faculties and use the medium to expand our knowledge systems, which includes knowing how to "use" this knowledge. Expanding upon the premise of Rita Felski's book *Uses of Literature* the idea is to explore the radical potential the idea of "utility".

1.2. Saturation as a Cognitive Challenge

Given the ubiquity of the term, Information has varied and profoundly confusing definitions across fields. While it will be difficult to give one stable definition of information given that the point *is* to challenge the disciplinary boundaries of the term itself, I have relied on the Oxford English Dictionary for its etymological derivation from the Latin *infomare* meaning to "discipline", "teach" or "give form to" -- given my focus on the academic and the pedagogic throughout. While I have repeated verbatim, the computational derivations for mathematicians and

Cyberneticists in the first chapter, my own understanding of information, like the thesis itself, is far more tenuous and spills across disciplinary boundaries.

I shall be using the six types of meanings of information interchangeably throughout this paper as has been listed by G. Wersig "Information science: The study of Postmodern Knowledge Usage" (1993). These six types are:

> 1. Structures: structures of the world are information;
>
> 2. Knowledge: knowledge developed from perception is
>
> 3. Message: information is the message itself;
>
> 4. Meaning: meaning assigned to data is the information;
>
> 5. Effect: information is the effect of a specific process reducing uncertainty, or a change of knowledge, or resolution of an anomalous state of knowledge in the mind of a recipient.
>
> 6. Process: information is a process; commonly a process of transfer.

(qtd. in I. Cornelius, "Theorising Information")

While this formulation is meant for a computational analysis in the domain of information science, the use of this definition will help me clarify the three ways in which the term *information* saturation has been unpacked across three chapters. Four types of connotations of the word information as these often overlap in the discussion that is to follow, these being information will be referred to as message, knowledge, meaning and to some extent effect. The first chapter shall refer to theoretical excess as saturating academic space as well as academic subject. In a sense, the disengagement that will be discussed is part of the process of theory as no longer drawing from immediate context and turning into meaningless and commoditised information to perpetuate the knowledge industry.

The vast amount of data in circulation over the internet is beyond comprehension for human mind and it continues to be quantified in terms of storage units. It is no news that this along with the data trace of each individual accessing the web adds to the pile being accumulated and sorted by the corporate sectors for commercial use. A vast amount of accumulated data qualifies as information for individuals and sectors because of the meanings or new inferences, trends and patters it yields to them. This material circulates via a network of optical fibres, computers, smart electronic devices and satellite signals. The second chapter is going to be a cognitive exploration of information saturation by looking at theories of subjectivity and cognition to reach at a fuller understanding of what information saturation means for the (academic) subject is situated within the digital era. The connotation of

meaning here is more straight-forward and located within the domain of the digital than in the other two chapters. It is an in-depth exploration of the idea of information age, with all its digital implications of what David Berry calls softwarised or computational capitalism (Berry, 16). Most importantly, the cybernetic and the postmodern movements, that were shown to be almost parallel developments, informing each other, are looked at here in their temporal existence with a focus on contemporary theory. Most importantly, this chapter aims to establish, that the digital turn has ensured that the academic is no longer isolated. The medium of the internet has deterritorialised the space, and not only are these spaces in the process of becoming connected to each other across the world, but that social media platforms like Tumblr and Twitter have levelled the field as the individuals from across spheres can meet and interact. Lastly, the chapter sets the premise for the argument in the third chapter, that the spread of "softwarized" (Berry 5) industrialisation across the globe has ensured that postmodernism is no longer an isolated event in the West. This will be done by taking into account Azuma Hiroki's observation that the otaku subcultures of Japan are an inflection of the global spread of postmodernity.

1.3 Saturation: A Third World Perspective

The extremely complicated network of the digital, however, is not my only focus. In socio-cultural terms, a lot that circulates within a society as knowledge or traditional wisdom could just be information that is of little use to the newer generations, simply because they fail to contextualise it for themselves. In this sense, information here refers to the decontexualised transfer of message and meaning as well as knowledge. In societies with a history of social and intellectual oppression by colonial forces, there is a history of transmission of data by the masters that is merely just information, but in reality is of little or no use to the inhabitants of the colonies. There are some profound works that discuss the deep cognitive process that goes into turning mere information into knowledge in a given culture. A few lines from one of Derek Walcott's poems called 'Names' would be worth quoting here:

Listen, my children say:

moubain: the hogplum,

cerise: the wild cherry,

baie-la: the bay,

with the fresh green voices

they were once themselves

in the way the wind bends

our natural inflections…

…and children, look at these stars

over Valencia's forest!

Not Orion,

not Betelgeuse,

tell me, what do they look like?

Answer, you damned little Arabs!

Sir, fireflies caught in molasses.

The children, in all their innocence, reject the terms of the coloniser (information) and instead reach towards their own indigenous collective imagination to find the analogy of the "fireflies" to describe the constellations. This rejection of colonial information that is imparted as knowledge to the colonised has been at the centre of postcolonial critique. Hence it comes to no one's surprise that the education system in India is still hung over its colonial bearings.

The third chapter seeks to come back to the core question of informational saturation in academia but within the context of India by only focusing on the English Departments of central universities of Delhi. The chapter goes back to the fundamental idea of "access" to understand a more complicated aspect of informational excess. An intervention into the "everyday" of an academic subject is an important theoretical tool as it is for many others before me, to look at the way theory and praxis interact and inform each other. In this chapter I bring back pedagogy and the digital, in the context of India, to show the development of another kind of cognitive excess which, I argue has severe far-reaching political implications. I posit that while the gap between pedagogical content and the reality of the academic subject has always been a presence in a "developing" country, the intervention of the

digital has the potential to further the project of global market by "dumbing down" critical subjectivity and a further conversion of the academic subject as-- to use a Dickensian metaphor-- cheap 'hands' of capitalism and the academic need for education in the country as a meaty potentiality for the western education market. Rote learning is encouraged and imposed by the ill-planned curricula designed by a politicised administration from a very young age. The situation is not addressed adequately at the level of higher education seeing as how an indepth and exploratory curricula which includes a critical introduction to digital media is a lack yet to be filled, even as the use of smart devices increases exponentially. Meanwhile, the burgeoning aspirational class of India has increasingly begun to look to education as a means to an end. There has been an unprecedented focus on "vocational" studies for quick employability of individuals. I look at some current autonomous student protests originating within campuses to see the challenges of the third world academic and how this very type of information saturation is being challenged at the level of the university.

Education in the former colonies such as India continues to be at the centre of political battles to "control" what is being taught and by whom as has been argued by the likes of Gauri Vishwanathan. The syllabi of core subjects such as science, social science, literature and math are hardly designed for intensive questioning and challenges. The focus in majority of cases is overwhelmingly towards rote learning- a form of memorisation technique that prioritises memory over critical engagement are a common practice in India. However my focus in the third chapter is primarily towards higher education, the English departments to be precise because subversion and questioning-- at the heart of a liberal arts education are at the centre of learning here. Higher education for most students of liberal arts departments begins with unlearning a lot of 'information' that was passed to them as knowledge. One begins by questioning their most fundamental beliefs as they continue to learn theories written (mostly) by western authors. In liberal art departments, there is a will to challenge assumptions; the hierarchies are supposedly less solid as in scientific and technical institutes. However, by focusing on the gap between what students in these departments study and their everyday existence I seek to show that a lot of theory and criticism remains just that- theoretical criticism. And while lived grievances may get theoretical redressal in classroom discussions, the departments along with the

administration impose rules and regulations that widen the chasm between what is taught and what is practised. Digital media has led to very creative forms of addressing the problem of rote-learning, as individuals and organisations evolve modules for creative learning. There are hundreds of lectures and modules on the most complex writes and thinkers of the West on the internet. And given that the western canon continues to be central to liberal arts in India, the students are left on their means to explore the internet for their intellectual nourishment. The exam-based system further propels the students to esort to these blogs and websites at the last moment for ideas they can regurgitate in the papers. A majority of the students thus end up being passive consumers of the information in the web for their immediate ends. The second chapter tries to explore how a dependence on the digital could shift focus of individual subjectivities from the lived and the embodied to the disembodied Gibsonian space of signals and data. The third chapter will try to show the dangers of such unprecedented changes for people of India -- the dangers of uncritical use of the digital medium portends a bleak future. When a few months ago, Facebook was trying to push for internet.org (later changed to free-basics- a marketing gimmick to lure people into thinking they would be getting access to internet free of cost while hiding its own for- profit motives) the issue of the dangers of social media as the opium of the masses was highlighted by many. Sumantha Raghavendra sites statistics to show that of the one million people who used free basics which was already available in India, 80 per cent were already accessing the web ("Data-driven article" 2016). The point being that the original target for free basics "was not India's poorest who have never come online but far more so, students and millennials to whom the hook was about surfing for free". The attempts to colonise the "developing" countries by restricting access to digital space by efforts such as this one too has been amply analysed elsewhere. In such a market-dominated scenario, critical rationality is integral to resist such attempts at monopolisation. The abhorrent manner in which Facebook duped many into signing a petition to support free-basics by providing the link in notifications was noted by all. Gimmicks and strategies such as these rely on the distracted and diffused subjectivity of the user. Many indeed signed the petition mainly because the notification carried names for the people in one's friend list who had signed it too (knowingly or no). While this is too vast a topic for deliberation here, suffice it to say that such an attempt by Facebook brought the issues of

criticality when using social media into public domain. The argument will move towards looking at the way information saturation leads to a gradual shutting down of critical faculties, it is a symptom to a larger malaise of a kind of Hegelian 'animalisation' of the human.

1.4 Between Criticality and Praxis: Seeking A Way Out of Saturation

The dialectical relationship between market and postmodern aesthetic has informed cultures in a way that humanistic ideas of value and responsibility have not only become unfashionable utterances, they are regularly associated with suspicious and conservative politics as if there is no longer any merit in such ideas. It is in reaction to this kind of an understanding that we are witness to a lot of theories in the realm of philosophy, literary as well as political theory regarding ideas of responsibility and value. At the same time, such theories have hardly impacted the academic and pedagogical practices in a way as to reorient education towards a critical and analytic endeavour that is informed by the will to intellectual and societal enrichment. There is a vast gap that exists between what and how things are taught, and what is practised outside higher education classrooms, in the context of India. For pedagogy to challenge and find ways out of the current morass, it is important to go beyond the convenient and the fashionable, and into the blasphemous and the dangerous.

In the context of higher education in India it will be explained how the neoliberal ethos is increasingly taking hold of classrooms at the level of policy. On the other hand, the colonial history has continued to inform the aim and object of education system in India as that which is oriented towards the Enlightenment ideals of progress, empowerment and democracy. The content of English Departments, which mostly seek to counter and critique these theories also practice and help implement such policies. The syllabi are stuck in a centuries old morass with tokenist tribute to postcolonial literature. Given the highly varied constitution of the classrooms in the central universities discussed, the syllabi as well as the critique often fail to find identification with the students. In the context of library scholarship, Maura Seale quotes C Pawley as saying that the enlightenment belief was that "reading could *transform* society by *informing* its people" (Seale "Enlightenment, Neoliberalism and Information Literacy" 2016, emphasis in original). The third

chapter explores how this enlightenment era understanding of knowledge transformed into a system of information that began to be forced-fed to the students. The standardised, universal idea of progress, empowerment and democracy continues to be fed to student in school, an idea that takes years to deconstruct and unlearn for students in liberal arts departments. In such a scenario, when English departments too begin enforcing authoritarian edicts, as will be explored, the idea of subversion via education becomes another idea on paper to be mugged and regurgitated. Subjectivity is a radical concept and while postmodernist theory talks at length about "contingency", the process of realisation of what it means in all its subjective and political implications is a lot slower and dependent on one's subjective position. Criticality along with contemplation is essential to being, and indispensable to the role of an academic professional. A lot of work has been done to show how the pedagogic practices in India are in need of a radical overhaul-- with focus on critical and contemplative practices. With the unpacking of the term "information saturation" the idea is to show how the problems that plague higher education institutions could be looked at through the lens of cognitive overload, in order to open up discussions on utility and application in relation to theory and praxis. Inspired by Rita Felski's formulation about "uses of literature", a case will be made for the ideas of "use" and "applicability" to be redefined as tools of subversion in pedagogic practices. With a focus on embodied and experiential this dissertation is aimed at finding ways to challenge information saturation by looking at existing colonial and neoliberal leanings of pedagogical practices to suggest ways of reorienting education towards criticality and praxis. In order to do this, we shall look to a fresh understanding of postmodernism, one advanced by certain theorists such as Gustavo Esteva from the Third World and aimed at challenging the standardised ideals of western enlightenment as well as neoliberal policies at the core of the education system.

2. Chapter One- 'Saturation': Situating the Concept

2.1 Saturation: Origins

The first chapter will delve on the concept of saturation from within the literary and pedagogical space of the academia. Saturation is an abstract idea that I shall advance as a conceptual framework to look at the excessive proliferation of theory and information across academic spaces. The point is to argue for a certain positive aesthetics that unites "utility" and "criticality" as twin forces to resist the onslaught having gained a fresh impetus by the digital medium. It begins with looking at a certain celebration of theoretical excess in some quarters of humanities studies. One needs to look at how difficult it is in present times to become a scholar and claim even a running knowledge of a certain idea or text given the massive output of ideas and theories on every given topic. In doing humanities, according to Rita Felski we "…curate. We are caretakers who preserve a tradition (yes, even when we critique that tradition). We also convey both communicating and transporting values, sensibilities, texts, and stories. We criticize. Criticism in this sense includes forms of disagreement and objection that do not follow the mood and style of critique. Finally, we compose. We make. Composition is not creation out of nothing, but creation through gathering, assembling." (qtd. in Mullins "Are We Postcritical" 2015). Felski's comment is significant here because she is part of that group which believes in "building up as much as dismantling" (Mullins 2015). The double-bind in the academia of wanting to hear as many voices, and have as many perspectives, at the same time to record, understand, theorise (which in a manner is a way of giving a cogent perspective, and coherent shape to that which one has gathered). Literature departments' insistence on writing cogent, well expressed, lucid essays as part of the 'training in critique' is symptomatic of this double bind. But the most important point is that on which Rita Felski has written extensively- the problem of critique of critique.

The title of Felski's latest book *The Limits of Critique* (2015) gives away her central concern, which is to provide a new direction to current scholarship; she does not really focus on the excess that we are currently dealing with or, how difficult it is to do research in the digitalized universe which has only accelerated and added to the dissemination of excess of critique. Felski's focus is in the way criticism has steadily reduced literature itself to a mere object of critique has sought to strip it to its bare bones in terms of its politics. But the most important point of all is the way critique has merely become about the critique of "exegesis". It is particular methodology of critique which seeks to distance itself, and teach all literature as

merely holding certain secrets about its own complicity in the social context within which it is situated that critique has lost itself into mere back-and-forth between critics. Felski's object in pointing out that critique is only one *form* of response is to "articulate a positive vision for humanistic thought in face of growing scepticism about its value" (*Limits* 186).

This chapter will seek to explore how such scepticism came to be. In the beginning we shall look at what can be called a certain aesthetic within academic spaces, what one can call the aesthetic of hedonism. By looking back to the last works of Barthes which show a steady depoliticisation and an eschewing of responsibility in favour of aesthetic jouissance as a disavowal of critique. The journey of such a head-on engagement with literature then shifted towards a proliferation of theory. Criticism soon became the de facto stance in academic spaces in a way that the critic and criticism no longer remained at the margins of society and became rather mainstream. Felski's argument that there is no longer anything revolutionary about "hermeneutics of suspicion" is a point in this regard. Rather, the idea that texts hide more than they reveal, and must be murdered and dissected in order to reach at their complicity in status quo is a rather fashionable one. As will be explained at a later point in the chapter, Felski's charge against elitism of the process of criticism is also a telling recognition of the complicated way in which market values have come to invade the academic spaces. However, the next section shall be limited to a detailed trajectory of the movement from reader's hedonism to proliferation of theory. There is a lot of work done on excess of theory and information. As the object of this dissertation is to look at 'saturation' as a viable theoretical medium to understand the idea of excess, it is imperative to understand how the receiver (reader/observer) began to be looked at as a legitimate source of study. A detailed discussion on subjectivity and cognition can not happen without historicising the debate into the history of western discourse in the area.

2.1.1 Theoretical Excess

The scholarly process is that of an informed reader/observer who reads, understands, and coheres as par of the engagement with the text. Literary theory took a long time in considering the reader as part of the cultural process. However, the journey of the figure of the reader/critic as part of the critical process of literature via reception theory became an established field of study during the 1960s. Terry Eagleton writes "Reception theory examined the role of the reader in literature, but was really part of a wider political concern with popular participation. The

passive consumer of literature had to make way for the active co-creator. The secret was finally out that readers were quite as vital to the existence of writing as authors, and this downtrodden, long-despised class of men and women were finally girding their political loins. If 'All power to the soviets!' had something of a musty ring to it, it could at least be rewritten as 'All power to the readers!'" (*After Theory* 53-54)

However, by the 1970s, (beginning with *S/Z* in 1970, with his distinction of the "readerly" vs. the "writerly" texts) Roland Barthes had complicated the roles of the reader, author and the critic while discussing the individuality of the "text". The evaluation of a text, Barthes insists, lies in writing, for readers are mere passive receivers of a text, and unless they write (or rewrite a texts, as critics) they remain passive consumers of a text for "then he (sic), instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of the writing, he is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text: reading is no more than a mere *referendum*… what can be read, but not written: the *readerly*" (*S/Z* 4). The writerly *text* "would consist only in disseminating it, dispersing it within the field of infinite difference"(5) while the readerly *text* are mere "products (and not productions)". While reading does include work on part of the reader, it does not include "giving it a particular meaning but to appreciate what plural constitutes it… based as it is on the infinity of language" (6). What is the task of the critic then? For this, one must go to *Pleasures of the Text* written in 1973, where he associates the process of reading as a will to pleasure/bliss (translation for *jouissance),* what Howard Richards in his Preface to the book calls the "writers' aphrodisiac" (vii)- to dissect the process of reading as different from mere knowledge, "as against the prudery of mere ideological analysis" to establish an "erotics of reading"(vii), where, to get away from the consumerist act of mere reading a readerly text, Barthes expands upon the pleasures of dealing with contradictions and plurality as part of the pleasure of reading are preferred over mere prattle of a frigid (readerly) text, which has not been written in order to be read versus the kinds that is written to seduce the reader into engagement. Barthes then goes on ahead to not let reading be disturbed by conflict and to instead let difference replace conflict. Barthes explains "difference is not what makes or sweetens conflict: it is achieved over and above conflict. Conflict is nothing but the moral state of difference" (13) implying perhaps, that in order to glean maximum jouissance out of the process of reading. The foregrounding of pleasure in the latter part of Barthes' writings arose from a belief that pleasure is resistant to appropriation by power (Willette "Roland

Barthes" 2013) one must lay aside one's moral and ideological standpoint in favour of the text which itself is an undifferentiated eye. It is important to note that the foregrounding of the process of reading over and above all other intellectually pursuits (especially writing and criticism) where too, the text has been wrested away from moral, ethical and ideological structure happens at the cost of silencing the activity of writing and criticism. When Barthes speaks about the act of engagement with a text, where the text is over and above everything else, the idea is to squeeze the last juices of the text out engaging in the sexual play of language and meaning, to spend oneself in the act of reading and writing, an orgasm that leaves one gasping for breath and unable to function. While such abstract ideal of reading is all very well to read about (indeed, *The Pleasure of the Text* is an absolute delight to read) and the pleasure principle may read as a subversive act in face of a society increasingly taken over by the vocabulary of 'utility'. Barthes' extolling of the pleasure principle as the ultimate goal of intellectual pursuit (as a mode of rebellion against norm) has had quite the opposite effect within academia. Postmodernist eschewing of metanarratives, its delight in Baudrillardrian spectacle, and the Barthian sexual play with words has somehow transformed itself into a larger insistence on everything goes, since conflicting readings become just a mere matter of difference, and are okay in the general interest of a culture of reading and writing eventually having culminated into a certain depoliticisation of academic pursuit. This kind of self-congratulatory exercise at having decoded an aspect of meaning of a text, pinning down the floating signifiers to a set of meaning, has lead to a general proliferation of theories that we are struggling to stay afloat. Beverly Voloshin takes up the matter in "Strange Attractors: Literature and the Poststructural Field".

