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Psychological Manipulation and Cyber Identity: A Critical Examination of Cyberbullying's Poetics in *Backlash*

A B S T R A C T

Cyberbullying, a pervasive and damaging form of harassment, has become an urgent issue in the digital age, affecting millions of adolescents worldwide. Sarah Darer Littman's novel "Backlash" delves into this complex and often devastating phenomenon, providing a stark and insightful exploration of its effects on young people. This study examines the theme of cyberbullying in "Backlash," analyzing its portrayal, the psychological and social impacts on the characters, and the broader implications for readers and society. The study relies heavily upon the conceptual framework of psychological manipulation which is a type of social influence that aims to change the behavior or perception of others through abusive, deceptive, or underhanded tactics. By advancing the interests of the manipulator, often at another's expense, such methods could be considered exploitative, abusive, devious, and deceptive. The study is analytical, it follows a new critic approach that focuses on the way the content of any literary work is represented by a particular form. Furthermore, it follows a structural approach as it highlights the layers of the examined work so as to foster its discourse which aim at raising the collective consciousness about cyber bullying and its after effect.

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التلاعب النفسي والهوية السيبرانية: تحليل نقدي لأدبيات التنمر الإلكتروني في رواية رد الفعل المعاكس

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الخلاصة:

أصبح التنمر عبر الإنترنت، وهو شكل من أشكال التحرش المنتشر والمدمر، قضية حرجية في العصر الرقمي، والذي يؤثر في ملايين المراهقين في جميع أنحاء العالم. تتعمق رواية "رد الفعل المعاكس" للكاتبة سارة دارير ليتمان في هذه الظاهرة المعقدة والمدمرة في كثير من الأحيان، وتقدم استكشافاً صارخاً

ومتبصرًا لآثارها على الشباب. تتناول هذه الدراسة موضوع التنمر الإلكتروني في رواية "رد الفعل المعاكس"، وتحليل كيفية تجسيده، وتأثيراته النفسية والاجتماعية على الشخصيات، والانطباعات التي ستزرع داخل القراء والمجتمع. تعتمد الدراسة بشكل كبير على الإطار المفاهيمي للخداع النفسي وهو نوع من التأثير الاجتماعي الذي يهدف إلى تغيير سلوك أو إدراك وفهم الآخرين من خلال أساليب مسيئة أو مخادعة وغير صادقة. من خلال تعزيز مصالح المتلاعب، غالبًا على حساب شخص آخر، واعتبار مثل هذه الأساليب استغلالية ومسيئة ومخادعة. الدراسة تحليلية، تتبع منهج النقد الجديد والذي يركز على كيفية تمثيل محتوى أي عمل أدبي بهيكل وتركيب معين. علاوة على ذلك، فهو يتبع منهجًا هيكلًا لأنه يسلط الضوء على مكونات وطبقات العمل المدروس لتعزيز تفسير خطابه الهادف إلى تنمية الوعي الجمعي بظاهرة التنمر الإلكتروني وتداعياته.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التنمر الإلكتروني، التلاعب النفسي، الهوية السيبرانية، الثقافة السيبرانية، رد الفعل المعاكس

Introduction

Cyberbullying, a pervasive and damaging form of harassment, has become an urgent issue in the digital age, affecting millions of adolescents worldwide. Sarah Darer Littman's novel *Backlash* delves into this complex and often devastating phenomenon, providing a stark and insightful exploration of its effects on young adult. This chapter examines the theme of cyberbullying in *Backlash*, analyzing its portrayal in terms of its causes and its psychological and social after effect. This chapter, therefore, discusses aspects of psychological manipulation which is a type of social influence that aims to change the behavior or perception of others through abusive, deceptive, or underhanded tactics. In addition, it discusses how cyberbullying and fake identity are treated nowadays as cybercrimes. .

