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Digital Palimpsests and Algorithmic Colonialism: The Tension Between Preservation and Erasure in Postcolonial Literature

Teacher /Maytham Abdulrazzaq Abbas

General Directorate of Dhiqar Education, Iraq.

email :maithemabass9@gmail.com

ORCHID NO:0009000804790712

الرقيم الرقمي والاستعمارية الخوارزمية : توتر الحفظ والمحوفي الأدب ما بعد الاستعماري

المدرس/ميثم عبد الرزاق عباس

المديرية العامة لتربية ذي قار، العراق

البريد الإلكتروني: maithemabass9@gmail.com

معرف الباحث والمساهم المفتوح 0009000804790712

Abstract

One could start thinking about what the digital age and the postcolonial literature may need to say to each other in a number of ways: the inequalities of the information age in the general access to the digital, and the digital literacies to the digital cultural practices, we could think about what ways the tensions between the metropole and periphery may have inflicted the digital as much as it has inflicted the former. It applies the concept of the digital palimpsest, which views digital technologies as both allowing possibilities of preservation and accessibility, and posing threats of maintaining colonial hierarchies and prejudices, at the same time. The review relies upon the contributions of digital humanities, postcolonial studies, and critical algorithm studies to think about the competing status of digital archives as being spaces of potential recovery and erasure. introduce when used to work with postcolonial materials, where the text may be analyzed, but where its situated and contingent status runs a significant risk of being cancelled. It further goes on to consider ways in which algorithmic curation systems with a biasing factor play the role of the gate keepers with regard to postcolonial literature visibility and reception which may consequently contribute to what is known as digital colonialism. Key concerns addressed include ethics of representation in the digital worlds, the challenge of bias in algorithms and the need to create critical practices of digital life founded on decolonialism. The review ends with a discussion on the necessity of interdisciplinary collaboration and ethical acuity to ensure that digital technology can be used to give voice to, rather than silence, the postcolonial, and take into account the possibilities of future studies on digital infrastructures that are fairer and more critical algorithmic literacy. **Keywords:** Postcolonial Literature, Digital Humanities, Digital Archiving, Algorithmic Curation, Algorithmic Bias, Digital Palimpsest, Critical Algorithm Studies, Digital Colonialism

الملخص

يمكن تناول العلاقة بين العصر الرقمي والأدب ما بعد الاستعماري من زوايا عدة: منها عدم المساواة في الوصول إلى المعلومات، والفجوات في المهارات الرقمية، والممارسات الثقافية المتصلة بالفضاء الرقمي. كما يمكن التفكير في الكيفية التي أعادت فيها التوترات بين المركز والهامش تشكيل المجال الرقمي كما أعادت تشكيل الفضاءات الاستعمارية السابقة. ويُطبَّق في هذا السياق مفهوم الرقيم الرقمي الذي يرى التقنيات الرقمية فضاءً مزدوجاً يتيح فرصاً للحفظ والوصول، وفي الوقت نفسه يهدد بإدامة التسلسلات الهرمية الاستعمارية والأحكام المسبقة. يعتمد هذا الاستعراض على إسهامات الإنسانيات الرقمية ودراسات ما بعد الاستعمار والدراسات النقدية للخوارزميات لفهم الوضع المتنافس للأرشيفات الرقمية بوصفها

مساحات يمكن أن تكون إما مواقع للاستعادة وإما أدوات للمحو. وتتضح المشكلة خصوصاً عند العمل على المواد ما بعد الاستعمارية، حيث يصبح النص قابلاً للتحليل، لكنه يفقد في كثير من الأحيان سياقه التاريخي والثقافي بسبب هشاشة موقعه واحتمالية إغائه. كما يناقش البحث الطرق التي تقوم بها أنظمة التنسيق الخوارزمي ذات التحيزات البنيوية بدور "حراس البوابة" فيما يتعلق بظهور الأدب ما بعد الاستعماري وتلقيه، الأمر الذي قد يسهم في تعزيز ما يُعرف بـ الاستعمارية الرقمية. وتشمل الانشغالات الرئيسية التي يعالجها البحث أخلاقيات التمثيل في البيئات الرقمية، وتحديات الانحياز الخوارزمي، والحاجة إلى بناء ممارسات نقدية للحياة الرقمية تقوم على مبادئ إلغاء الاستعمار. ويختتم الاستعراض بالتأكيد على ضرورة التعاون بين-تخصصي واليقظة الأخلاقية لضمان أن تُستخدم التكنولوجيا الرقمية لتمكين الأدب ما بعد الاستعماري لا لإسكاته، مع الإشارة إلى إمكانات الدراسات المستقبلية حول بنى رقمية أكثر عدالة ومحو أمية خوارزمية أكثر نقدًا. الكلمات المفتاحية: الأدب ما بعد الاستعماري، الإنسانيات الرقمية، الأرشيف الرقمية، التنسيق الخوارزمي، الانحياز الخوارزمي، الرقيم الرقمي، دراسات الخوارزميات النقدية، الاستعمارية الرقمية.