> In his textual analysis of "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," Barthes divides up the text and labels codes at work in the text. He is not demonstrating the structure of the text but its structuration, its openness…Even in this moving structuration, there is a crux, the scandal of the text, which is the impossible utterance, "I am dead." Here at this scandalous encroachment of life on death, Barthes identifies the co-presence of two codes at work in the text, the scientific and the symbolic, which are opposites. Since they are both present and equally plausible, Barthes labels them undecidable. And this particular excess of signification, this undecidability, becomes for Barthes the mark of the literary… Critical theory, in attacking traditional notions of literature and literariness, in directing attention to textuality and to discourse, has multiplied the number of texts that may be studied. More importantly, theory has multiplied itself. (135)

Voloshin tries to understand this proliferation by referring to Rene Gerard'S "Tiresias and the critic" and Katherine Hayles's *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science.* Voloshin explains-

> At least one reason for the multiplication of the critical field over the past thirty years is the structure of inquiry of the human sciences, as Girard describes it, including the structural requirement of there doubling of interpretation up on itself. Evidence of such reflexivity is everywhere in literary analysis and in the analysis of analysis" (136).

 While the shift in enquiry itself is not a problem, the production and collation is. Voloshin further says "Hayles posits an isomorphism between information theory and chaos theory in contemporary science and poststructuralist literary theory and argues that the similarities in assumptions and methodologies in these two disciplines" (139) can hardly be explained without the assumption that they are both parts of a common episteme" where chaos theory in Hayles terms can be understood as

> the study of complex systems…in which the nonlinear problem are considered in their own right, rather than inconvenient deviations from linearity. Within chaos theory, two general emphases exist. In the first, chaos is seen as order's precursor and partner, rather than as its opposite. The focus here is on the spontaneous emergence of self-organization from chaos.... The second branch emphasizes the hidden order that exists within chaotic systems. (qtd. Voloshin. 137)

The very discipline of literary analysis is unlikely to move towards any form of simplification, and any reasoning asking for simplification can not happen without resorting towards conservatism and would be against the spirit of literary studies. Instead Voloshin suggests that "Hayles takes literary theory itself as a possible analogue to the object of inquiry in nonlinear dynamics and suggests that literary theory may behave like some autocatalyzing physical systems that spontaneously reorganize themselves at a higher level of complexity" (139) and may be then as Gerard had suggested, critical theory will change course again.

 While Hayles formulation is extremely intriguing, it detaches itself from the scholarly process itself that is dealing with this excess at a daily basis. She refers to information theory and Barthian excess to understand the chaos that poststructuralism has left in its wake. The plight of the reader/critic is taken up by Hayles in another work, where she traces the inclusion of the observer/critic as part of the information theory back to cybernetic studies.

2.1.2 Cybernetic Studies: A parallel Occurrence

In cybernetic studies, the observer has had a long history through which he/she could be understood as indispensable to the process of communication. Katherine Hayles in trying to bring the body back into the discourses within cybernetics and informatics historically situates the debate by tracing the process back to the Macy Conferences held from 1943 to 1954. In *How We Became Posthuman* (1999) she retraces electronic and digital studies back to the Macy Conferences where cybernetics was put forward as a legitimate field of study. The most revolutionary implication of these conferences- now considered as having ushered in the first wave of cybernetics- was the idea that the "boundaries of the human subject are constructed rather than given" (84). Predictably, as cybernetics gained ground as a legitimate field of study, penetrating every aspect of life, it provoked anxious questions in the humanist quarters that had till now celebrated the dawn of a new era where cybernetics was to dissolve the disciplinary lines between biology, psychology and electrical engineering- a sign of growing complexity which testifies to the increasingly varied and complex web of human knowledge. However, the imperialist implication of such an endeavour started causing nervousness as it began to impinge on the autonomy of the humanist intellectuals and scientists who were at the helm of the project as they started assessing the limits of cybernetics and discovered that its implications include a fragmented consciousness- a horrifying realization for a liberal humanist whose entire being is centered around the belief of a "coherent, rational self and the right of that self to autonomy and freedom, and a sense of agency linked with a belief in enlightened self-interest" (86).

I shall draw heavily from Hayles' historicisation to look at the central principles of cybernetic studies as a field of study. Macy Conferences started with Norbert Weiner's conceptualization of information as a purely quantifiable, probability function as against a more complex understanding of information whose meaning is contingent upon, and is constituted in relation to its context. A decontextualised understanding of information-as a mathematical function- essentially meaningless, led on to formulation of human subjectivity too as constitutive of informational patterns and links- "humans are not so much blood and bone, nerve and synapse as they are patterns of organization…memory in humans is a transfer of informational patterns" (qtd. Weiner in Hayles, *Posthuman* 104). Weiner focused on the nimbleness of humans in responding to their environment which allowed them to adapt to the world outside. It is this nimbleness that allows humans to function by existing in a state of homeostasis despite the flux

and noise of the outside world. Noise is what introduces randomness. The horror of the liberal subject, explains Hayles would be if the machines were to appropriate this nimbleness to themselves.

Till now the observer remained out of the picture. Gregory Bateson brought the problem of including the observer as part of the communication-feedback equation, and to incorporate reflexivity and feedback loops emanating from the till-now objective party. This was recognition of the observer as embedded within a context while observing the systems. Bateson suggests that the problem can be solved if a substantial reworking of the realist epistemology is undertaken. Heinz Von Foerster wrote *Observing Systems* where he introduced the image of the observer observing himself by observing others. A man in a bowler hat in whose head is pictured a man in a bowler hat in whole head sits a man in a bowler hat and so on- the observer "as a discrete system inside the larger system of the organism" (*Posthuman*. 133)

Some experiments conducted later established that the observer does not as such register a reality as much as it constructs it. Hayles writes about some of the chief contributors (Warren McCulloch, Walter Pitts, Jerry Lettvin) of the Macy Conference wrote about the visual system of frog in a now-classic essay titled "What the Frog's Eye Tells the Frog's Brain". In the essay they demonstrated that the frog's visual system not so much as represents it as constructs it (131). Realist epistemology is reconstituted as Maturana observes that everything said is said by the observer. "From the viewpoint of the autopoietic processes, there is only the circular interplay of the processes as they continue to realize their autopoiesis, always operating in the present moment and always producing the organization that also produces them. Thus time and causality are not intrinsic to the processes themselves but are concepts inferred by an observer. Hayles declares that "Information, coding and teleology are likewise inferences drawn by an observer rather than qualities intrinsic to antipoietic processes" (139). The inclusion of the observer within the communication equation- previously constituted by input, medium and output was recognition of the idea that the observer is a part of the complex system he/she is observing and is a part of the feedback loop that keeps the system going.

Traditionally, while readers have never really been left out of literary theory- what is Aristotle's theory of catharsis if not based on readers' response. However, the concept of reader-response theory as a valid subject of study did not catch on till the 1960s, and it is difficult not to see a correlation between the inclusion of the reader within literary theory as an active

participant in the cultural process, and the observer as a feedback loop in the communications process.

While the observer in the initial studies of cybernetics has a functional role to play in these discussions. Hayles points out "….Maturana's observer does not have psychological depth or specificity. Rather, Maturana's observer is more like the observer that Albert Einstein posits in the special theory of relativity. The one who sees is always called simply, "the observer," without further specifications, implying that any individual of that species occupying that position would see more or less the same thing" (158). A major contribution of Hayles is to create a discourse on lending a certain psychological depth and context to in the field of cybernetic studies. To no ones' surprise, Hayles turns to literature to make her point. This was done by looking at how technology has transformed the context within which Postmodernism is situated. In "Situating Postmodernism in Information Society" Hayles declares "… once embodied in the technology, information theory did not just transform the content of its cultural context; rather it fundamentally altered how contexts are reconstituted. Never before in human history had the cultural context itself been constituted through a technology that makes it possible to fragment, manipulate, and reconstitute informational texts at will. For postmodern culture, the manipulation of text and its consequently arbitrary relation to context is our context." ("Situating" 26)

Hayles advances the concept of Information Narratives ("Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers" published in 1993) to explain that "Information narratives show in exaggerated form, changes that are more subtly present in other texts as well" ("Virtual Bodies" 80). To understand her statement, it is important to place Hayles argument within the context she is referring to. In her own words, "Whether in information narratives, or contemporary fiction generally, the dynamic of displacement is crucial. One could focus on pattern in any era, but the peculiarity of pattern in these texts is its interpenetration with randomness and its implicit challenge to physicality. *Pattern tends to overwhelm presence* marking a new kind of immateriality that does not depend on spirituality or even consciousness, only on information." (81, emphasis in original). Hayles refers here to two terms she has conceptualized to understand the impact of Information on our general existence. She suggests that while presence and absence used to be the concept to characterize the correlation between the signifier and the signified before new media came and destroyed that correlation. While earlier, our means of communication devices

used to embody the signifier, now they are interspersed with pattern and randomness, for instance, the spatially fixed and geometrically arranged keys of the typewriter produce fixed scripts, while the computers "randomize" this process. The computer produces what she calls a "flickering" signifier. The blinking cursor on the monitor on that white screen we know is *not* present, but that is a computer program which is primarily a coming together of a pattern of 0s and 1s, and there is no direct correlation between the spatial arrangement of the keys and the ways the letters appear on screen because there are programs at work inside the computer that work at producing the desired letters on screen while all we do is press the buttons in certain randomized pattern. It is important to remember that the purpose of Hayles in *How We Became Posthuman* is to bring back the body into the discussion on the generally decorporealised discourse on Information Theory and Posthumanism (20) - the belief that information can travel unchanged from "different material substrates" (16), challenge ideas that treat the body as incidental to consciousness. She seeks to bring to the fore "what had to be elided, suppressed and forgotten to make information lose its body, and the resultant hierarchy within such an idea i.e. the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate (28). Information Narratives on the other hand embody this shift from the conceptualization of presence-absence to randomness and pattern. Reader reception theory in the 60s made its case by establishing the reader as indispensable. The second idea that text and context inform each other is one that has been written about at length, Felski's *Limits of Critique* being the latest text. Both these ideas of the reader and the context can be understood and are in fact encapsulated by Hayles in her argument against ignoring the body in discourses on Information Theory. Hayles states "Because they have bodies, books and humans have something to lose if they are regarded solely as Informational patterns…From this affinity emerge complex feedback loops between contemporary literature, the technologies that produce it, and the embodied readers who produce and are produced by books and technologies" (*Posthuman* 44). Hayles situates Information Narratives within postmodernism by highlighting their shared decontextualisation as being closer to the concept of simulacrum.

2.2. *Gods Without Men* and 'Saturation'

Douglas Coupland in a 2012 review of Hari Kunzru's *Gods without Men* titled 'Convergences' conceptualizes of a new genre he calls translit under which he includes such

works as *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Orlando* and Michael Cunningham's novel *The Hours* and David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*. Coupland describes the term Translit as one that crosses "history without being historical; they span geography without changing psychic place. Translit collapses time and space as it seeks to generate narrative traction in the reader's mind. It inserts the contemporary reader into other locations and times, while leaving no doubt that its viewpoint is relentlessly modern and speaks entirely of our extreme present." (Coupland 2012)

The term that Coupland advances to understand narratives like *Gods without Men* (henceforth, *GWM*) highlights the narrative style of the novel and remains the primary focus for Coupland throughout and is therefore insuffient to understand the novel. GWM with its circuitous narrative, its collapsing of all sorts of information, cultural references and data, with a demand back to coherence, meaning and emotion is a narrative that tries to negotiate along the (post)modern state of being. The narrative is characterised by a lateral expansion spanning across geo-temporal boundaries and progresses as if an HTML where one reference or evocation leads to another subplot and back again. Kunzru's novel is also an interesting entry point into an understanding of excess. *GwM* not unlike Cloud Atlas is expansive in its scope. It is divided into self-contained chapters situated temporally between 1775 to 2008-9, geographically between California, Manhattan, and the Mohave Desert- part of which contains a simulated Iraqi settlement. Recurring throughout the novel are motifs of the Coyote figure and what is referred to as the "three pinnacled rocks". The geographically solid location- especially the recurrent motif of the rocks, where all the stories converge belies a central concern in GwM- which is not just abstract but physical in nature in that the stories networked through characters *as well as* through the geographical location span across the temporalities. There are , what Frederic Jameson has called, generic discontinuities throughout, what reads like a transcript of an oral narrative of the Coyote, to a third person narrative, to a diary entry and letters- all interspersed with each other. The novelistic form implies a certain stylization to the way the chapters have been arranged, despite a non-linear narrative, seeing as how the stories build a crescendo by the end, resulting in a penultimate anticlimax, followed by a mysterious revelation. To some extent, the studied randomness of the chapters mimics an algorithmic patterns, self-contained within a finite amount of space and time, where each generic interruption, which is also one story, is a self-contained algorithmic pattern within one whole program (the novel), self contained, with a

specific context, following its own generic logic which in association with other algorithms yields multiple interpretations.

By associating the stories with the idea of variables and algorithms, one does not at all intend to reduce the work to a fixed meaning. Rather, by drawing parallels between forms of storytelling and algorithms, one wishes to highlight what Kunzru may mean when he spoke in an interview to Granta Magazine about the need to produce a networked art form to mimic the global context ('Interview: Hari Kunzru'. 2011) in not just the way our lives are connected but also the general simultaneity of forms of literature that exist o a global platform.

The mathematics school in Philosophy speaks about mathematics as the grandest metaphor of all. While one would not go so far as to echo Pythagoras when he says "all is number", it seems that Kunzru's novel mimics the computational theory of existence in that it turns the maths-as-metaphor around its head and weaves a narrative as a combination of equations in which, the magic realist elements, the myths, the straight third person narratives are all wound up together with other forms of narrative in a complex mix of algorithmic pattern. In other words, the novel mimics a computational program, with each part performing different functions within one unified whole. What Hayles had said for Information Narrative, holds true for a narrative like GwM too in that, this kind of literature, makes vivid changes happening in the larger society. A novel like GwM makes visible the globalised network within which we exist. The differences- cultural, religious and others- that the narrative is extremely sensitive too are all part of that selfcontained whole, that flattens out time and to some extent the space- (the Iraqi simulation, the different terrains of the same place in different temporalities), giving the reader the experience of one giant whole with compressed, flattened out parts- which give the illusion of incorporating all differences- and belonging to different spaces, but are not. The implied reader too of the novel is a global citizen, one who is aware of all the cultural markers pertaining to America, and can also understand and appreciate the way the novel plays with literary, cultural and historical references. GwM self-reflexively mimics the nature of the World Wide Web. However, as the novel tries to mimic the digital medium, it lays bare the tensions that exists between new media and the older forms of art such as the novel.

The book is divided into chapters whose titles state the year/time in which the narrative is situated. The first chapter is titled as "In the time the animals were men", in which the mythical figure of the Coyote sets out into the desert to brew himself a hundred grams of pure crystal. The

coyote figure in Native American mythologies (and elsewhere) is depicted as sometimes mischievous, sometimes mean and sometimes naïve figure. In GwM, the coyote figures as an anthropomorphized figure, is always up to no good, one who almost always subverts divine plans. In the first chapter he tries to make himself some crystals, but fails each time, one time blowing his face, other times, his hands etc. Coyote literally defies death and eventually with the help of the advice of fellow mythological figures- referred in the book as Cottontail Rabbit, Gila Monster and Southern Fox- Coyote manages to cook a handful of crystals, rejoicing and congratulating himself for being "cleverer than them all". The coyote remains a liminal presence literally and metaphorically (as will be established later in the novel when he crosses the earth world into the land of the dead).

It is notable that the first chapter is the only one told like a folktale. Elsewhere, the Coyote figure resurfaces as part of narratives related to by other people/characters. The second chapter titled "1947" relates the story of Schmidt- a former aircraft engineer- who sets up base beneath the three pinnacled rocks to await the arrival of aliens. Schmidt has returned from the war feeling betrayed by humanity after the consequences of the second world war. Having had, what will be referred to in the book as an extraterrestrial "contact" he packs his belonging and heads to the desert and establishes base beneath the rocks. Nearly a decade later, the base turns into the headquarters of a UFO cult which uses the base to make alien contact. A few years later, the cult descends into utter chaos, having to depend on prostitution and drug racket for its survival and perceived by the townspeople as a threat to public security and as allies of dark forces are cleared out by the authorities.