Sarah Darer Littman's young adult novel *Backlash* (2016) delves into the issue of cyberbullying, the dark consequences of social media obsession as well as the repercussions of inappropriate online behaviour and relationships. Littman's tells the story of Lara and her particular series of events where she is bullied by her former friend Bree. The main character, Lara, is represented as

teenager whose self-esteem plummets after being targeted by relentless online bullying. As she struggles with depression and attempts to regain her confidence, she receives a cruel message from a boy named Christian, which leads her to a suicide attempt. The twist comes when it is revealed that Christian is not real—he is an online persona created by Bree who is driven by jealousy and resentment. The novel dives into how the truth unravels, and how the characters cope with the backlash of their actions. According to the context of the novel's plot synopsis, Littman, quoting Louis Leung (2014), tackles, in a fictional way, how Internet is used to escape from the negative feelings and experiences of unpleasant emotions, searching for alternative gratifications and thus ignoring Internet risks. (425-6). Littman's *Backlash*, in this sense, emphasizes that heavy usage of social media, particularly Facebook and blogs, could serve as an early indicator for recognizing young adults who need more careful surveillance that would prevent them from becoming victims of avoidable online problems.

Sarah Darer Littman is a well-known author, especially for her young adult novels. Her 19 fictional works entail, *Some Kind of Hate*, *Deepfake*, *Anything But Okay*, *In Case You Missed It*, *Confessions of a Closet Catholic*(2005), which earned the Sydney Taylor Award for Older Readers, and *Backlash* (2015), which won the Iowa Teen Book Award as well as the Grand Canyon Reader Award. Littman started writing when she realized that she loved storytelling—a matter that motivated her take writing lessons. This motivation can be related to the fact that the rhetoric of stories is a tool used to persuade or convince people to act in specific ways. Stories can thus function as means for both learning and taking specific action. Walter Benjamin illustrates:

Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn. And among those who have written down the

tales, it is the great ones whose written version differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers. (Lodge, 1988, 12)

Littman's desire to be a recognized and creative storyteller is manifested in the way she wrote her first novel, *Confessions of a Closet Catholic*. Through the viewpoint of an eleven-year-old girl who is Jewish by birth but secretly becomes Catholic, Littman explores theme of faithful identity. The novel's character can be seen as acceptable and accessible due to its emotional depth and anti-stereotypical representation of the Jewish identity represented for example in *The Merchant of Venice*. The anti-stereotypical representation of the Jewish identity is reflected in the way Littman tries to reflect on theme of what faith means regardless religion: " "No matter which road you decide to take on your life's journey, just make sure God is an intimate part of it" (Littman, 33)

Reading Littman's novels makes one prepared for the beauty, intricacy, and simple elegance of her imagination materialized in the world it generates. When one reads Littman's works, he must be aware of her notions about the calm quest of meaning and the reader's capacity to react. As such, Littman is committed to writing about topics that are important to young readers. Focusing upon details and simple language are the fictional techniques by which she tackles social issues. Her novels manage to strike a balance between serious topics and positive resolutions, making her literary works relatable even for younger readers despite dealing with heavy themes. Her novel, *Deepfake*, for example, tackles the issue of divorce and its negative impact upon teenagers :

My parents went through a long, bitter divorce, and even though it was finalized over a year ago, things haven't improved much. Or at all. Dad's been dating all these women who are like the anti-Mom—tall where Mom's short, blonde

where Mom is brunette. It makes me wonder why my parents ever got married in the first place .

In the same novel Littman talks about the negative impact of social media upon anyone's privacy: "No trees fall in your forest unless you've put it online. Everyone has to know everyone business...Everything is posted on Facebook before I even walk back in the front door of our house. Now everybody knows." (272) Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and others have become integral parts of man's daily life, influenced not only his\her social interactions but also raised significant concerns about the invasion of privacy. As one navigates this digital landscape, it is essential to explore the extent to which social media has encroached upon his\her personal space and examine the implications of this invasion. Unfortunately, the rise of social media has given birth to a surveillance culture, where individuals willingly share intimate details of their lives, often without fully understanding the potential consequences.