The third chapter cuts to present in 2008 where a British lead singer of a popular band, having fought with his bandmates, ruminates on having left England for America, only to discover that America does not suit him and despite fame he feels unhappy. After talking to his estranged girlfriend who refuses to cater to his whim, Nicky decides to leave everything till "it'll all be sorted out" (25). To Nicky drives off in his car, having stolen fellow bandmate's handgun and drugs. The next chapter is an excerpt of a diary entry by a missionary in the year 1778, in which he narrates the work of an old Aragonese friar Frey Garcès with four hundred Indians. The last chapter of the book is the portion redacted from the diary of friar Frey Garcès which recounts him having seen something terrifying- "a man with the head of a lion. He spoke to me saying that I was beloved and revealing certain mysteries concerning life and death, which as

soon as they had been revealed, receded into forgetfulness, for that which is infinite is known only to itself and can not be contained by the mind of man." (384)

Apart from the Nicky plot, and Schimdt, the third and arguably the most coherent narrative is that of Jaswinder, Lisa and Raj. Jaz is the son of an emigrant Punjabi family and is marked by the insecurity of the diasporic community. By the time the narrative begins, Jaz has fallen away from his family in Baltimore, having married an American white girl Liza. He is doing sufficiently well in his career as someone who writes algorithm at a firm in Wall Street, but is facing difficulties as the father of an autistic child Raj. Lisa in the other hand is the daughter of doting American parents but has had to give up career in order to stay home to look after Raj. The marriage is strained and in order to bring in a semblance of normalcy Jaz and Lisa decide to take a break and head off to Mohave where they lose their son. The child is later returned to them after much publicity and media hype. However, he seems to have been cured of autism and seems to show a mental advancement that throws his parents- especially the rational logical Jaz off guard. Unable to figure out what happened to Raj during the time he went missing, Jaz drags the child and Lisa to the desert to seek answers only to discover that in the desert lay "only a vast emptiness, an absence. There was nothing out there at all." (381)

A subplot that is twined with the Jaz-Lisa story is the story of Walter- a machine that - when plugged into the economic systems of the world- collects huge and absolutely disparate data from across the world to draw out patterns which initially help gain the advisory firm earn huge benefits but eventually crashes the Honduran economy and eventually (it is implied) may have led to the global economic meltdown of the 2008-9. The maker of Walter is Cy Bachman a jew- a modern day Prometheus, seeking to understand the secrets of the world- but not for altruistic gains seeing as his brainchild is employed to glean profit from the volatility of the world economy. Cy eventually commits suicide after the world descends into chaos post the total washout of the American economy.

The Jaz Lisa story where they go off into the desert to seek answers but to no avail is symptomatic of there being no grand gestures from up above, no visitations, no prophecies. As against the redacted passage at the end of the novel where Fari Garcès speaks of a cosmic vision, terrible and grand in nature, the loss of prophets and sages in present age is a void that speaks about there being no such grand gestures anymore. It is important to note that while the friar is humble enough to admit not being able to recall this visitation anymore, speaking about the

inadequacy of human mind to encapsulate the secrets of the Universe Cy Bachman and Jaz symbolize the Promethean daring to unravel them all. The one who claimed that position- Bachman- commit suicide in the novel. It is quite interesting then, that Kunzru speaks of "a networked artform" that speaks about the networked form of our globalised lives since his work belies certain pessimism to such an endeavour.

The form of the novel itself embodies the tension between two human impulses- an insatiable hunger for the secrets of the universe, its nuances and particularities and the other is to connect it all and unravel the nodal links to the web of existence- an almost imperialist endeavor to impose meaning even when there is none and thereby leading to catastrophic results. The novel can be seen as a very palpable tussle between meaning and coherence versus the hyperlinked form of the novel. The narrative seems to be a cautionary tale implying that, to want to rid human experience of ambiguity and error in order to render it completely computational and rational, is full of hubris and is bound to fail. The fact that the novel ends with a postlapsarian revelation is telling of the deeply spiritual nature of the author who seems to suggest that human experience across generations has been riddled with events that can not be understood, neither can they be explained. The most interesting aspect of the novel, and directly related to the idea of information excess, is that the magic-realist elements that are sprinkled across the narrative are logical loopholes. There can be n number of theories to explain what happened.

Contrary to the critics of Cybernetic studies, Norbert Wiener's ambitious project never really died. It was merely an institutionalization of one of humans' most innate desire to control it all in the name of "cybernetic" studies. Postmodernism's fetishization of difference is another extreme in the quest for knowledge. The pedagogical training to students of humanities is a cybernetic one- to write coherent, logical, lucid papers, to make sense of it all, to theorize and understand, while the level of enquiry at this point of time is informed by what has come to be called by some as Barthian hedonism where everything is put up for interrogation and intellectual enquiry, and the enquiry itself is put up for further enquiry. It becomes difficult for prospective researchers to find an entry point into a field of research, to be consistently aligned to, and mainly in order to take a position in the area. This can be seen by some as a start of an increased depoliticisation or an apolitical spirit within the academia.

Kunzru's novel is vast in scope, well researched and assumes a *cognoscenti* or a very well informed reader in all matters American- from contemporary cultural symbols, American history and mythology. In other words, the novel assumes a subjectivity constructed by the increasingly digitalized and networked world, a world where the World Wide Web is just a touch away. At the same time, exploiting the novelistic genre, it does much more. The novel is about figuring out "knowledge of limits" (359). The novel's evocation of religious and cultural minorities as the jews, Sikhs, or the UFOians, seeks to remind the readers (including the critic/theorist) about the imperialist process that theorization and that any coherent explanation of the text would decidedly be an imposition. In the penultimate chapter of the novel, where Jaz and Lisa go into the desert, to seek answers, in a crescendo call, there are no voices from above, no "light-in-the-refrigerator" moment where there is a sudden shedding of light the moment the gates are opened. The postmodern declaration of there being no metanarratives almost rings true, but, not quite. The fact that the novel ends with a censored diary entry recounting a cosmic vision shows that people did experience extra-realistic visions earlier as opposed to now where there is far too much information, and (perhaps due to so much information) far too much skepticism and cynicism for any such moment of realization. This rather skeptical view of contemporary life, is not an individual one, in that, students trained into reading texts in courses on literature are often taught to look at the text, with its assumptions and meaning (not even with a pinch of salt, but) in a detached, skeptical manner. If Kunzru's generalization is far too sweeping, it definitely holds water with a certain section of academia. Felski's formulations about the disengagement within academia can not be overstated here.

2.3. A Turn towards Affect

Rita Felski takes issue with what Paul Ricoeur has called the "hermeneutics of suspicion" as currently pervading academic spaces, in that it is:

> virtually de vaguer (now) in literary theory, rather than one option among others. As a quintessentially paranoid style of critical engagement, it calls for constant vigilance, reading against the grain, assuming the worst-case scenario and then rediscovering its own gloomy prognosis in every text. (There is also something more than a little naïve, she observes, in the belief that the sheer gesture of exposing and demystifying ideas or images will somehow dissipate their effects.)…the attempts to subvert, interrogate and disrupt have become normative." (*Uses*, 3)

She argues that it is this negative form of engagement with literature that must be resisted. If Felski is to be believed (and there is no reason to not) that texts are not just intermediates of reality but play an indispensable role in mediating and constituting it, literature emerging out of academic spaces can hardly be promoting a positive way of looking at life and literature when the negative form of engagement has become the norm. Felski suggests that the need now is to develop a positive form of aesthetic engagement, while taking note of the essentially varied, variegated and fragmented mode of contemporary life. Felski starts with her own work *Uses of Literature,* which is playfully calls her manifesto, she reassesses forms of engagement with the text.

Felski's formulations are of significance here, because not only does she bring in a positive attitude towards what current modes of engagement with literature and society, her formulations can help us understand ways out of the swamped nature of current scholarship while avoiding falling into reactionary or anti-intellectual rhetoric. The idea is to not stop asking, interrogating, subverting, investigating or analyzing till the time literature continues to speak of "distinctiveness, difference and otherness", and considering the present state of being, there is still a long, long way to go before this happens. At the same time, Felski's work is sharply aware of the disparate and essentially adrift nature of literary criticism of literary theory.

Felski's way of dealing with the twin problems of theoretical excess and providing a renewed vigour to theory which in her words has reached a stalemate- similar to Terry Eagleton's *After Theory-* by claiming that there have been no great, path breaking theorist after the glorious 1980s- is to call for a bringing back into focus four common forms of textual engagement- recognition, enchantment, knowledge and shock. The idea behind this kind of a phenomenological approach by Felski when working on art and literature is to usher in a sense of transparency and responsibility while doing theory and criticism. Felski suggests that self assessment and self recognition (as suggested by the first of the four) is necessary before embarking literary analysis. The second is enchantment- a state of "pleasurable self forgetting while reading a text", thirdly, is knowledge.

The question of knowledge is an indispensable one when one speaks of information saturation. The case of excess within the academia is a marker of the incurable human condition to figure it all out, as we continue to get buried in theories, information and data. However, what constitutes knowledge, what is dispensable, where the limits to knowing are deeply philosophical

questions that can not have easy answers. At the same time, Felski's formulation on knowledge will be a good way to start. Suffice it to say now that knowledge and shock are reformulations of the old ideas on literary content and detachment but aimed at a positive aesthetics.

To come back to Kunzru, the recurrent spatial metaphor and physically the space of the Mohave desert is symptomatic of the change in Kunzru's conception of modernity in transmission (also a title of Kunzru's third novel) while locating stories from across time (but not space) which converge at the three pinnacled rocks points not only to the essentially networked existence of our past and present but also the image of a "hard" solid space that links together these stories can be seen as an attempt to anchor the essentially liquid nature of existence. Kunzru's works are tinged with a scepticism towards a blind celebrations of nomadic, fluid, fragmented existence as possibly a fantasy for those with privilege of a stable home and identity. Kunzru's own identity as the son of an emigrant family can attest to a certain reserve towards glorifying rootlessness. This is one way in which Kunzru's novels remind the "globalised" reader of the struggles of people belonging to/having ties to ex-colonies. Postmodernism as if not a privilege then as a choice is part of what Kunzru highlights through his narrative. The book rejects the postmodernist attempt at painting a fragmentary life, by showing that our lives in general are more networked beyond what computational analysis would yield. While Felski's work is directed towards an "emotional turn" in cultural studies it is also a good way to start discussion on the idea of theoretical excess, the cognitive aspects of which will be discussed in the following chapter. The disengagement at the centre of Felski's works is happening within an increasingly decorporealised discursive space, one situated bang in the middle of the Information Age and demands elaboration.

Rita Felski's argument is that a cultural turn is needed within the academia to resist the accelerated rate of professionalisation within academic spaces[1]. An important idea that emerges out of Felski's thesis is that of an honest engagement with the text- one that is unencumbered by the norms and necessities of inhabiting the academic space. The need, according to Felski, is to "listen" to texts instead of jumping on to its "diagnosis" (6, *Uses*). This kind of a meditative

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[1] For a detailed analysis and response on the subject, refer to *Academics and the Real World* by G.R.Evans (2002). Section 6: University and Social Commentary discusses the specific limitations of academic spaces within the Universities of Great Britain but is applicable to universities elsewhere too. The other sections on the role of politics and the relevance of research within society are relevant observations for the discussion at hand.

encounter with texts is highlighted in several other aspects of engagements with other forms of arts. For instance Pauline Oliveros developed an entire philosophy of listening deeply to all kinds of ambient noises and immediate sounds. Felinski and Oliveros' efforts, along with those of several others have directed significant attention to highlight the importance on the part of the reader to reclaim his/her own interior space in order to allow for a genuine encounter with art and literature. But what is this reclamation that one speaks of? Reclaiming interiority from what? When Felski suggests that the reason why the "pragmatic" of texts has won over the "poetics" in the rush towards whittling down texts to their "bare bones of ideological and political functions", her argument insinuates towards a prevalent dishonesty within the academia as regards to their engagement with texts and ideas in the race for getting published, presenting papers etc. Referring to the gap between academic and common knowledge about texts and reading practices, where the two do not interact anymore given the steady closing off of the exclusionary space of the academia, Felski's thesis is to bridge the gap between these two domains, not in order to somehow extol common knowledge but in recognition of the fact that "because theoretical reflection is powered by, and indebted to, many of the same motives and structures that shape everyday thinking, so that any disavowal of such thinking must reek of bad faith" (*Uses*. 13). Lack of self-reflexivity within the academia encourages the problem of trying to survive and staying afloat amidst the growing pile of theories and ideas as the urgency to produce something new in newer ways assumes greater importance. It is apparent that Felski points towards the crisis of subjectivity in academia while focusing on the (steadily declining) affective response to reading. For instance, when she refers to "omissions and commissions" practiced in different literary approaches such as historical criticism[2], "the critic is absolved of the need to think through her own relationship to the text she is reading…. It is, in a Nietzschean sense, to use history as an alibi, a way of circumventing the question of one's own attachments, investments, and vulnerabilities as a reader. The text cannot speak, insofar as it is already spoken for by an accumulation of historical evidence." (10).

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[2] "historical criticism encourages a focus on the meanings of texts *for others*: the work is anchored at its point of origin, defined in relation to a past interplay of interests and forces, discourses and audiences".

Felski(17)

Felski's introduces recognition, enchantment, knowledge and shock as four, albeit overlapping aesthetic and analytic categories as the critic/academic's means of engaging with the text in her thesis as she suggests, "they are neither intrinsic literary properties nor independent psychological states, but denote multi-levelled interactions between texts and readers that are irreducible to their separate parts. *Such modes of engagement are woven into modern histories of self-formation and transformation*, even as the very variability of their uses militates against a calculus that would pare them down to a single political purpose" (15, italics mine).

Felski makes a resounding call for a phenomenological perspective by repeating the early call in phenomenology of "back to things themselves" with the recognition that "Texts, however, are unable to act directly on the world, but only via the intercession of those who read them" (18) - as she recognizes the role of reading in shaping notions of selfhood and political discourse of the time. Further, she tries to bring the critic/academic into the fold of the larger category of the "reader" as she recognizes the latter's potential to bring about a change as she attributes a transformative potential to literature. According to her, literature is not merely an 'object' but source of knowledge that holds the potential to "challenge or change our beliefs and commitments" (7).

Felski's argument is touching as the crisis that she speaks of resonates with one's individual experience in the academia where the hurry to publish and a simultaneous impulse to indulge oneself in the passionate free flow of ideas somehow overshadows the founding principles of relevance, impact, and utilitarian perspectives of the research. Her understanding of 'use' negotiates between these two impulses where she tries to take the term to mean something beyond

> "strategic and purposeful manipulative or grasping it does not have to involve the sway of instrumental rationality or a wilful blindness to complex form. I venture that aesthetic value is inseparable from use, but also that our engagements with texts are extraordinarily varied, complex, and often unpredictable in kind. The pragmatic, in this sense, neither destroys not excludes the poetic. To propose that the meaning of literature lies in its use is to open up for investigation a vast terrain of practices, expectations, emotions, hopes, dreams, and interpretations – a terrain that is, in William James's words, "multitudinous beyond imagination, tangled, muddy, painful and perplexed." (*Uses.* 8)

Felski locates the poetic jouissance in its power to transform the reader's experience via a hard, exhaustive path laden with surprises that have the power to subvert one's entire belief

system. The claim is no novelty as the potential of art and literature to transform individuals has been acknowledged ever since Plato imagined his *Republic*. However, her reaffirmation of this idea is refreshing despite an almost fashionable avowal of 'suspicion' in academia today. However, it is important to ask if it is easy to reorient criticism towards a finer balance between the affective and the critical, as Felski would like us? Methodologically, is it possible to adopt a genuine turn in literary and cultural analysis when studies show that students and researchers find it hard to as much as finish entire books? (J. Zhou 2016)

3. Chapter Two- 'Saturation': Subjectivity and Cognition

The previous chapter primarily dealt with the problem of theoretical excess within the academia. However, is it at all possible to continue to think of the academia as an organic whole? It is tempting to imagine the academia as a social imaginary existing within the society while being quite distinguished from it. It could have been true earlier but academic spaces lost claims to such an isolation since the invention of the World Wide Web. Given that academia is a privileged space that is wired into the globalised capital economy via government and private grants, institutional spaces, and such like. The phenomenon is a part of the institutional machinery of several Indian universities as well. Residential universities like Jawaharlal Nehru University and the University of Hyderabad boast of Wifi connectivity in most if not all of the campus. Students from these universities are wired-in academic or intellectual subjects, and are very much the "user" of the internet. The term User directs attention towards the dependence of the academic subject on the medium of the internet without which, she finds it impossible to function or produce relevant research output. Indeed what is a "user" without her tools of research and engagement? The nature of the internet is such that the old phrases about media of recommending "judicious *use*" are not quite feasible here, i.e. it is not that easy (not anymore) to plug out that easily than it was before owing to the co-dependent nature of such information devices and our routine existence thus, emerge as nodes in the larger web of networking as we have access, irrespective of our position as a research scholar or not.

The aforementioned crisis of the subject within academic spaces, even the ones in third world countries like India, is quite similar to, if not more complicated than the first world subject. But before speaking about the third world, one must explicate on who is this subject, nay "user" and what crisis are we speaking of.

3.1 The Information Sublime: Cognitive Challenge

In a 2009 editorial entry to the journal Leonardo, Robert Pepperell succinctly describes the head-on engagement with the new media, especially the Internet as ambivalent, if not paradoxical one.

> "The Internet connects hitherto discrete areas of inquiry in a way that could conceivably trigger an intellectual "Big Bang"---an expansion of ideas and connections that overrides historical and regional boundaries. At the same time, the sheer volume and diversity of information renders any global synthesis impractical, however much desired. We may now be forced to abandon anything

like a "unified field" of knowledge and accept that the more we know the more we know we do not know. (Pepperel "An Information Sublime", 2009)

The sublime carries historical and philosophical bulk as a concept. While Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry* (1747) helped in shifting the discourse of the sublime- a combination of excitement and anxiety one experiences in an encounter with nature or cosmos- from the objects themselves to the mind of the person grappling with it. Following Burke's intervention, the idea began to be referred to as a phenomenological, in particular cognitive challenge. When Pepperell refers to the encounter with the data deluge online as a subliminal experience- simultaneously terrifying and exciting - he also draws attention to the cognitive challenge this encounter poses to a wired-in subject on an everyday basis. At the same time, the theological underpinning of the term "information sublime" can not be ignored from the extract quoted above. The idea that the more we know the more we know we do not know, is part of the deterministic school of philosophical enquiry. The more intricate grows our web of knowledge, the more we realise that there is that much more that is not known. The implication in Pepperell being that such a realisation will humble us but that would not and should not stop us from continuing to know and grow as a collective in search of knowledge.

Pepperell's conceptualisation is based on the principal of humanistic knowledge, as it posits the human pursuit of knowledge in a direct relationship with the principle of 'understanding'. Knowledge in the humanities is not merely an accumulation and ingestion of information but an attempt to grope meaning through narrativising, analysing via the study of texts in terms of its historical and cultural context, establishing links, expanding and burrowing deep into the vast recesses of existing knowledge for clues to understand the texts at hand at the same time.

A discussion on cyberspace and cybercultures can not be divorced from the larger cultural current of postmodern aesthetics and reading practices. The previous chapter tried to show a genealogy of the rise of cybernetics as arising from and growing parallel to the postmodern era. The particular point that I tried to make in the chapter is not a new one, that cybernetics was situated in the middle of the heyday of postmodernism and that the cybercultures went on to literalise the assumptions and theories of postmodernism that were being put forward around the same time as the Macy Conferences. Azuma Hiroki, a Japanese cultural critic authored *Japan's Database Animals* (2001) could only be translated into English in 2009 by Jonathan Abel and

Shion Kono. The book has had a profound influence on the pedagogic practices of Japanese studies in the West, while it continues to be contentious and controversial in Japan as it seeks to take away the exclusive tag from the otaku[3] (sub)culture of Japan and show that the culture was more of an inflection of the global spread of postmodernity. The way in which the otaku consumes the cultural products within Japan is similar to - if not explicative of - the way Baudrillard envisioned postmodernity as a time where the distinction between the original and copy start blurring, and where simulacrum as a concept, which is neither an original not a copy, would become dominant. The otaku's consumption and dissemination of manga, anime, games and sci-fi is regardless of whether the author is amateur or established. Moreover, much of the culture is derivative and thrives on the productions of the readers in the forms of toys, fanzines and other cultural insignia. Further, the other characteristic of postmodernism- the disavowal of grand narratives in favour of smaller, more localised ones, as was predicted by Lyotard, is visible in the otaku culture as well as Azuma uses it to explain as a preference of fiction over lived reality by the otaku. The otaku (meaning "your home" or "your family") relinquishes blood-relations in favour of a symbolic relation with fellow otakus, a relation based on shared love for the cultural texts. Azuma historically traces the rise of the otaku culture in the 1970s and 80s- a time of great upheaval in Japan, a time which, simply put, was leading to the disorder of the grand narrative, when the otaku began to turn to fiction to create their own smaller narratives of coherence and meaning. In the same book, Azuma explains how the logic of the Web is similar to that of consumption by the Otaku, and the common denominator between the two, is the postmodern aesthetic and practice. His description of the logic of the Web as reflecting the postmodern world-image along with a discussion about the lived practices of over the Web spilling out on to the everyday is of special interest to me at this point. Azuma explains himself through the antonymous concepts of visible and invisible. The relationship between what is visible (words, images) and what is invisible (meaning) is quite clear in the context of print media as it adheres to the practice of visibilizing the invisible. However, when it comes to the hypertext, the relationship blurs quite profoundly with the introduction of the HTML- the source code that helps write the hypertext. The "visible" here, explains Azuma, remains in flux. While there are many more layers of what can be made visible here- from the commands in source code

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[3] a Japanese term that refers to people with obsessive interests in various Japanese subcultures, particularly manga, anime, science fiction, or digital games. (Schafer, 'subjectivity')

to the finished appearance of the web page, the operating system *also* allows me to make visible- via the Graphic User Interface- either or all of the stages visible to the reader/user- the HTML commands, the binary configurations that help convert the HTML commands to finished format, I can make visible or invisible, any or all of these stages on monitor- just not the electromagnetic rays that are at work within my hardware. The HTML also allows me to upload my work on to the internet and allow the reader/user to consume it, modify it (if they have the necessary knowledge) and share it. However, there is no guarantee as to whether the document as it appears on my windows 7 will appear in the same format or not as it is downloaded by a user on his/her Mac, and what if the file gets corrupted in transmission? I may receive back a document that reads in Chinese due to a malware. These different variables in the transmission of a digital document further complicate the idea of the visible, as in there are multiple types of 'visibilities' of the same document, and hence, unstable. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is thus multilayered and, as Hayles says "flickering". The meaning no longer hovers in the realm of signified as it renders itself differently at various platforms and moments in time. More importantly, as the internet proliferates via a linking together of documents and web pages across the world, its enormity prevents coherent comprehension by single or multiple minds and thus, establishes as unyielding to any kind of attempt at meaning. This characteristic is what explains the idea of the internet as a meta-narrative, comprehensible to logic and narrative, as Azuma uses the word 'database' to refer to the accumulated data and information over the web. Later on, Azuma turns the word database into a metaphor, which has been discussed in detail in the course of the chapter. Azuma presents another interesting idea as he elaborates on the spill out tendency of life on the computer. While it is naïve to treat the virtual and the real world as exclusive to each other, Azuma elucidates how the logic of the Web is "penetrating widely and deeply into many other genres technologically unrelated to it. For example, books and magazines will continue to be published in future, but the organisation and narrative style will approach those of web pages, and movies will continue to be screened but the direction and editing will increasingly resemble those of games and video clips". (102)

3.2 Reading in the Digital Age: Ease over Adventure

    In his preface to Roland Barthes' *S/Z* Richard Howard while referring to the process of reading- the subject of Barthes' meditation- quotes Valery Larbaud as having called reading "an

unpunished vice". While the citation is a little misleading (the phrase is in fact from a prose poem by English poet Logan Pearsall Smith called 'Consolation'), it will be a good entry point to begin speaking about the academic subject. To quote the poem by Smith from which Larbaud picks and translates the title for his compilation of essays (Ce Vice Impuni, la Lecture) on the act of reading:

> The other day, depressed on the Underground, I tried to cheer myself by thinking over the joys of our human lot. But there wasn't one of them for which I seemed to care a hang–not Wine, nor Friendship, nor Eating, nor Making Love, nor the Consciousness of Virtue. Was it worthwhile then going up in a lift into a world that had nothing less trite to offer? Then I thought of reading– the nice and subtle happiness of reading. This was enough, this joy not dulled by Age, this polite and *unpunished vice*, this selfish, serene, life-long intoxication. (Italics, mine)

The cultural capital attached to the idea of reading needs a little elaboration. Reading is considered as a means to an aspirational high culture end. Moreover it is a self-indulgence that is hailed across classes. One is encouraged to read from an early age as the exercise gradually acquires the twin undertones of pleasure and aspirational value. There are countless studies and lectures on the internet age that infer that more people are reading than ever before and in countless ways. Blogs, vlogs, e-newspapers, journals and the advent of social networking sites have encouraged a vigorous circulation of ideas and opinions. New age forms of literatures-fanfictions, flash fictions, and memes are a testimony to the way the wired-in generation of individuals make use of the internet to engage with ideas. At the same time, there is a growing sense that a lot of what happens on internet is passive consumption primarily because of the format of HTML that does not so much as imply, but *push*es one from one hyperlink to the other. Azuma in *Japan's Database Animal* shows the way these two ways of immersion (one passive and the other somewhat active) in the culture of anime, manga, science fiction and video games go hand in hand. Moreover, for Azuma, these are inflective of the global phenomenon of postmodernism even as some otaku are more passive in their engagement than others as they collect and consume the cultural products without partaking in the exchange. The way in which the otaku does not care for the 'originality' of a text before immersing herself to it is a direct example of Jean Baudrillard prediction of the way in which the boundary between the original and the copy weakens in postmodern society. Countless spinoffs, fan games, and fanzines of amateurs and authors alike proliferate and float on the databases and are voraciously consumed by the otakus. Azuma goes further and tackles the popular claim that otakus are

psychopathological subjects by showing that the otaku's preference of the real over the fictional by proclaiming a group-affiliation over those of blood or the nation is a postmodern characteristic of the preference of the fiction over the real in that they "shut themselves into a hobby community not because they deny sociality but rather because, as social value and standards are already dysfunctional, they feel a pressing need to construct alternative values and standards" (*Database* 27). For Azuma, the compulsive and feverish consumers of anime, manga and, video games are symptomatic of the animalisation of the human in postmodernism. His characteristic of the animal is derived from Alexandre Kojeve's reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* where "people come to use cultural products for the immediate satisfaction of needs without searching for or desiring profound underlying meaning from them". However, given the vast negative discourse in philosophy that has always brought back the animal into the discourse to show all that makes *us* human, i.e. animals as paradoxically constitutive of traits that they lack vis a vis the human- language, knowledge, awareness, imagination, Azuma's analogy (or, as has been referred to in the book as animetaphor) of the animal compels one to think about the comparison can add to our understanding of the otaku in that, what do animals offer that the human and snobbish alternatives deny? (*Database* xxvii) The implications of the analogy of the otaku to understand the phenomenon of postmodernism are far-reaching. However, for our immediate purpose, I shall restrict myself to understanding human behaviour in the internet and by extension information age in this light.

The various links embedded within the body of the hypertext, is "hyper simply because its structure is such that it seeks to preserve the authority of all the units that comprise its documentary array. In this respect a hyperedition resembles that fabulous circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere". (Mcgann qtd. in Alonso,1299). The internet is a space that in addition to allowing endless virtual travel also invites a fluid play of identities. Alonso calls the "euphoria derived from the vertiginous, endless permutations that the medium appears to afford" as an instance of the internet sublime where "Place thus loses out to space, in a move that short circuits hierarchical considerations about access to and the use and development of the new technologies… (and it) beckons us with its exhilarating threat of overwhelming our analytic categories" (1299). Add to this the different ways that we are plugged into the social network through the medium of the internet and one begins to get a sense of the

way in which individual subjectivity is diffused and dissipated across the optical and/or wireless medium of the Network.

The internet user is implicated in a quite complex matrix that is dispersed over a variety of technologies and devices. In this manner, the position of the user is more complicated than that of an otaku, which describes a *particular kind* of immersion while the user is no less than a node in the unprecedented network that *is* the information age. Apart from the various other forms of technologies for simplifying everyday chores, there is the all round access to the cyberspace that characterizes this subject. Sven Birkerts has explored the psychological and cognitive aspect of this wired-in subject in a rather recent book *Changing the Subject* (2014) Birkerts' method is an interesting one as he anchors it in his own experience as a twentieth century individual transitioning from the Marshall Mcluhan-esque milieu that hailed the advent of the media of the day to the head-on collision with the information age. Needless to say, his reaction is as alarmed as that of Paul Virilio's cataclysmic pronouncements on new media and need to be incorporated with caution. Quite a lot has been written on the cultural impact of new media. However, Birkerts sounded the gong twenty five years ago as he suggested three interesting and broad directions in which new media and cultural studies should focus.

The first reference is made to language. English- the lingua franca of the internet has been reclaimed on the internet. Vowels are being dropped in daily communication over the internet- a phenomenon that started with the imposed character limit over instant messaging and social media. With the advent of listicles and the race to win page views, almost all the listicles start with superlatives (10 reasons why Lady Gaga is the best, this video is the best thing that will happen to you today, 20 best cat memes on internet etc). In doing so, they reveal a hyperawareness of the titles of these lists of ephemerality of the medium of the internet when they bracket off the superlative with times markers like 'today' or 'right now'. –implying that the list could very well be different the next day as the information it carries multiplies and goes viral. Indeed what is "best ever" today could be the "worst ever" tomorrow. Superlatives have flooded our everyday conversations such as "amazing", "the best", "super", and "worst ever" are words that recur quite often in our daily conversations and not just over the internet. It is here, on the internet that one sees accentuated what Jameson meant by "artificiality, arbitrariness and a waning of affect" (*Postmodernism* 16). Birkerts warned about this culture of hyperbole and exaggeration as he considered language as one of the four developments that cultural theorists

might watch out for "as our 'proto-electronic' era yields to an all electronic future" (*Gutenberg Elegies* 128), As we are saturated by language than ever before and words and ideas incessantly regale us from all sides as we drown in the cacophony of (what Hamlet calls out in a flash of genuine frustration while feigning madness) 'words, words, words' in the present age, words seems to have lost significance.

The second aspect as mentioned by Birkerts is a "flattening of historical perspectives" as he suggests 'our perception of history will alter' as the circuitous life plants in a perpetual present. The capacity of storing and accessing information is surrendered onto increasingly smart devices as we relinquish our capacity to narrativise our lives onto social media via timelines. More importantly, Birkerts mentions,

> …our sense of the past is not only a linguistic construct, but is in some essential way represented by the physical accumulation of books in library spaces…Moreover, we meet the past as much in the presentation of words in books of specific vintage as we do in any isolated act or statistic. The database, useful as it is, expunges this context, this sense of chronology, and admits us to a weightless order in which all information is equally accessible. (Elegies, 129)

The *Gutenberg Elegies*, as its subtitle suggests, is primarily concerned with reading in the digital age. However, as one explores the way in which daily living has been transformed by the presence of digital and smart devices, this idea of the flattening of a historical perspective becomes more meaningful. One important way in which we narrativise our lives has been explored in the field of gerontology as it suggests a continuous engagement with those aspects of our lives we deem important and meaningful enough to help connect the dots of our lives. The space that we inhabit is one such aspect of our embodied reality that helps in the making of a sense of identity. As more and more of our daily chores are handled by smart devices, and our embodied reality shrinks to its most basic, functional self, and finally all but disappears as we plug into the circuitous life, our sense of past and future is being eroded in favour of the 'here' and the 'now'. "The more we grow rooted in the consciousness of the now, the more it will seem utterly extraordinary that things were ever any different…the past that has slipped away will be rendered ever more glorious, ever more a fantasy play with heroes, villains, and quaint settings and props." The dangers of simplifying history, as has been established by the current regime in India are for all of us to see. But what is interesting is the way internet has enabled one and all to vociferously claim sides in this ever more superficial debate on the past.

The third reason for worry in the digital age would, according to Birkerts would be ''the waning of the private self. We may even now be in the first stages of a process of social collectivisation that will over time all but vanquish the ideal of the isolated individual'' (130) As the circuits we are wired into keep humming, the devices keep buzzing, as "the doors and windows of our habitation matter less and less and the world sweeps in through the wires" (130). As the nature of the subjective space changes, the self, Birkerts declares, will change.

As the three issues that Birkerts highlights come into reality- as language mutates during constant communication, as historical perspectives flatten, as private selves shrink, it is important to ask as to how have the cognitive capacity of individuals changed over time? Attempts to answer this question may help us in understanding the way in which subjectivity has changed in the digital era.

One can start the discussion by looking at the way the myth of 'multitasking' has been debunked by neuroscience and behavioural studies. Countless research has shown how multitasking does not enable us a greater hold over what we do, and rather dilutes the intensity with which we approach out everyday activities. Multitasking is, however, marked by interruption and thus, is being replaced by 'switch-tasking'. It is important to note that the cognitive overload that switch-tasking entails has been found to reduce the brain's density and slow our reaction time, thereby reducing our overall productivity. But to understand finer nuances of the same, we need to first understand the studies pursued by neurosciences with respect to our brain function. On a preliminary level, it has been proved that our brain shows phenomenal plasticity in terms of moulding itself to the needs and requirements of newer, ever-changing environments and immediate tasks. Birkerts cites a study done on London Cab drivers' brains which reveals that there is a direct correlation between their daily job and their enlarged hippocampus which is responsible for "storing and manipulating spatial representations of a person's surrounding" (*Changing* 76). In the same book, Birkerts observes that while it is a prerequisite for the cabbies to memorise all the lanes of a complicated city like London, the study shows that the 'smaller anterior hippocampus' had to shrink in order to make space for the enlargement of the other area. This implies that cabbies' aptitude for certain other memorization techniques must have been adversely affected by another necessary enlargement. He further goes on to sum up his argument against the rationalisation of new media as *just* a medium and a tool to achieve things we have been meaning to achieve in a faster, speedier way. He suggests,

"…our growing engagement with the fluid, quasi-neural network that is the Internet is most certainly modifying- even *radically* modifying- our cognitive make up"(77) and further implies that we may be moving towards a man-machine miscegenation. The terminology miscegenation, racist as it is, becomes a telling example of Birkerts absolute anxiety, even fear of the newer technologies.

The notion of serendipity- popularly understood as a lucky find- exists on the internet as far as chancing upon a good song, movie, book or even a dress or gadget. However, such an idea of serendipity is quite far from its deep, philosophical meaning- the word derives from the name of the place Serendip, as it appears in a Persian folktale (*Changing*, 48). Serendipity is an idea that interrupts the predictable or deterministic nature of life by allowing a mysterious interaction between the everyday reality and the laws of the universe wherein, it allows for a new way of looking, the possibility of re-cognition "that certain causally unrelated events can be experienced as thematically kindred…to extend the reach of the meaningful by allowing for various kinds of suggestive resonance" (Birkerts, 48). A serendipitous moment, is a moment of transformation in an individual's psyche, a wondrous moment of recognition and amazement at the "larger unknowability (and mystery) of most of existence" (49)- a call to imagination and wonder while rational faculties g(r)asp at meaning. The world of the internet, with its increasingly complex algorithms to predict my behaviour and refine my searches along with its monumental ability to sift through vast streams of data to provide me possible answers in a blink, (through search engines, GPS etc) alters our "fundamental orientation towards the sublime unknowns of existence"(49). As the complexity of the algorithms increases, the internet continues to shape my experience of my browsing based on my past behaviour- conceiving me as "a sum of my behaviour" incapable and unlikely to change my preferences, contradict myself or exhibit any behaviour that deviates from the algorithmically predicted. It can be granted that serendipitous moments may have a logic of their own that is beyond our comprehension, but there is no denying that there is something about finding a much-coveted book for rupees 10 on a random outing, that quite defies logic. But, coming back to the point of algorithmic determinism Birkerts says, that harmful or no, it is "difficult to win against the grain of ease" (52) which implies, that these "preference feeders…are covertly shifting us from initiative to obedience" (52) and in the process eliminating any chance for a moment of serendipity and unpredictability. When we rely on algorithms to find the love(s) of our lives, we relinquish all possibilities of serendipity to an

essentially rational system. The rare pleasure of discovering a gem amidst a pile of books at Daryaganj is replaced by a link-to link browsing on the internet to save time, money and sweat. While ease of access has been a driving force behind almost all our technological advancement, it is when it begins to alter our faculties to the point of no return that a deep engagement with the phenomenon becomes most pertinent.

One valid question would be- who is to say that the technologies like the Internet of Things are more transformative than technologies in the past, i.e. what makes philosophers like Birkerts assume an apocalyptic tone about the moment of today on the scale of history? What is it about the information age that is so alarming to the likes of Virilio? And how do I claim an objective distance from the phenomenon I observe and claim to analyse even as I am implicated within the system by my debilitating dependence on media technology say, the (interconnected) internet, phones, ebook readers and laptops? Recognising the problem of trying to isolate oneself from an environment one is trying to analyse, Birkerts posits, a tad dramatically about the phenomenon of the smart-everything as an environment or cultural zeitgeist, "What if the elephant in the room, is the room itself?" And, if the elephant is the room itself, how does one begin to conceive of a methodology to explore such an all pervading phenomenon?