The most recognized essential components of Littman's writing style are realistic representation, emotional depth, and dialogical perspectives. The realistic representation is inspired by real stories and incidents that wrapped by fictional though realistic life account of young adults. There is a real story almost similar to that of Backlash of 13-year-old Megan Meier, who committed suicide due to being harassed on My Space by a cyberbully. The cyberbully was revealed to be the mother of a classmate. She sought retribution against Megan since she believed Megan was disseminating inaccurate information about her daughter. The mother established a fictitious My Space account and assumed the identity of a 16-year-old male named Josh Evans. The mother utilized the profile to get information on Megan with the intention of establishing a friendship with her. Josh was an imaginary figure that never showed up. The mother sought to ascertain if Megan was spreading rumors about her daughter. Megan formed a friendship with the mother, mistakenly believing her to be

Josh. Megan's vulnerability to depression represented a risk, so she was medically given medicines. Having knowledge of this, the mother exploited the My Space page to publish derogatory and offensive remarks, ultimately resulting in Megan's death.

Schools, in Littman's novels , play crucial roles in shaping the conflicts and directing them. This can be explained as follows :

School is the site for meetings with friends, developing dating relationships, and participating in sports and other activities. It can provide intellectual stimulation, though it as often produces boredom. Relationships with teachers, coaches, and other mentors can affect the direction a young person takes in life, in every department from academics to career choices to personal values to artistic endeavors to athletics. Hence, school is the site of at least some scenes in many novels, though the degree to which school relationships influence plot outcomes varies significantly. (Trupe, 2006, 198)

The social milieu of school plays a significant role in the storyline of Backlash, the examined novel in this chapter. Actually, Backlash is a manifestation of techno-realism in which technology functions as a tool of power, while the inherent need for survival in human nature influences the development of identity. Categorized under the umbrella of young adult fiction, Backlash encompasses three interrelated conflicts narrated in form of flashback: the challenges associated with obesity, the establishment of a cyberidentity, and the consequences of cybercrime. While each of these factors has distinct impacts on the protagonists, they collectively contribute to a captivating narrative exploring the detrimental consequences of cyber bullying. The novel, in fact, opens with cyberbullying in a chapter entitled "Lara:"

THE WORDS on the screen don't make sense. They can't. He says: You're an awful person. He says: You're a terrible friend. He says: I know you've been checking out dresses for the homecoming dance. He says: What makes you think I'd ever ask you out? He says: I'd never be caught dead at the school dance with a loser like you. He doesn't say it in a private message. He posts it publicly, on my Facebook wall, where everyone can see. (Lara, Para. 1)

One of the reasons social media, especially social networking sites (SNS) by teenagers, has provided a platform for cyberbullying, is due to the amount of personal data posted and interactions between users. In Backlash cyberbullying places a net of illusion and fake identity between the bullier and bullied because their interaction takes place in a virtual space . Cyberbully (Christian\ Bree) says things to his victim (Lara) that he\she is not able to communicate in a face-to-face encounter because his real identity as well as motives will be revealed .

In relation to the above context one can highlight the fact that personation, the act of claiming other person's identity with the intention to deceive others, is an old crime. However, personation on social cyber space have raised fears and objections on the simplicity with which manipulation and fraudulent activity can be made. Personation in Backlash is motivated by different causes and leads to different consequences. The coming pages of this chapter illuminate the whole structure of cyberbullying phenomenon as it is fictionally represented by different social and psychological motives within the characters or the milieu they are surrounded by .

Social and Psychological Dilemmas in Backlash

Reflecting on cyberbullying in Backlash requires examining the motives that lead the main characters of the novel, Lara and Bree, to navigate cyberspace in an attempt to satisfy certain needs. This will lead one to examine

different social and psychological issues related to these needs such as body image, human nature and its behavioral manifestation.

Man has consistently been the primary focus of scientists and philosophers, particularly post-modernists and post-structuralists, who seek to investigate the various influential forces inflicted upon man, including his speech, actions, and body. This finds its echo in how modern western societies value thin bodies of both sexes. Relying on this context, Michel Foucault's concept of docile bodies is applicable in a sense that it is based on the idea that a body "is something that can be made; out of a formless clay, an inapt body [from which] the machine required can be constructed" (Foucault, 1978, p. 135). A body, according to this, is shaped by means of societal norms that practice power relation upon it. In other words, docility, in terms of ideal body image, happens when human bodies are under constant surveillance so as to be obliged to meet societal expectations. As such, a docile body is "subjected, used, transformed and improved".