The point about the unprecedented nature of "smart" technology has been quite apparent from the start but now is the time to say it in as many words. A lot of the alarm about the new media has to do with its increasingly inextricable relation to market. The hyper-commercialised nature of the Internet and technology (and they are no longer completely distinguishable) play an active role in changing human will and subjectivity like never before owing to the way in which the new media interacts directly with our brains through our senses.

Birkerts begins to weave together an intricate picture of an ever-shrinking world by means of a lateral expansion of connection, where he hints at a kind of a "cognitive collectivism". This kind of a technology, Birkerts affirms by quoting McLuhan, enables us to collectively transform us:

> It is not only our material environment that is transformed by our machinery." In the words of McLuhan scholar David Lochhead, " We take our technology into the deepest recesses of our souls. Our view of reality, our structures of meaning, our sense of identity—all are touched and transformed by the technologies which we have allowed to mediate between ourselves and the world. We create machines in our image and they, in turn, recreate us in theirs. (65)

The economically binding character limit of (roughly 160 8-bit characters) text-messaging (where one had to pay per SMS), was soon replaced by the internet enabled Facebook whose initial word limit was 160 characters. This was soon increased to 5000 characters just as Twitter began to register its presence as a public platform primarily because of its distinctive 140 character limit. The results are for all of us to see. Such a curtailing of characters to be used on a public form of expression has led to a general reconfiguration of language where vowels, silent consonants, articles, and prepositions are rendered superfluous to the spellings. Moreover, the increasingly commercialised space of the internet has caused the different news and views websites to be in a continuous competition with each other. Result: a flood of hashed and re-hashed data in forms of click bait articles and cat pictures (why cats and why not snakes, is something the internet is trying to compensate for by now propagating images of cute baby snakes). As mentioned earlier, the race for most page views has resulted in the flooding of cyberspace with superlatives, most evidently in list-articles or listicles. Though the list is largely subjective but appears to carry the weight of popular opinion as it establishes its authority by using superlatives. The question of how does the author reach the conclusion about the elements of the list being the 'best' is bypassed owing to the abundance of such posts across websites. In turn, our everyday life is flooded with superlatives now[4]. While advertising has always resorted to superlatives to create a sense of inadequacy in the user, the use of hyperboles and superlatives to interact on the Internet is one in many attempts (apart from emoticons) to inject expression onto the dry medium of Internet.

Fabian Schäfer in "Animalisation, subjectivity and the Internet" (2009) likens the surfing, or browsing through databases to what Walter Benjamin terms "reception in a state of distraction".

> This mode of perception, according to Benjamin is based on the 'tactile quality' of the object of perception- in Benjamin's case, movies and photographs. This tactility of visual media Benjamin describes is even emphasised by the interactivity of the Internet or databases… The perception of the internet is, in Benjamin's terms, one of 'tactile appropriation' that is based on 'habitualisation' rather than on 'attention'. (Schäfer, 2009)

Taking the Benjaminian metaphor forward, one can say that the act of surfing on the internet consists in parts of being a flaneur in cyberspace. Or rather, one wished it were so, for most users. The idleness, laziness and curiosity that is associated with the act of strolling the streets

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[4] http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/fashion/death-by-internet-hyperbole-literally-dying-over-this-column.html

for no particular end is somewhat similar to letting oneself wander from link to link, in a way the flaneur would go lane after lane in quiet contemplation. The "distracted or habitualised perception", as is explained by Schäfer through Benjamin, is not necessarily a bad thing since "the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at the turning point of history can not be solved by optical means, that is by contemplation alone. They are mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation"(Schäfer "Animalisation"). Through the means of certain other theories, Schäfer infers that deep contemplation as well as surfacial skimming is important to enrich the experience over the internet. It is an important thought, since a linear and rational experience of the internet based on algorithms and probability can only be broken or interrupted by the exercise of active thought and intuition to interrupt the flow of links to allow for contemplation and idleness.

3.3 Diffused Subjectivity

Enough has been written about the invisible and all-pervasive nature of new media in the internet age. Hayles's *How we became Posthuman* discussed in detail in the previous chapter, was a thesis against dismissing the body in the posthuman era. She focussed her attention on disembodied consciousness- as witnessed in the literature that dealt with this subject, which understood the body as nothing more than its functional value. Further, the body could be replaced and substituted with the help of prosthetics. Hayles' central premise was aimed at resituating politics within these discursive practises where she begins with a warning against dismissing existing politics of class, gender; race and geopolitics in the general euphoria of technological advancement. However, while speaking about the need for a shift in the analytical categories for this transition, Hayles writes,

> In the posthuman view, by contrast, conscious agency has never been "in control". In fact, the very illusion of control bespeaks a fundamental ignorance about the nature of the emergent processes through which consciousness, the organism, and the environment are constituted… In this account, emergence replaces teleology; reflexive epistemology replaces objectivism; *distributed cognition replaces autonomous will*; embodiment replaces a body seen as a support system for the mind; and a dynamic partnership between human and intelligent machines replaces the liberal humanist subjects' manifest destiny to dominate and control nature". (*Posthuman* 288, italics mine)

Hayles' positive outlook to the future about human-machine partnership and upholding the idea of "distributed cognition" as a move towards the democratization of interiority are fascinating ideas for the time, but have proved problematic as Birkerts in *Changing the Subject (2014)* explores "the subjective, along with the transformative power of new information technologies" albeit in an alarming tone. (*Changing,* 13)

Information, Birkerts defines as constitutive of data and context in tandem. At the same time, he says "very little of what now impinges on us is really information. It is data…*usable* only when it can be given a context" (15). The initial euphoria over the potential of the internet to connect and link all of the world's texts, arts and studies was infectious. But imagine a hypertext (it is not hard anymore to do so) with most if not all of its key words and phrases highlighted and leading to other hyperlinked texts. The implications are forbidding for the reader/scholar. Such a networked platform of reading would imply that there is no end to reading (consumption)- no such concept of a primary or secondary reading in a decentralized, non-hierarchised network of information- let alone the ability to get down to actually write (*produce*) something, or in fact to have an opinion over the matter. In order to facilitate search, the logical step in projects that have sought to create links between existing texts has been to sort these based on commonalities along the lines of words and ideas expressed (think elibraries, websites of comics, fanfiction etc). What does this kind of categorisation tell us about the way we are heading?

In his book *Otaku,* Azuma speaks of the shift from the snobbish otaku to the animalised otaku by tracing it to the way in which given the sheer number of texts being produced. The Otaku began to "catalogue, store, and display the results. In turn, this database provides a space where users can search for the traits they desire and find new characters and stories that might appeal to them." The translators of the book further clarify that the "database" Azuma speaks of is

> not simply the kind of computer program or Web site for storing and retrieving information that humans are finding increasingly difficult to live without, but rather a model or a metaphor for a worldview, a grand "nonnarrative" that lacks the structures and ideologies (grand narratives) that used to characterise modern society. (*Database* xvi)

There are a lot of points to be made here. Firstly, while literally the database *is* a digital one, the 'metaphor/model' that Azuma speaks of is the kind in which the otaku cultural paradigm began

to reorient itself according to the changing demands of the otaku. Slowly and gradually, the games and anime began shedding the need for deep and elaborate settings in favour of dramatic texts and visuals for quicker gratification. Secondly, the grand 'nonnarrative' referred to by Azuma is made of disparate variables, some of which are similar while others are contradictory. These variables together constitute the choices for the otaku in the database. I advance this theory in order to better understand the oft-heard (and legitimate) complain of the falling number of cerebral texts on the internet, and the presence of mundane and kitschy material on the web that constitutes popular culture today. The overly dramatic nature of populist material shall be taken up in a more meaningful manner at a later point in the thesis. The web is filled with articles that begin with "n number of easy ways to" and boast of offering an immediate acquaintance with philosophies, philosophers, canonical authors/their works, painting and all sorts of other cultural products to their readers. With such pre-digested morsels a click away, contemplative processes of reading will steadily decline as more of us turn to quick ingestion.

It is difficult, nay, impossible to not get cognitively overwhelmed at some point in the face of a ceaseless onslaught of information. Hayles wrote about bringing back the body into the posthumanist discourse in the era of optical fibres. What we now call the information age has transformed itself from wired to an invisible wireless (hence, untraceable) modern living system, which takes us further and further from "our embodied physical reality" (Changing, 15). What was being hailed as the Internet of Things (objects such as vehicles, buildings, cars, home appliances etc electronically enabled and connected to the network to facilitate the user by mutual exchange of data -without the assistance of the user-in between) has now gained itself the name of Internet of Experience[5]. The internet of experience is a term used to highlight how the internet of Things will shape and facilitate our everyday experience. One wonders what the daily experience will comprise of, when all our physical world has 'come online', and the physical reality has been all but invisiblised given that they function smartly i.e. by themselves based on the mutual exchange of data. Technology aimed at 'facilitating' the user is meant to enhance their online experience- the experience of the cyberspace. The world of William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, with the concept of a wired-in consciousness is not too far off in the future. From touch-driven technology to a move towards psychically-controlled devices, the body is increasingly being rendered superfluous to one's everyday experiences.

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[5] http://www.dprism.com/digital-transformation/the-internet-of-things-no-the-internet-of-experience/

With the constant piling up of more and more electronic devices to do our everyday chores, what, one wonders, does this imply for the embodied reality outside the virtual one? When all the devices for our everyday chores become interconnected and "smart", the immediate reality will be no more than mere presence, controlled by the smart devices in order to perform their functional roles, as all our faculties are directed towards the wired-in experience? When one is wired into the network, all of the faculties are directed towards a single point focus- that of the online. The IoT is dedicated to bringing "our physical world… online".

Information excess has created its own self-propelled industry in the true sense of a postmodern irony. From consultation firms which store and produce weekly or monthly commentary on the data and its patterns to institutional and academic studies such as those pursued in fields such as informatics and cultural studies that speak about the "problem" of information excess and the global flow of information, the participants in this industry are endless. The idea that we have been assailed with information is not new. From as far back as information that drives these devices floods our life and saturates it as one plugs out of our immediate reality and into a cyber one. As a large chunk of global capital and the best minds in engineering and advertising orient themselves to selling us these technologies, the question to ask is, what does this imply for individual subjectivity of the user, and of the culture at large? The answer is closely linked to the concept of the one and the many, or rather, the one *of* the many. As we immerse ourselves into the digital and online experience, we surrender ourselves to the algorithms to sort our data for us based on our previous interaction. The smart-devices orient themselves based on our previous behaviour.

The circuitous nature of life in the Internet Age is marked by predictability as it is constantly being intravenously fed data and works through algorithms of if-you-like-this-then-you-may-also-try as well as the smart devices (that predict your behaviour and act accordingly). This point is dealt with in detail by Birkerts. The digital world and the world of the internet, he explains, is no place for serendipity, and its consequences for the psychology of the "user" are far reaching. The speculation is rife that we may be moving towards a new form of subjectivity- "disrupted, decentred, disintegrated, disseminated or multiplied" (Erik Chia-Lee "Thinking Cyber-subjectivity"). Given the nebulous nature of reality, the implications of such subjectivity will be quite difficult to comprehend at any point as it adds to the idea of a world inhabited by a collective of such de-centred and identity-less subjects. Erik Chia-Lee tries to explore this idea in

"Thinking Cyber-subjectivity" wherein he is aware that neither the alarmist tendencies of cultural theorists nor the overtly celebratory and optimistic projections of a new reality from the ashes of the old in the cyberspace era are of any help in an honest exploration of the future of individual subjectivity in the age of the internet. He makes a case for eschewing the theoretical configurations that posit the construction of society and subjectivity based on "the phantom of the past" where subjectivity was supposedly higher, more coherent *or* "on the fantasy of the beyond" i.e. a postmodernist carnival without ends. He argues that doing so will drain the "energy and vitality of (cyber-)society and (cyber-)subjects and suggests a middle ground as he articulates a theory of the here- and the now, actively posited between the split-subject and the split-object, giving us "the critical powers to confront cyberspace so as, not to subvert and destroy it, but to retain its creative energy in perpetual self-(de)construction, always opening out to myriad re-symbolisations of its tele-socio-political networks". (Chia Lee, "Thinking Cyber-subjectivity)

3.4 Subjectivity and Pedagogy

It helps to recall Azuma here who suggested that two impulses of database interface arise vis-à-vis the Otaku. He argues that of these, one is primarily an animalised and passive one way consumption of the cultural products by the otaku and the other is the idea that life within the internet is *all* about consumption by users. The latter, he suggests, is the active way in which otaku indulge in classifying and categorising the huge quantities of anime, manga and video games so as to establish a *humanesque* engagement with a hobby-passion, which involves the otaku as they "actively intervene in received commodities by breaking down the narratives into their compounds. This "double structure" of deconstruction and reconstruction" that leads Azuma to,

> …interpret the otaku culture as a deconstructivist and, thus, subversive form of cultural reception that brings it close to a deconstructivist method in contemporary literary theory that offers a subject position to intervene in existing cultural forms or the discourse. Azuma bases this assertion also on the fact that to the otaku it doesn't matter any longer if the "author" of the small narratives they consume is a professional— "authorized" by one of the big manga or anime publishers—or an amateur who publishes his self-made anime or manga in one of the many fanzines… or the Internet.
> (Schäfer "Ludic Philosophy" 124)

The humanistic impulse to sort, categorise make meaning and interpretation and create more narratives show that no matter how "animalesque" the interaction with the internet grows, the human impulse to narrativise and make meaning is something that is common to the social media platforms. Tumblr, Reddit and fanfiction websites attest to that. The users of these websites are those techno-savvy people who are mostly susceptible to the harms that new medias and technology can wreck on the cognitive capacities of its users. However, looking at the way humanistic impulses of narrativisation and humour proliferate over these websites, it is hard to say that the machinisation of the human has as yet reached alarming levels.

As attention spans reduce, as linguistic and lexical skills are sacrificed at the altar of brevity and as we collectively face a crisis in our historical imagination, it is important to acknowledge that there is something that is happening in the cognitive capacities of the human brain that is changing our make-up. It has become more imperative than ever to find out ways in which individual and the social imaginary is responding to such an animalisation. To turn towards the way Azuma responds to the charge of otaku as affect-less, unfeeling animals by a one way consumption is by tying up the issue with a psychoanalytic reading of the very nature of postmodernism. Azuma says that the absence of a grandnarrative in postmodernity, is supplemented by a double-layer structure of small narratives and a grandnonnarrative, i.e. of simulacra and database. However, while the database refuses to lend itself to meaning the otaku of the 90s are simply "moved by the drama of the outer surface layer of the work, despite their desire to dissemble, analyze, and reassemble works, or *precisely because of this desire*" (*Database* 94). Azuma explains this phenomenon with the help of what are called 'novel games'. Through the long and exhaustive discussion he shows how the games are divided in double-layers to yield to the desire for the system at the level of the database, and the need for drama at the level of simulacra. The former requires the "sociality" of the otaku- the need to file away, share, buy and sell derivative works, and the latter exhibits the need for the narratives is satisfied individually, where is demands to be moved by the fiction of the games in lieu for their withdrawal from lived-reality.

Azuma further describes the way in which the evolved nature of market in postmodernity has detached affect and emotion from its social context of empathy for the "processing" of emotions nonsocially, in solitude and in an animalistic fashion. Azuma calls this trend of a demand for smaller narratives as simulacra for animalisation and an emptied out humanity or

sociality of the database model as the picture that emerges out of postmodernism in the 1990s of the otaku. The otaku model is a fitting analogy for the situation of the information saturated age that we inhabit as mentioned before. Going by the discussion so far, we detect two aspects of the way in which life in the internet age and by extension in the Information age has changed. There are two aspects to this both of which overlap and sustain the circuit. These two kinds of aspects are of dispersed subjectivities a negative one, immersed within the circuit, the Passive consumer and the other is the active one. Together they constitute what has been called numerous names-the hive mind, the collective consciousness, digital totality, the Cyclops. Cyberspace is a decorporealised, globally networked space, available at a click to anyone with an access to (as yet) neutral, unheirarchised space of the World Wide Web. Till the time Data service providers do not get to tinker with who gets to access how much of internet we can continue to believe in Net neutrality speak about the problems of accessing the world wide web as it exists now- a somewhat commercialized, snooped on as well as a space that continues to still be a medium of expression for anyone with *access* to it. For the more savvy ones, it is a medium of creative expression more than to comment and share. At the same time, given its networked nature, the internet is characterized by simultaneity of experiences- a fracture in time.

Fabian Schäfer in his paper "Ludic Philosophy: Subjectivity, Choice and Virtual death in Digital media" takes cue from Azuma's formulations and makes a case for the idea of a "productive and "humanesque" or subjective way of dealing with digitized information" as opposed to looking at the cyber-influx as enabling an animalisation of the user. Most importantly for Schäfer in the context of media literacy and pedagogy, it is important to "teach the users of these new media the sharp distinction between these two modes. Particularly with regard to the use of digitalized knowledge and the Internet, it will be of particular importance to teach contemplative and analytic reading to a generation of otaku and Google users that possesses a highly developed digital literacy but is beginning to lack basic reading and writing skills" ("Ludic" 125).

With this, we come back to the role that pedagogy can play in dealing with information excess. It is important that the major critical works I have included so far speak about the importance of pedagogy in the postcybernetic era have called for bringing back the affective, aesthetic (in the case of Felski) and the humanesque (in the case of Azuma and Schäfer) in pedagogic practices. This is a significant point because as Azuma highlights the

commodification of emotions and affect in postmodern culture has lead to superficial engagement with affect and emotion. In order to resist this Felski, in the context of professionalisation and mechanisation of academia, and Schäfer in the context of wired-in individuals, suggest a reclaiming of affect by a horizontal (not vertical) engagement with the texts. A turn based on "contemplative and analytic" approaches.

However, what do such calls to the affective, imply in the cultural moment that we inhabit in the Third World?

4. Chapter Three: 'Saturation' and the Third World Academia

Thus far, we have explored information excess as a historical and cognitive phenomenon, without going very deeply into its socio-political aspects. But so far, I think it will not be a gross generalisation to call information excess a symptom of the postmodernization of progress, or more specifically, development. This understanding opens up a new side of information excess, that has been explored, but not from the same perspective as I hope to show. The issue at the core of information saturation is "access". Information has long been declared the new currency, a declaration that has already excluded a vast majority of the world, which is yet to develop the requisite infrastructure that enables this vast majority to depend on Google for answers: and for authorities to snoop on citizens, both local and global. When we assume information age to be a reality, it is a reality that touches the people who have managed to plug themselves into the Gibsonian universe of electric signals and flickering screens. But this is not to say that the other side of the globe has never, or is not experiencing an overwhelming amount of information and data.

In an interview with Ashis Nandy, published in 2006 in form of a book titled *Thinking India*, Ramin Jahanbegloo queries Nandy about his responses to globalisation which seems to have expanded the supremacy of English via Internet, and has failed to change the functioning of the state institutions of India. Nandy speaking before the Modi-rhetoric had gained currency with the Indian bourgeoisie, said that he does not believe that globalisation will "ever become an electoral issue" in India. He later goes on to explain that:

> Even if we raise the question of language, while it may be true that 80 per cent of the content on the Internet is in English, we have to remember that 0.5 per cent of Indians have computers, probably around 2.5 per cent of Indians speak English, and a little more than 60 per cent are literate. Some discriminations and disparities do not touch the majority of the population, or touch them less. *This is a problem of the middle class, not of ordinary Indians, who couldn't care less about whether 80 per cent pf content on Internet is in English.* Even if the percentage were 100 per cent, how would it affect them? (Nandy 129, italics mine)

It would have been difficult to argue against Nandy's argument when the book was published in 2006. A decade later, digital India is one of the driving mottos of the central regime, and globalisation and digitisation, contrary to Nandy's predictions, did turn into an electoral issue. Cheap smart phones are a reality. However, digital connectivity is still a far off dream for the corporate houses and Facebook (the free Internet scam is a case in point). But this chapter is not

concerned about the underestimation of digital technology by Nandy, or the direct impact of Internet on India. I am interested in another side of information saturation altogether: one that includes digital information saturation, but is about so much more. It is an everyday reality in a "third world" country.

The whole body of postcolonial literature can be seen as an intervention in that direction, in that it recognised the need for relevant research and understanding of former colonies. The sweeping statement I am making is of course in need of qualifications, in that even the body of postcolonial research has its own complex political implications, given the way in which postcolonial authors are themselves the new "it" in the global market of knowledge, of the exotic, hitherto unexplored category. My preoccupation in this chapter has more to do with the more immediate problems assailing the academia in the so-called third world, with a focus on Indian academia in the context of theoretical and cognitive excess.

4.1 Theory and the Academic Subject: A Third World Perspective

My focus is the third world because the popular meaning of information excess does not quite fit the everyday existence of the developing countries where the primary focus is as basic and rooted in lived reality of food, shelter, hygiene and employment. However, as I shall try to show in this chapter, an investigation into the academic institutions of the so-called third world country helps expand the concept of saturation, and pushes us to a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be informationally saturated, and can help us understand how to overcome the consequent cognitive block. The objective is to seek a "global" understanding of the problem. While the theory used in this chapter is hardly new or original, I hope that the contemporary perspective on it is something that is informed by my own situatedness as an academic subject in India. The idea of the academic subject that I use, is one derived from what Fredric Jameson in "Third world literature in the Era of multinational Capitalism" defines as the idea of a subjectivity which is "fragmented at a global scale"(67). Jameson, while speaking in the essay is referring to a third-world subject who is also a cog in the giant multinational capitalistic wheel. Such a subject has his or her own list of preferential reading but will experiment with new literatures nonetheless. However, and this is an implication which is not quite spelt out in the essay, if this subject is an academic one, he or she is required to mould his or her preferences according to "what is selling" in the academic market at the particular time. So while he or she-

owing to their missionary school upbringing in India- may find intellectual nourishment in Shakespeare and the Romantics with a dash of Ian Foster and Oscar Wilde, as a third world subject, and situated in the "now" he or she is driven by the idea of seeking something new (and preferably local) in ethnographic study and/or cultural studies to sell to the global market of ideas. Given the vast amount of hair-splitting that has already taken place in the area of his/her interest, and given the paucity of seats in research departments, will she choose a synopsis, however original, on Oscar Wilde over a newly discovered theatre form in a remote village in Assam? One is not saying it is unethical to go looking for a hitherto 'unexplored' area, but it is when novelty gets fetishized to an extent that it hinders genuine enquiry and stunts the intellectual growth of a collective, and is forever on the lookout for the next big idea. There is a race in the academia over looking for any thing that has not been said yet, and in my two years of being in this area I have sensed a kind of insecurity and fear among scholars guarding their research "topics" (not just entire papers, but the very subjects) and getting a paper published on it as soon as possible before someone else discovers it. This kind of a race prevents a free and open conversation about the kind of research that is taking place in the academia across the country. As a result, academic institutions in India lack the kind of platform that enables a conversation among young and old scholars on ongoing topics. While academic activities like seminars and symposiums are forever happening, the financial precariousness of some scholars prevents them from being a part of such activities.

The two questions of postmodernism and information saturation get infinitely more complicated in the context of the third world countries, so much so, that it is imperative to prove that these two questions, dubbed as first-world bourgeois problems of excess, are even valid in the third world context. Keeping in line with my earlier focus on academia and academic subjects, I shall continue to speak within the purview of the liberal-arts academic community within a developing nation like India.

In a country like India, with its human rights violations and systemic atrocity, the university knowledge, unless put to use for individual and societal nourishment, will sound a death knell on the whole project of higher education: it has already been rejected by groups in Mexico as an imposition of the West, fundamentally unsuitable for redressal of its ground realities. I speak here of what has been called by Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash as Grassroots Postmodernism.

4.2 Grassroots Postmodernism

One of the radical consequences of information saturation, is ennui and a sense of jadedness. In the context of digital media-enabled consumption, the sense that we always already know what is happening in and around the world and lack the means to make an intervention that the sense of boredom and listlessness follows. But for an academic the struggle is even more "real" in that they must overcome the everyday struggles listed above in order to produce research that can contribute to a positive struggle within society. The spirit of postmodernism, one that arises from the ground realities of the third world is the only way forward. Esteva and Prakash have worked on some valuable ideas in this direction.

Academic postmodernism "are slaying the modern dragons: science and technology; objectivity and rationality; global subjugation by the One Culture—the "culture of progress" spread across the world through the white man's weapons of domination and subjugation." (Esteva and Prakash, *Grassroots Postmodernism* 2) However, as Esteva points out, there are certain sacred cows of academic modernism that continued to be revered even by postmodernist critique. These are the "familiar reality of jobs, markets and welfare (that) threatens to collapse around them". (2) What Esteva and Prakash claim here is not a new idea. Postmodernism has been accused of furthering the cause of the market to the extent that it is understood by some as the name of the new face of capitalism. What this criticism is actually targeting is academic postmodernism- one that thrives on theorisations of differences, and has been discussed at length in the first chapter. Esteva and Prakash are part of a group of scholars that sees postmodernism more as post-modernism, in that they see it as announcing the exit of west-imposed modernity; an era of whirlwind scientific, technological advancement and portending the death of indigenous cultures of the so-called third world. It is, therefore, a teleological next-stop, and characterises radical anti-modernism. As for the word grassroot, it:

> does not include all grassroots movements or initiatives. The Shining Path, the American or German Nazis or Neo-Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan, the Anandamargis and others of the same ilk are in our view fully immersed in modernity or premodernity. "Grassroots" is an ambiguous word, which we still dare to use because its political connotation identifies it with initiatives and movements coming from "the people": ordinary men and women, who autonomously organize themselves to cope with their predicaments. We want to write about "common" people without reducing them to "the masses". (3)

Esteva and Prakash, by theorising what they call "grassroots Post-modernism" seek to "bringing these terms out of the confines of the academy to far removed and totally different social and political spaces, we hope to identify and give a name to a wide collection of culturally diverse initiatives and struggles of the so-called illiterate and uneducated non-modern "masses," pioneering radical post-modern paths out of the morass of modern life" (3). In this sense, post-modernism and postmodernism for these two, are quite the same as to "represent a kind of stringing together of local narratives of struggles", which may or may not have anything common in themselves, but only a steadfast refusal to swallow the metanarratives being fed to them, by forging their own. Thus, it asks for a global solidarity of the oppressed, while recognising that the enemy is different and the struggles are different for each grassroots collective/community. Esteva and Prakash are extremely aware of the charge of being accused of exoticising, or extoling the native's struggle and of mythification or mysticism. However, they set up their manifesto as trying to hope:

> for intercultural dialogues, creating new pluralistic discourses: modes of conversation that can
> appropriately express the *conditio humana* in a pluriverse. For scholars and activists engaged
> in understanding and supporting indigenous knowledge systems, our book tries to open doors
> to escape the study of the world's "social majorities" as primitive or "underdeveloped"
> anthropological curiosities. Abandoning projects to help or develop peoples at the grassroots,
> we invite others to join us in learning from them the knowledge and skills required to survive
> and flourish beyond modernity (5).

The reason that Esteva whole heartedly rejects the modern education system is because "replicates the educational leadership of the North" and is "catastrophic, unjust and even apocalyptic" (Esteva "Part Two" 63) It is a point well taken by the academics and activists who, even as I type this, are planning against the WTO GATS agreement signed by the Indian Government that it will accelerate the process of withdrawing from the field of education. It is as if, even as we write and critique the havoc that the market will wreck on the Indian educational system (limiting access to only those who can afford it) the impositions are well underway.

4.3 State and Saturation

Apart from research, that seeks to disengage itself from the immediate situation in order to allow for a necessary distance for the researcher to analyse it, it can also lead to armchair activism as a major means of protest in the third world. And while it is a matter of individual choice of the way one decides to engage with a social problem, it promotes an intellectual dishonesty and convenience that can harm the intellectual ethos. Conferences and seminars on environment issues, held in air-conditioned venues are a case in point. Tokenism, of an imaginative kind can go a long way in pushing students and researchers towards a rewarding engagement with the subject matter. With *Pinjra Tod* and other such movements as being entry points, what concern me now are information saturation, and the ways and means to overcome it.

The second chapter discussed at length the intertwined relationship of market and new media, located in the so-called first world. In the third world, on the other hand, the nature of information saturation in academia, apart from being closely connected to privatisation and a move towards free market, has also to do with the fast pace at which the realm of abstract ideas is expanding, while the rate of change in the real world is sluggish, and lags far behind. The problem of theory and praxis is an old one. In the west too, the insidious way in which the west is insidiously selling its interests to what it terms as "developing nations" of the world has been speculated over at length, however, just as we keep grappling with this age-old question, we must realise that in case of the so-called third world, the challenge is to decolonise the realm of knowledge, and at the same time attempting to make theory and praxis meet.

The other side of information saturation I would like to explore is by looking at the postcolonial (rather, neo-colonial?) existence of academies in India as enabling another kind of understanding of information saturation. Philip G. Altbach in "The Academic Profession: the Realities of Developing Countries" explains in detail how the "professoriate" in developing countries (taking the example of India) is peripheral to International Knowledge systems, at the centre of which are (western) Industrialised nations, providing them with a potent combination of wealth, resources and position. Furthermore, Altbach explains that the conceptualisation of higher education as in the US and Europe is based on compartmentalisation of systems of knowledge into specific departments, competition among staff, institutional hierarchy, and

specific definitions of science and hierarchy. It is this model of education that has been thrust upon the ex-colonies such as India and which these countries are trying to better. The decision-making structures that these institutions have are fundamentally based in the wealthier part of the hemisphere. The most powerful people in academia in the third world are "products" of western education and hold the reins back in this country. The "power elites" of the academia in the third world impose the same professional and administrative ethos in India. An example of the thoughtless way in which the education system has no relations with the environment can be gleaned in the way the academic calendar in higher education is organised where the times of exams and submissions clashes with the most extreme weather patterns in a tropical country such as India.

Amidst such a grim reality, Internet has been perceived as an unprecedented platform that has enabled a free and open access to and exchange of knowledge around the world. However, is it really the case? What if the reality were, that a vast majority of the third world academics were, or are in the danger of becoming mere "users" of knowledge produced by others, and therefore, have become further 'slaves' to knowledge that is being produced elsewhere? When self-reflexivity and motivation become preys to consumption and deliver to the same "international knowledge systems", indigenous research gets further exoticised and commodified, as the researchers and academics reap benefits of their research as ground realities remain more or less the same. Meanwhile, the gap between the academia and ground reality widens. Isn't this a familiar paradigm? Isn't this precisely what academic postmodern ethic has become infamous for? Hedonism and self-centeredness?

When Ramin Jahanbegloo asks Ashis Nandy of the possibility of India being a postmodern culture for instance in the case of religious fundamentalists who criticise modernity, but not in order to justify their own stance in theology but by getting theoretical justifications from postmodernism. To this, Nandy responds that formal postmodernism, the kinds that is much maligned is only *one kind* of postmodernism implying that the term itself is inexhaustive (109). Rather Nandy goes on to show that academic theories have been used often to distinguish "good" violence from "bad" violence, little recognising that organised violence of the kinds we see in riots, is a typically modern occurrence. Industrialised violence is the first marker of modernity, and it has been "a major handicap of many movements that have claimed revolutionary status and have themselves tried to provide a critique of modernity" (110).

Nandy's argument is not to be confused with a glorification of pre-modern violence of invaders and kings in that, as he himself recognises, such violence is very difficult to organise today. Instead, any justifications of modern forms of violence in society turns a blind eye to the complex way in which such violence draws strength from corporate militaristic ventures. Clearly, Nandy's import is to avoid an uncritical ingestion of postmodern aesthetics of difference and contadiction. Nandy's conception of postmodernism aligns with that of Esteva's grassroots postmodernism, as explained earlier, while he himself identifies as a "deprofessionalised" intellectual (*Talking India* 14).

The centuries old syllabus of English canon as first preference while the indigenous literature- classical as well as contemporary follows second, to be followed by that suspiciously tokenist category, world literature. Literature that is immediate and relevant is hardly to be found across Indian Universities and educational institutions, except with the minor exception of what can be called the avant-garde conceptions of syllabus in Ambedkar University, Delhi. The syllabi in a majority of central universities congratulate themselves on teaching students how to give a postcolonial reading of Shakespeare. Caliban and Cleopatra become our postcolonial heroes and muses. To students who have nurtured their own passion for local literature, the bachelors degree is tough, while they flower into their own (if they make it) by the time they come into research. The rest of us, children of the metropolitan, with no regional literature to call their own, we depend on serendipitous space of the library or the casual encounters with fellow readers. Meanwhile, the ceaseless onslaught of theoretical formulations from the west continues to flow in, during classes, and internet reading. What makes matters worse is the gap between the lived reality of an average third world academic and the space of the classroom itself.

An average student from a middle or lower income household who takes up higher education has to negotiate through various contradictions within that span. The gap between a good and a not-good university/ institution is vast, in terms of the most basic facilities such as clean toilets, that it is difficult to formulate a coherent theory of higher education. Hence, I shall focus on liberal arts education as taught in central universities of India, only. A couple of years ago, in 2014, Ashoka University- the first private university dedicated to a liberal arts curriculum- was officially opened in India. The vision of the university, as stated by its founders, was to reconnect Indian education system with its liberal, interdisciplinary heritage for the Takshila and Nalanda eras, by eschewing the highly specialist-based knowledge system of

central and state Universities: a British legacy. While the goals are admirable, the means, since privatised and commercial, are not quite. The average fees for the university excess the entire annual income of even a middle-income household. The expectation, apparently, is that families would not mind selling themselves off to provide a quality liberal arts degree to their child(ren). What is still not clear is the way the university envisages negotiating a liberal arts education with the transformation brought about by the communications technology and media. The revolutionary potential of the new communications and media technology to fundamentally change human cognition and therefore, society, has been discussed at length in the previous chapter.

4.4 Digital Criticality Against Market Invasion

The new challenges in humanities and arts education are to confront this humongous transformation taking place in front of our eyes. The need in a third world country is to negotiate this challenge via understanding the inequitable resource distribution in India. In other words, the idea is to bridge the gap between the Indian humanities classroom and the outside.

How does the idea of postmodernist saturation figure in here? A vast amount of what is taught in humanities and arts departments in India is vastly irrelevant and pointless in that, there is a fundamental gap between the curricula, as devised based on the UK model, and the immediate experience of the student. The curriculum is dominated by literature from the western canon. It is true that all literature is informed by the most basic human experience, but when a book is part of the curriculum, it will strike a sharper chord with the students if it seems to be closer, and not farther from their own experiences. While the western canon has to a large extent informed much of the trajectory of knowledge systems worldwide, the trajectory is much more complicated, and involves a more varied contribution from other cultures, than English curriculum in Indian Universities would have us believe. Much has been debated in the realm of postcolonial studies to elucidate this point. However, the curricula in most Universities, remains narrow in this regard. The undergraduate syllabus of Delhi University pays nauseous homage to world literature by including writers from fellow developing countries of Africa and Latin America. The colossal body of Indian and the even vaster body of South Asian literature itself is bound up into three tiers of classical (Kalidasa, Kabir, Meera), modern (and by modern it means the 1960s!) and diasporic writings. Apart from this, the students are taught to 'do' postcolonial

interpretation of western canon, and once in a while, depending on the vigorous environment of the classroom itself, the 'poco' question is complicated further by the woman and the caste question in contemporary India.

The problem with analysing the English literature education in India is that, so far it seems as if it is inertia on part of academia and administration, that has led to stagnation in the way literature is taught in India. While that is true to an extent (DU brought in some significant changes in its English Literature curriculum while transitioning from annual to semester mode, with some contribution from the short-lived four year undergraduate programme), the fundamental problem goes much deeper than just an administrative inadequacy. India, for private education players, is seen as being home to a population 60 per cent of whom are youth. A majority consists of youth therefore, and their parents see education as a means of upward mobility and are willing to pay any price for it. Secondly, the country itself is on the world map for providing, what PM Narendra Modi too is proud to proclaim, a cheap labour force. The majority of teaching force is employed on a contractual basis, slaving away without any form of social security and completely in grips of the administration which can fire the individuals soon as they toe the line- by showing any kind of dissent. The point I am trying to make here is, the administrative and political disinterest in education that helps intellectually nourish is harmful to an extent, that is leading to a successive "animalisation" (discussed at length in the previous chapter) of the academic subject- an animalisation that advances the cause of capitalism in seeking to make an uncritical and unprotesting labour force. Unless there is a radical overhaul of the education system that seeks to not *just* provide employable labour force, the private sector too will jump into the race to promote the larger WTO agenda. Digital literacy (not education)- a term that is being floated about by the likes of corporate giants as Facebook, seeks to promote just enough literacy to enable the users to operate facebook and other apps it deems as non-threatening. The point here is, the digital platform itself, has been almost totally invaded by the market, and would be driven by demands of the market. The digital platform works to conceal its own workings, a point discussed at length by David M. Berry. In order to make meaningful interventions on the digital platform that go in favour of its own interests and not as slaves to global market, the education system in India needs to respond to the needs by promoting digital education based on transparency and open access.