Obese individuals are often objects of bullying. This is materialized in Backlash through the character of Lara whose obese body places her outside the borders of beauty myth. Theorized in Beauty Myth (2008) by Naomi Woof, this myth is based on the assumption that :

Beauty is a currency system like the gold standard. Like any economy, it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact. In assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard, it is an expression of power relations.(13)

According to the above context, Lara's body is objectified by an institutional power that emphasizes visual rather than spiritual beauty. As such Lara is described as "ugly" and called by assaultive nicknames such as "Lardo"

, "Lardosaurus" (dinosaur) and "Corpse". Metaphorically, the last title indicates being dead, invisible and without life. In other words, fat bodies are usually depicted with no future at all. In this line of assumption, a fat life is framed as failure, and a fast track towards death itself. Inherited cultural evaluations of obesity have rendered the fat body more and more invisible, and thus the lived experiences of fat people are continually erased. This explains why many students in Lara's school ask: " why doesn't Lara kill herself?" (31) Being an object of societal gaze makes Lara a practical example of two interrelated concepts: weight stigma and weight bias .

While weight stigma generally indicates societal devaluation of obese people, weight bias, in response, entails system of beliefs, negative attitudes and stereotypes that echo prejudice, unfair treatment and even implicit forms of discrimination. These two concepts resemble a cultural climate that shapes the forest inside obese individuals :

Just like the climate shapes the forests of the world, our forest and the trees within it have been nurtured and shaped over the years by forces in our environment. Environmental forces that have existed even prior to our birth. From a young age, you likely saw the climate forces and the trees and foliage, but may not have noticed them or their impact. It would be like asking a fish how the water is. It is so immersed in the water that it may not realize the temperature of the water, or why it swims in one area but not another. It is just there, and it just does. (Pegrum, 2024, 17)

The climate (societal) forces, that shape appearance, are morphed, more and more, by the rules of societal niceties and norms at the moment one moves from childhood into adolescence, and then adulthood. Succumbing to these roles, Lara's mother tries "to create a supportive environment for Lara to lose

weight... she [doesn't] buy cookies anymore. [She doesn't] make any. [The] house has been a Cookie Free Zone since Lara was in middle school.” (62) What Lara's mother tries to do is to restrict Lara's eating pattern and to cripple food's sensational pleasures and its temptation, this will consequently help Lara attaining some standards of ideal beauty .

The cultural standard of beauty concerning body shape is largely shared through major mass media. Contemporary advertising, shopping centers, and entertainment institutions generate dynamic concepts of beauty that evolve over time. Women are especially under pressure to fit in with these mediated "ideal" pictures of their bodies. Some assert that inducing feelings of shame regarding weight or eating habits may serve as a motivation for individuals with overweight to pursue healthier lifestyles. Scientific evidence indicates that this assertion is inaccurate. Fat shaming does not serve as a motivator; rather, it can lead individuals to experience negative self-perception, potentially resulting in increased food consumption and subsequent weight gain. Though practicing cyberbullying, that targets her fat body and motivates her to commit suicide, Lara does not fight her obese body and try what will make her fit in societal standards of beauty. Cyberbullying enhances her desire to eat what will make her body an Other and a cage where her spiritual beauty is trapped. In a confessional :

I open the fridge and scan the contents for something that might make the Gratitude List. But there's no cookie dough, no gooey chocolate cake, no unhealthy snacks. Mom thinks I still care about not being Lardo, that I still think all those trips to the nutritionist and all that extra exercise and the weighing food and mindful eating and stuff were worth it. Nope. If there were a big chocolate cake in the fridge, I would eat the whole thing and wash it down with a quart of milk. Because what does it

matter? What does anything matter when the world would be a better place without me in it.

Conclusion

Online contexts pose fresh difficulties for evaluating the intersubjectivity in its most phenomenological meaning. It is impossible to determine if virtual reality is enabling the construction of new persona -s or merely the emerging of the deepest most unfettered ones. Nevertheless, it gives social scientists with the possibility to understand and cognitively assimilate fresh the fruits of most unique types of sociabilities enhanced by the digital connection.

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