Frederic Jameson probably did not quite know the prophetic truth he uttered in that much criticised essay on "On Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" when he said that "in the third-world situation the intellectual is always in one way or another a political intellectual" especially in the Indian context. Jameson's thrust was in-keeping with his larger thesis that all third world literature is necessarily a national allegory. One must contextualise Jameson's own position, like many have done, as a US intellectual writing at a time when the US was moving towards a steady militarization. Jameson's extolling of developing nations like Cuba where a semester of higher education is dedicated to exploring the role of the intellectual in public life, is itself a lament at the lack of an organised and ceaselessly questioning and alive political atmosphere in the US universities that can protest against the Reagan era US policies. Jameson's larger thesis has been vastly problematized, starting with that crisp response from Aijaz Ahmed in 'Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory'' first published in 1987. However, the truth of what Jameson said rings true for me in an entirely different manner now, five years after reading it, in the way the entire education system of India is politicised to the extent that it is vastly dependent on the whims and fancies of the governments in power. The Indian educational system, alongside the juridical system, is a legacy of the British, with a few tweaks now and then, as the need arises for the ruling political parties. Education, as it was used by the British was a tool to educate the brown people just enough for administrative purposes (Vishwanathan 431).

The result being, that education continues to be run at the whims and fancies of the ruling class. Books are discontinued or new curriculum is introduced based on the political ideology (which itself is inconsistent in Indian polity). I am thinking of the shelving of A.K. Ramanujan's delightful and rather factual essay on multiple narratives of the Ramayana across South-Asia, because it offended the right-wing Hindutva sensitivity for challenging that one narrative (perhaps the television version of Ramanand Sagar?) which is the only one acceptable to it. However, it will be inaccurate to blame only the right-wing for the systemic rut in which the higher education is stuck in India. Even during the reign of the supposedly secular Congress party, books have been pulped or discontinued from curriculum because it offended the sensitivity of someone politically important. While India is trying to drag a centuries old system bequeathed by the colonial masters, the UK itself has upheld the importance of free speech

within academia and higher education over and above that of the general public. Noted historian and theologian G.R. Evans notes:

> The legislative protection of the still recent Education Reform Act 1988 assumed that there attaches to such (academic) 'speech' a value so supreme or perhaps merely so 'useful to society', that it is entitled to a protection beyond that which all citizens of a free society ought to be able to claim. In effect, the academics form a group which society 'pays to think' (*Academics* 2)

Amidst this political rut, the average student of English Literature, lacking the means to pursue degrees abroad, is trying to negotiate the personal with the theory taught in class. It is quite tragic that something as fundamentally dependent on the personal as literary theory, is taught and hardly ever touches lives in the way it should. Amidst the rush to implement structural changes like the FYUP, a series of poorly designed courses are hastily implemented. The next challenge is to complete the humongous syllabus, conduct exams, and declare results (that may contain errors that may take entire academic year to rectify). Contemplative practices get no time. There is a rush to finish syllabi and conduct exams, in the formative years of Bachelors programmes. The vast gap that exists between the kind of ideas that are taught in classrooms and what is put to practise is what is fundamentally wrong with higher education India.

It is this inevitable consequence of the 'mugging' theory that I consider another aspect of information saturation. The central argument of this chapter is, that unless there is an overhaul of the education system, in favour of advancing the study of indigenous systems, the academic situation in India will automatically veer in the direction of advancing the cause of the global capital. As the gap between what is taught and what is felt in literature classrooms continues to widen, and the meritocratic system continues to judge students on objective-type questions (answers for which are available on Wikipedia), the system will continue to produce consumers of global knowledge, producing research enough only to fuel the Baudrillardian spectacle of digital media entertainment, as the realities on the ground continue to fester. Countless hours in the classroom are spent discussing all that is wrong with the system. Some extremely nuanced articles on higher education have been written on the topic. Yet reality remains that we still continue to practise a centuries old system of education that violently kills motivation and will in budding intellectuals. The reality that confronts the students can be jarring. This is an inability to put to praxis what is available in the realm of the abstract. Meanwhile, the realm of the abstract expands.

4.5 Challenging the Chasm Between Theory and Praxis: Thwarting Animalisation

If these were the fault of the administration and the government, there is a ripple aspect, in that a department actively advocates this chasm between theory and praxis as a necessary evil. Throughout our bachelors, we celebrated anarchy and chaos, we questioned authority and hierarchy inside the classroom and turned in disciplined, well-worded assignments on a spectrum of topics, and learned to cite theorists to substantiate our every claim. After being taught for years that there is nothing called an "objective" point of view, and that everything needs a contexualising and qualification, this year, the English department at DU, following on the footsteps of UGC NET- buckled to pressure of authorities (teachers and administration) and changed the format of the entrance (MA, M Phil and PhD) exam to a fully objective one. A common rationale provided in favour of this new turn is, that turning to the objective method is a way of destroying meritocracy, because objective type answers can be correctly answered even by some one who does not know the correct answer (merely by fluke or the method of elimination). However, the meritocracy argument runs hollow in the way, at the MPhil level, the DU Department provides research grants according to the merit list, and is also known to allow people to take the sought-after courses on the basis of merit list. Hence, when candidates for the Masters programme are asked questions whose answers can be easily found on Google or Wikipedia, the only participant in the scenario that gains is digital media itself, steadily leaving behind other forms of contemplative reading as a legitimate means of "accumulating" knowledge. This is not to underestimate the power of Wikipedia or the encyclopaedic approach of wiki towards community-collected knowledge, but even here the exams and the mode of selection do not go beyond the obvious. There have been multiple attempts to put together streams of local-narratives, oral and transliterated and translated, from India and other so-called third world countries (The Oral Citations Project by Wikimedia Foundation, for instance), which could be promoted via including them as courses to start a discussion on digital humanities and archiving at the bachelors level. But an informative and critical use of digital media is yet to be effectively introduced in the curricula, even as the use of digital media increases exponentially among the youth of the country.

While the previous paragraph may read as a rant, I will try and locate my argument in a situation unfolding in some of the 'premier' universities of India, to substantiate what I mean by the gap between theory and praxis in academia in India.

In April 2015, the University Grants Commission released a set of guidelines titled the "Safety of Students on and off Campuses of Higher Educational Institutions" where it suggested barbed wires and tall boundary walls to keep the residential facilities safe. It also suggested manual frisking of girls and their handbags by "sufficiently armed" (3) female police personnel. Among other suggestions were a number of police stations within campus for "instant" responses to critical situations, and regular police patrol. It suggested including CCTVs and biometric systems to enable the "HEIs to keep an eye on a student's movement and whereabouts in failsafe manner" (3). Such mechanisms were included alongside calls for self-defence classes for women and a directive to institutions to maintain hygienic environments in canteens and elsewhere. The import of such draconian measures alongside the infantalization of adult men and (as the UGC refers to them in the guidelines) girl students were received with all its outrageous implications by the academic community comprising teachers as well as students. The UGC tried to wriggle out of it by claiming that those were mere "guidelines" and that institutes are free to do what they want with them.

These guidelines are relevant to begin the conversation on the way the Indian State treats higher education as not a platform for free and mutually enriching, and never-ending process but projecting itself as a nanny state, sees higher education as a continuation of the discipline-and-punish measures used at school. Little surprise then that one set of guildelines by the UGC suggests quaterly parents-teachers meetings to give feedback on their children's attendance and examination results. The fact that these 'children' are "fully grown, employable and voting adults central to the policing process" (Kidwai "Big Brother" 2015) seems irrelevant.

Two months later, in September, an article was published anonymously in Youth Ki Awaaz titled "Lady Shri Ram college student on progressive campus, but regressive Hostel. Addressing a host of issues that women hostlers face in LSR, for instance curfew hours and dress codes within the residential areas, the article states that "While the college tries to promote an ideology that focuses on making women lead, ironically the residence hall of LSR is trying to push through regressive measures" ("Lady Sri Ram College" 2015).

Shortly after the aforementioned UGC guidelines, and around the time of the Youth Ki Awaaz article, there were shouts of protest in certain nooks of the north campus of Delhi University in the form of colourful graffiti and posters exhorting women to pinjra tod (break the cage). The voices grew steadily as women from across institutions in India started narrating their plight on the facebook page that the organisers had created. Slowly, a narrative began to emerge

about the way institutional spaces were unabashedly playing the role of vanguards of patriarchy as women stepped out of homes to pursue higher education. The movement began gathering momentum, and a largely empathetic Delhi Commission for Women took cognizance of the issue and asked for a formal complaint to be filed with it. Pinjra Tod compiled a 16000 word report, citing the grievances collected from across campuses in Delhi, and called for suitable action from the Commission. Almost half a year later, DCW responded by slapping a host of notices to institutions across Delhi- central, state and Private- seeking responses to a host of questions addressed in the Pinjra Tod report. Further developments are awaited.

However, it is not the result itself that interests me the most. It is the voices, or the "event" itself, in the Zizekian sense that interests me here. Voices have been raised earlier in Delhi University against the discriminatory rules for women's hostels, the exorbitant and discriminatory fees structure (almost double the amount than what men in the hostels pay!). However, those were easily crushed by authorities, by individually witch-hunting the protesting students and calling up their parents to report that "their ward is demanding to stay on the street at one in the night!" (Bhasin 2016) and the parents would invariably try to pull the plug on dissenting voices. Clearly, requisite lessons from earlier attempts have been learnt in the amount of precautions that are taken to protect identities in the Pinjra Tod movement. The organisers, specifically the spokespersons themselves, do not stay in hostels any more, but have been part of the protests earlier in their own colleges. It is of immense interest for this dissertation in the way the women seek to address the classroom and lived realities of women (especially) in humanities courses. In an interview on the movement, Pinjra Tod addressed the question of this chasm as follows:

> However, You know, you go to class and study feminism, go to the library and read feminist texts and go for international feminist conferences only to be locked up in the hostel at 7.30pm. This contradiction reality is really frustrating. You are not able to experience the empowering possibilities of what you are reading. The UGC [University Grants Committee] has this Saksham committee report which feminists like Uma Chakravarti and Mary John have formulated. It is a really progressive report, it's about the question of women's safety and autonomy and it is saying the things that we are trying to phrase. When you tell women that we will lock you up for your safety and we will not let you make your own decisions, you are actually incapacitating them. To make women more autonomous, you have to drastically change their realities. (Bhasin 2016)

The majority, almost all noted English departments in India have courses in Higher Education Institutions (HIEs) that are global in that they are highly influenced by the western theoretical paradigm. When taught postcolonial readings in class to a class of english literature students, one of things taught is the way in which english too has been appropriated by ex-colonies and has evolved over time. However, while we were being given back our first assignments in Bachelors (a paper on the english translation of Tagore's *Ghare Baire*) our professor had mentioned how a lot of us had made extensive use of continuous tense (one of the "eccentricities" of Indian English, where we merely end up translating the syntactical structure of Hindi into English) and must get rid of the habit before exams to prevent ourselves from failing. To no ones' surprise, students who had studied in Convent schools were patted for their "grasp" and "fluency" in the English language (UK style). The lecture and strict marking worked, and by the end of our three years, the girls were congratulated for having improved their writing skills.

I come back to this issue because this is one fundamental gap between theory and practise that the women students of universities are trying to bridge in contemporary times. Pinjra Tod is an autonomous group of students spanning across universities, affiliated to neither a political party nor an NGO. They fund their activities- random film screening, discussion, public meeting- by asking for money face to face, or via Facebook. The movement rose out quite organically in the wake of the draconian UGC guidelines, and hostel-related issues that cropped up across social media. From a group of 20 to now 150, they have student support and campus presence across Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai. Apart from very specific hostel-related demands, the group has lent support to other movements in metropolitan cities that directly or indirectly relate to women's safety. One of them is to reclaim public spaces for women. On the third death anniversary of Jyoti Singh, who died a painful and much-publicised rape while travelling in a bus (with a male friend) at night, the Women affiliated to Pinjra Tod travelled in buses in various cities like Calcutta and Mumbai, singing songs of freedom and rebellion as they did so. By staking legitimacy from oral narratives and staking claim on public spaces via the traditional vocabulary of protest such as postering and graffiti, Pinjra Tod is gaining momentum by trying to stay focussed on women's issues while lending support to other movements such as the one against caste-discrimination in Campus spaces. The kind of organic community building of students on the basis of their mutual understanding of the lacks within the system and their redressal is a refreshing take within campus politics which largely depends on political

patronage, wherever it is allowed. Most technical colleges are proud to declare that their campuses are free off any kind of cumbersome student unions. With the kind of bureaucratic inertia that is seen in institutions across country, a student union is the only means through which that which is taught is thought and felt, and can be exercised. Otherwise, what is taught in classroom will remain in the realm of, what Zizek calls, University Knowledge- one that falls apart on the encounter of the real. What Esteva calls "deprofessionalised intellectuals" can only become a recurring reality when the education system gives them space for contemplation. Humour and relaxation too are endemic to the process of research and analysis. But the current system of semesters (disrupted as they are depending on the whims of those in power) bogs students with a literature that does not only make a poorly planned attempt in terms of gently introducing the realm of European and key Indian literature to students from across streams, it also does it hastily. This pushes students further to resort to the internet for their academic and recreational solutions.

The object till now has been to show the vastly different way in which the Indian Higher Education system pushes the use of digital media on its students, as opposed to the more technologically advanced nations. The study material, the canonical literature, at least, is often commonly available for Bachelors and Masters students is commonly produced by websites (such as shmoop.com) based in America. Such rote learning does not bode well for the cognitive capacities of young minds. Thus far I have tried to show two kinds of information saturation- one about the gap and the other, and a consequence of this is, being an uncritical use of the digital medium, both of these are promoted by institutional structures in the Indian context. Both of these two have been challenged by the various waves of protest that are sweeping campuses, Pinjra Tod being one of them. Undoubtedly politics is not new to Indian campuses, but what sets apart Pinjra Tod from initiatives so far, are the ways in which it continues to grow as an autonomous movement, based on the issues that plague the issues of women across campuses. The manner in which Pinjra Tod oriented itself to the contemporary situation of systemic pressure and sluggishness and its use of social media to mobilise opinion is a subject of a separate study. However, it is of concern to me here, given the way in which despite criticism of promoting a bourgeois ethos that seeks for all and complete freedom for women on campus- without seeking to contextualise its demands- Pinjra Tod has continued to focus on women on campus and has thrown its support behind other issues that centre around

gender justice and campus politics. One can see in this tenacity, a will to see the movement through to its end, keeping in mid the short shelf-life of protests these days, due to an unclear, or too large a goal in site. The latter was seen in the case of the protests against the UGC's decision to scrap the research grants to the central universities, making it clear, and the government's intent to withdraw its support from public education in keeping with the aforementioned WTO GATS agreement. Pinjra Tod had rallied behind the movement, keeping in mind the fact that the grant enables a lot of women (and men) to pursue research even against the will and pressure of family for marriage and/or employment. However, the movement petered out after a couple of months of *dharna* outside the UGC building. The reasons can be many and are open to speculation. Some attribute the reason to in-fighting among the student bodies, others cite the larger disinterest of the students, and some others to the immediate cause of severe winter in Delhi, of course it could be all three. However, given this history, Pinjra Tod has continued to rally itself with support from women as well as men, and some teachers from the universities. It has cautiously kept itself away from actively aligning with a political party, but extending support to causes it deems important, such as the JNU incident in February this year.

The academic sphere in a third world country is a privileged space in that it denotes aspirations of the majority of the country. Moreover, the facilities of a higher educational institution are a privilege when looked in relation to a major portion of the country which lacks even as basic a facility as toilet. The politics of 'information age' lies entirely in the idea of 'access' to the digital medium. In the context of third world education in particular, higher education continues to be a matter of access. Despite the reservation mechanism, surveys show that the benefits of education have trickled down at a far less rate than expected. Given such a reality, the experience of most of students in HEI has been marred by contradictions and hypocrisy. The entrenched system of meritocracy and western-cannon has taken away higher education from the reaches of the common student who flails about till he/she reaches research, where much is contingent upon facilities and freedoms of the academic space he/she inhabits. Ashis Nandy, in his interview with Ramin Jahanbegloo states, that

> …we feel that because we have opted for the US as our standard, even if that standard has
> its problems, we would rather suffer from the problems from which the world's richest and

> more powerful country suffers than from the old problems of the poor and the peripheral.
> We don't want to die of starvation; we want to die of obesity and overconsumption.
> (*Talking India* 140)

The import being, that the bourgeoisie of the country would rather ape the west in all its faults than to deal with the problems that plague them. This uncritical aping is what can be characterised as a morbid strain in India's political imaginary to join the developed nations, that is contributing to the very specific type of information saturation- ostensibly, a problem of excess that only plagues the rich. But as I have tried to show in this chapter, the problem in fact can be linked to the students belonging to the aspirational class itself. I do not seek to underestimate the power of critical thinking and self-reflexivity in an entire class. What I seek to show is, given the invasion of market into our private lives- which has saturated our popular culture and lived reality with ideas of consumption- self-reflexivity and abnegation have become difficult to carry out. Nandy mentions how poverty and austerity have come to be equated with destitution in the political imagination. The Brahminical scholarly tradition is traditionally supposed to be poor and abnegatory in a self-imposed manner. More than the material aspects of these positions, what interests me immensely, is the self-reflexivity and criticality towards lived culture that informed such practices. From Chaucer's Clerk, a poor scholar in Canterbury tales to the image of Rangnath, in Shrilal Shukla's *Raag Darbari*, narratives set in provincial and pre-modern times from Europe to India, depict a sharp but student with poor means of survival. My point here is an extension of Nandy's argument who says that a healthy body has a built-in process for… self-reflection (146). An academic society is that kind of a mechanism for the larger society. The grave problems that plague higher-education in India, have made sure that all sorts of mechanisms for self-reflection are stalled or even discontinued. Losing critical and analytical skills by students can become an even greater problem in the digital era, and information saturation of the kinds that have been discussed in this chapter is a term that explains the phenomenon.

Bleak as the situation seems, Pinjra Tod and other such autonomous campus movements for instance the Ambedkerite studies group show that the struggle against such neo-colonial imposition continues. This has shown that it is possible to bridge the gap by an organic mobilisation that depends on self-reflection and a stock-taking of lived realities around us. It

also shows that a critical and rewarding use of digital media to not just mobilise, as in the Arab-spring, but to also create a database of person narratives that can be legitimate proofs against institutional oppression and bias. By throwing its weight behind other political mobilisations, Pinjra Tod also shows that it is possible to focus on the local and specific while extending solidarity with the larger fight against capitalism.

Information saturation in India has as much to do with the sluggish political and bureaucratic system as digital saturation. In such a scenario, the image of information saturation fits the condition of here in a darkly humorous way. In the terms of chemistry, a saturated solution is one that has absorbed the solute to an extent that the solution itself becomes stagnant and does not allow for any more chemical activity. In chemical terms, such a solution can only be activated by heating up the entire solution (if it is water) to enable more reactivity. As we bridge the preach-practice gap, we can avoid saturation because the current systems need to be stirred and heated up to accommodate the new and the changing. The problem at the core of saturation, is stagnation. In a dynamic, vivid and lively intellectual environment, there would be no scope for saturation. This of course is an ideal solution and the analogy cannot be extended very far. However, the idea of the higher education system stuck in a morass and in desperate need of revival is an idea that has been (re)iterated by all and sundry: today it finds mention in manifesto of various major political parties.

The problem of education in India has been copiously covered, and there is much more to be said, starting from primary school education. However, my focus is higher education precisely because that vertical system can somewhat be challenged at this level, and students and scholar can both be givers and receivers of knowledge in the system. An overwhelming amount of students and scholars wish to join higher education at some point. In some central universities, the issues plaguing the system find takers all around, and students have protested for little and major issues at different levels in the system. That we are assailed by theories and syllabi that perpetuate a western model of thinking and perception is no news. But looking at it as information saturation helps understand that this humongous pile we find difficult to relate to can actually alter us cognitively and restrict critical faculties while increasing consumption of information. For some the initial years at college are about unlearning what is learnt at school. With the current focus in academia at indigenous cultural studies, methodology learnt at

Bachelors level needs revision and unlearning. It is in this context that Gustavo Esteva quotes a community shoemaker in an Indian Community in Mexico as saying:

> Education? I think that education is really bad information. Since we were children, we were made to believe that there were caudillos, idols, heroes. . . . That is not true . . . Instead of learning about something called Independence and Revolution in the books and the school, we must look for our independence and make our own personal revolution, for the things we can change. ("Part Two" 59)

Conclusion

This work has tried to argue that the aesthetics and practice of academic postmodernism, originated and matured in the West, has been in tandem with the growth of new media and smart technology, and has led to proliferation of theories, information and data. In addition to theoretical excess in the West there is a tussle between the cybernetic impulse to streamline the sources of knowledge and data and an aesthetics of celebration of meaninglessness and fetishisation of "difference". The theoretical paradigm in Hayles' essay on Information narratives seeks to understand the way in which new developments within information theory and technology in relation to and borrowing from postmodernism has lead to newer developments in literary theory. Hayles has further borrowed from Chaos theory to explain the way the chaotic churnings of theory which, according her will yield an internal order at some point. While Hayles' formulation can be seen as looking forward to the globally networked information system, the idea that academic discourse is saturated with theory about theory is increasingly being realised across academic spaces. Rita Felski writes at length about the way this tussle between finding common links, coherence and meaning clashes against a celebration of difference and had lead to a certain depoliticisation within the academia. I situate this discussion within the emerging theory on postmodernism and cybernetic study by focusing on role of the observer/reader in order to show how the idea of 'saturation' is based on the receiver's cognition and subjectivity.

Kunzru's *Gods without Men* is an interesting case for an entry into a form of positive engagement with the work primarily because it is informed by the ethical insecurities about the project of a networked world. Kunzru's novel- with its lateral expansion of narrative seeks to bring stories from across geographical and temporal boundaries to be brought on a level plain, is part of many attempts in the genre called "translit". The novel shows that this tussle in fact, is an old one, going back centuries of human civilisation and mythopoeic imaginings. The form of the novel, along with the magic-realist elements demands a certain suspension of disbelief of the reader for immersion into the narrative. Magic-realism poses a challenge to the realist mode of narration and its use can be traced back to the political and ideological origins of authors and thinkers' challenging of western aesthetics. I add to this argument by pointing out that the mythopoeia and mystification demands a certain investment from the academic reader. As part of our training within English literature, we are actively encouraged to question and suspect

everything as what Paul Ricouer has called a "hermeneutics of suspicion" as part of our pedagogical practices. This approach Rita Felski argues, has steadily weakened the bond between the reader and the text by injecting a sense of negativity and suspicion which has shorn literature off of its poetics. This has, Felski implies, lead to intellectual dishonesty and has accelerated the pace of professionalisation of the academia. Against this background Felski argues for an affective turn in literary theory by introducing four aesthetic categories that must be adopted by the reader in her encounter with the text.

As I try to show in the second chapter, the problem of disengagement has been rendered more complicated by the advent of Internet and smart technologies. The global networking enabled by the World Wide Web has ensured that academia and the academic subject are no longer separate from the rest of society. The inclusion of recent studies on cognition and digital media in this dissertation is to prove that McLuhan's idea that the medium not only shows us *what* to think, but *how* to think and that a steady exposure to the smart screens can mould our brains to the needs and demands of the new media. The twin theoretical paradigms of postmodernism and cyber studies are brought together to understand the new theories of subjectivity. The point is to push at a political understanding of this new networked collectivity or the "hive mind". An exploration of theories of subjectivity in the digital era looks at how the impact of smart technologies has led to a Hegelian animalisation of the individual. The theory of postmodernism and the digital as put forth by Azuma Hiroki in the context of Otaku subculture shows that there are two impulses that inform the interaction of the Networked subject- one is consumption that shows a postmodern disregard for originality amidst the steady proliferation of the simulacrum. The other is to sort, categories and manipulate the vast and growing pile of literature and art of interest to the otaku, for easy and immediate dispersal, informed by a humanesque endeavour. These two impulses, Hiroki argues, is a reflection of the postmodern subject of the digital era- caught between the twin impulses of the human and the animal. The Network is steadily growing to realise the postmodern world-image of categorisation and consumption by the way it defies all attempts at meaning and coherence.

The animalisation he speaks of, is part of the negative discourse that seeks to show in comparison all that makes us human. An animal lacks everything that makes us human-- "language, knowledge, awareness, imagination". The steady immersion into the Gibsonian universe of the Network and a reliance on machines for our mental activities leads to a kind of

superficiality and waning of affect in our everyday responses. The medium of the Internet relies on algorithms and obliges us to always stay in the present- resulting in a flattening of historical perspective. This can be directly correlated to the form of Kunzru's *God without Men* too where there is a tussle between surfacial linking and deep thematic explorations. The novel does this in a self-aware manner, via means of leitmotifs and themes that run common across these various narratives.

Part of the argument here was to show that the digital media with its ability to transform human subjectivity, is inextricably linked to the market as "access" continues to be at the centre of the idea of information age and leads to the steady animalisation of the human. Thus, the curbing of critical faculties is an alarming development for the twenty first century. As access continues to determine those who are part of the network from those who are not, the question of human agency begins to lose ground. Every time a user clicks "allow" when an app asks for access to her personal data in exchange for her access to the services of that app, she lose out on human agency in favour for her immersion into the digital era. The point is to show, that this is a move towards a digital collectivity of distracted individuals with dispersed sense of self-- divorced from the embodied reality, floating in the wireless ether of information. Amidst this, information saturation as an individual and collective condition can happen when the animalesque consumption begins to take over the humanesque endeavour to filter, imagine, critique and contemplate. The market-led transformation of the new media is steadily moving those of us with access to the network, towards one-way consumption.

Having laid the premises thus far, the third chapter moves back to the discussion of theory and the academic subject but this time in the context of India. A conceptual understanding of 'saturation' is advanced thus far in order to see it as a point of departure to make a call for a radical overhaul of academic endeavour. The market is yet to take over the kind of control over the digital as it has in the west. Government regulations, thanks to radical rejection by members of the civil society continue to thwart such attempts of the market to makes inroads into India and create a monopoly. Facebook's thwarted attempt at seeking control over who gets to access how much of the Internet was a prime example of such an attempt. This chapter seeks to show that an overhaul of pedagogic practices in India can go a long way in determining the trajectory of the new market within India. Given the socio-political complications that a theorisation of Indian academia presents, I have decided to focus on English departments across government

universities in Delhi. By looking at the way these departments reify bureaucratic norms and hierarchies in direct contravention to what is taught in classrooms, I look at a form of state-imposed condition of information excess that relies on an uncritical engagement with theoretical paradigms that are ideally meant to be informed by one's own engagement with everyday lived reality. By looking at the current interventions initiated by students across disciplines in Higher education institutions such as the Pinjra Tod movement have sought to challenge state imposed regulations, the third chapter goes on to explore how students have sought to engage theory with praxis, and by actively using social media platforms have led to a proliferation of new, socially engaged form of theoretical paradigms, that are a form of rebellion against the colonial hangover of the state-imposed pedagogy. Looked through this lens, there can be seen a hybrid form of subversive practices that borrow liberally from Western theory, but which is informed through and through by the everyday lived realities of the academic subjects of these departments. On being asked a question about the role of the critic of modern rationality, Nandy responds that:

> The responsibility of a Third World writer is to not to read a First World author according to canons of First World criticism and wisdom. Our job is to interpret them according to a different set of cultural and political needs. (*Talking India*, 74)

In absence of an indigenous form of theoretical paradigm within pedagogy and in face of modern challenges, the students of these English departments have actively participated and used contemporary theory to critically respond to everyday challenges of their daily lives. Ashis Nandy is also a prime example of someone who has developed what is called "critical traditionalism", a kind of critical theory that is filtered through from the situatedness of the modern intellectual and is aimed at critiquing the imposition of the western idea of modernity.

The theorists used in this dissertation span across the globe, stretching across four continents. While Kunzru and the cybernetic discussion is part of the Northern American discourse at the time, the parallel discussion within European as well as academics in the US were preoccupied by the idea of postmodernism. In order to fully understand the global acceptance of postmodernism as a useful theory to explain modern phenomenon, Azuma Hiroki's formulation of the dialectical relationship between postmodernist world-image and the Otaku culture can been seen as another form of engagement in the field. However, as has been shown in the third chapter, an uncritical acceptance of postmodernism as well as *information saturation* is inadequate to fully understand the everyday realities of the Third World. As has been explained, an expansion on the idea of information saturation in the third world also helps

understand not just the specific realities of the Third World academic, but to also see the way in which there is a danger towards an accelerated movement towards a zombie-like collectivity at the global scale. In such a scenario the argument goes, the specific historical and material context of India is that much more at risk of global market. The conceptual understanding of 'saturation' such as the one explored here helps look at the global reach as well as cognitive impact of newer forms of market, such as the 'softwarised' (Berry, 15) market Berry speaks at length about.

The idea of information saturation arises when not just the scales but the entire mechanism begins to swing dangerously towards the side of uncritical consumption. The individual *humanesque* impulse of meaning and coherence is abandoned in favour of hedonistic, institutionally as well as culturally encouraged consumption of data and information. In the context of the so-called third world, institutional and bureaucratic intervention has lead to kind of cynicism, part of which is because there is a widening chasm between theory and praxis within the academia. Contrary to the popular understanding of information overload as a corollary damage of the digital era, the chapter shows that another kind of information saturation has continued to plague the academic world of the so-called third world, and with the advent of the digital medium this kind of consumption is about to get bigger at scale. The imposition of hardly relevant pedagogic content, far away from the identifiable realities of India has already been spoken of in postcolonial writings such as those by Gauri Vishwanathan. I argue that unless there is an introduction of a critical theoretical paradigm in tandem with a reappropriation of pedagogic practices for the needs of the third-world, where they both inform each-other, the third-world subjects, in increasingly greater numbers would continue to be one-way consumers of the digital medium, as the socio-political realities of India continue to widen the chasms between rich and poor.

Borrowing from the work done by Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Prakash on grassroots postmodernism, it can be proved that it is possible to encourage a critical perspective towards modernity, one that challenges the assumptions of the modern state. The accelerated pace of withdrawal of the state from educational system in India is an example of how privatisation is a teleological end for the vision of modernity. In such a scenario it is critical more than ever, to bring together theory with praxis and let the latter inform the former. Grassroots postmodernism-- an initiative of Esteva and Prakash is radical in its rejection of the educational practices

directed towards realising the vision of modernity. Daring to touch upon the sacred cows of academic postmodernism, the duo declare that the radical potential of postmodernism can be realised only when we recognise the educational system as a cog in the wheel of the market apparatus. Esteva and Prakash see postmodernism as post-modernism and see it as a reaction to the pro-market neo-colonial agenda of modernity. By reformulating the paradigms of the postmodernism from the so-called third world perspective, Esteva and Prakash go on to demonstrate how certain parts of Mexico can be seen as postmodern responses to local needs and demands. By calling for solidarity across the globe on the basis of local needs, Gustavo and Esteva seek to call out the elitist stance of academia over meta-narratives by reiterating the reality of oppression, deprivation and radical subversion as ways of forging solidarities to form a pluriverse. Additionally, by demanding the prioritisation of local needs and demands, the globalising impulse of new market via the medium of the internet can be resisted by making use of the media to respond to local challenges. This kind of criticality as well as emotional and affective response to the needs of society is a potent way to resist the onslaught of the global market. Information saturation is symptomatic of this onslaught, and I have tried to argue that affective and critical response to the lived reality could become radical tools for the individual as well as society to respond to the challenges.

In many ways, the challenge of information saturation is widely being recognised in the West as a potent one. Recent responses in pedagogy in the form of the "slow education movement" or introduction of courses that teach students to constructively wade through the data deluge, are in that direction. The call for a slow movement was made by Shelley Wright in 2014 in the context of school education- for it to encourage contemplative learning. Hence a lot of what has been said in the context of western academia will come across as redundant to those aware of these developments. The word "slow" has been much maligned by those speed-obsessed oracles of modernity. Paul Virilio speaks at length about the aesthetics of "speed" in the phase of rapid urbanisation. Even in an educational institute slow is not a desirable way of describing a learner. Fast, rapid, instant are the industrially encouraged virtues of modern living, to increase efficiency and productivity. However, as consumption becomes the dominant form of participation in the global market economy; fast, rapid and instant ways of consumption have become the virtues to adopt for global push for modernity. Wright mentions how individual needs, curiosities and imagination of children are quashed in the whirlwind of educating them.

Thus, her response is a form of slow learning to develop a community of learners who learn as much from pedagogy as from one another by savouring each moment of the learning process. Instead of a "top-down industrialised and homogenised assembly line, we need a grass roots slow education movement" Wright opines.

In an article titled "Why I Am Teaching A Course Called 'Wasting Time on the Internet'", published in The New Yorker in November 2014, author Kenneth Goldsmith points out how good we have become "at being distracted" forming an "electronic collective unconscious". The author has started a creative writing course in University of Pennsylvania where he, along with the students will sit for three hours a week "with their devices and a Wi-Fi connection" where "communication happens exclusively through chat rooms and listservs, or over social media". "The students will be encouraged to get lost on the Web…drowsily emerging from the digital haze only when class is over" to foster a self-reflexivity and encourage students to critically analyse their movements on the Internet to see what they can learn about themselves since "every click is indicative of our likes, our dislikes, our emotions, our politics, our world view". Pointing out that "drifting, daydreaming and procrastinating have long been a part of the creative process" the idea is to imagine "recasting the dead time they have been spending in front of their screens as engaged and creative". Goldsmith's idea is a fascinating one, seeking to promote a digital criticality that is at the core of the discussion here, but in a very informal, relaxed setting, unencumbered from "real time" questions of market, surveillance and consumption. The results of the experience of this class are yet to be published and I shall look forward to reading them. The point of concern is the way digital criticality should be twined with deep and contemplative practices within the education system in India.

This work started as an exploration of the idea of informational and theoretical excess within the academic space primarily in the West, however as the focus shifts to analysing information saturation from my own subject position, I realised that a phenomenological turn is indispensable to the whole endeavour. The idea of information saturation is tenuous enough to be experienced differently by different people. However the idea of the digital is twined with deeper political questions of new forms of colonialism, consumption and market. With the contracting globe, and a homogenisation of perspective underway through the digital media, it is imperative more than ever to be in touch with our embodied realities.

While the terms of engagement have been set, this thesis does not explore *how* to bring about the 'turn' I refer to. Thus in terms of praxis, this dissertation has barely scratched the surface. In order to fully engage with the pedagogical needs of India, a deeper, systematic engagement is needed to analyse the way in which information excess and rote-learning are actively imposed. An in media res intervention like the one shown here, is scarcely going to help make effective changes in policies. However, looking at the problem afresh from the perspective of *information saturation* encourages one to see contemporary pedagogical problems of India as emerging from a complex matrix of its colonial history, global market, privatisation and onslaught of internet and smart technologies. As I have tried to suggest, the call to grass roots postmodernism, as a kind of affective and political engagement with the local seems to be one possible suggestion.

While the hypothesis is located in the embodied-- what Zizek called the "real"-- its area of study as yet sees the spontaneous eruptions within the academic spaces as opening up a possibility towards such an engagement. A deep theoretical and practical engagement with these spontaneous, autonomous students' protests will go a long way in suggesting ways out of informational excess and its consumption. This thesis, far from being a conclusive study, merely attempts to open up a new paradigm for theoretical and practical engagement. The political and theoretical interventions made in the direction of uniting theory with praxis, will go a long way in opening the doors of the academia to people from the grassroots who have much to share in this direction. The digital medium in the context of the "third world", should not be looked at as an enveloping paradigm because it is not, as yet. Instead, the radical potential of the digital could be realised when it will be seen as a "medium" and not as a message in itself. As we give into the digital paradigm, we give into the world of algorithms, computation and rationalisation. These modernising impulses need to be resisted in favour of a more balanced approach of the embodied- an approach that spills into the so-far unacademic, the embodied, the irrational, the blasphemous. Academic engagement needs to rise up to the challenge, overcome the awe of the digital and "use" it to respond to the "real" and "embodied" challenges around us. However, from the mystical and speculative fiction of Hari Kunzru to Felski's call for a positive turn towards academic practices and a refreshingly revolutionary call for post-modernism by Esteva, this dissertation has continued to highlight the need for a positive and constructive turn in academic engagement.

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