Introduction

The digital and electronic era has significantly changed the landscape of the literary writing, production and distribution, and the growing accessibility of digitized texts has introduced fresh opportunities in the field of data mining and academic investigation. One of the subcategories in this transformation is the literature of the postcolonial which has a complicated, though not a disputed, background. To the degree that these archives are massive, and the types of algorithms to which individuals are exposed, or which mediate their exposure, marginalized experience, are playing a more epistemic role in forming who is reading what they are reading, it becomes more challenging to ask how are the postcolonial texts, which often struggle with the legacies of empire, contesting and contestation stories, marginalized experience being not only being preserved but how it is being transformed in this digitized age. This review article suggests the concept of the digital palimpsest as a heuristic tool with the help of which to interpret the postcolonial literature within the framework of new forms of digital archiving and algorithmic curation logic. It explores the latent tensions of the promise of digital in the democratization of access and maintenance of diverse voices as well as the tendencies of paying heed to the high-stakes in buttressing colonialities, perpetuating bias, and the exclusion of new populations in digital humanities initiatives and online information worlds. The name digital palimpsest was meant to imply Even though it may appear to be pictures of swirling colors, the picture shown is not a depth of data but the digital form of physically writing and erasing something away to show the layers of text, with more being hidden than visible. This metaphor, as a postcolonial (or indeed any) literary trope, helps to emphasize that digitization and algorithmic reading is no longer a benign process, but the more that brigading is marketed as a service, the better it is the work of digital intermediation, and the meaning, and visibility and evidentiality of texts are being subject to play. The digital archiving projects, regardless of how noble the preservationist intentions are, involve archival selection, description (metadata), and interface design choices which can introduce biases of culture (Koh, 2015). Besides, the proliferation of algorithmic curation, the recommending, filtering, and ranking systems of items on platforms of library catalogs to online booksellers, introduces another dimension of possible distortion. These infrastructures can replicate societal invested biases of its training data and implementation and the outcome is what they describe as cycles of injustice as researchers like Nyrup, Chu, and Falco (2023) assert in their work on the topic of algorithmic bias in other fields. Applied to postcolonial literature, this is objectionable in the sense that this algorithm can potentially silence non-western voices, flatten of cultural differences and even promote a neo-colonial digital space. Based on the digital humanities, postcolonial studies, critical algorithm studies, and library and information science, this review is based on a summary of what we know today about the connection between the categories of postcoloniality and digitization, plotting the key tensions and issues at this intersection. It subsequently reflects on how digital archives simultaneously act as sites of possible recuperation of the so-called subaltern archives (Frangos, 2013) and of what may become enablers of erasure. It implicitly deals with the meanings of machine reading, and types of postcolonialism, their findings and risks of detextualization (Frangos, 2013). The most important part of its analysis is the part that algorithmic bias and curation has in regards to the discoverability of postcolonial works, and reception, and how far such systems can be turned into objects that filter power imbalances. Bringing these strands together the article presents these interwoven accounts in order to give an overall overview of the research areas identifying important areas of tension and stating ethical need to be more just and critical about postcolonial literature in the era of algorithmic curation. These themes will be expounded in the following paragraphs. To begin with, we would like to consider the digital archive as the place of archiving and erasing the postcolonial narrations. Second, the review will discuss how curation algorithms and bias affect

postcolonial texts being visible and interpreted and connect it to the responses to the idea of digital colonialism. Third, we will consider some examples and case studies of projects in digital humanities that deal with postcolonial material. Last but not least, the conclusion is going to restate the key findings, reiterate the main tensions, and propose potential avenues of future research that could enable more balanced and fair digital futures of postcolonial literature.

1.0 The Digital Archive as Palimpsest: Conservation and Obliteration. Digital repositories are, therefore, a paradigm to the preservation, access and study of cultural heritage- of postcolonial texts being one such. The superficial benefits of digitization include longer life of delicate documents and global access like never before, democratization of knowledge and empowerment of previously suppressed voices. The digital projects of the postcolonial text, manuscript, and associated ephemera can be perceived as important instances of intervention, or entry into and use towards different purposes, archival practices that generally erase and disregard such forms of life: labors and artifacts that have been repressed by the logics of the archive, which are founded on the reproduction of some, often Eurocentric, modes of order. The connecting of materials previously unrelated online as well as the possibility to find things in complex categories and multimedia content opens up new opportunities of conducting research and communication, and the prospect of creating more enriching and grounded conceptions of postcolonial texts. The digital archive in that sense is a possible recovery place, the reconstitution of fragmented past, the amplification of what Frangos (2013) continues on Spivak to term the subaltern archive - bodies of knowledge and experience that survive beyond, even against, hegemonic colonial archives. To be optimistic, however, is to posit a place of possibility and not to assert that it is uninterrupted: My argument has been that the digital archive is worthy of being so understood in a materialist and not a formalist sense. Digitization, itself, is not a process of transcription but to translate and remediate. Choices of what historical content to be digitalized, of what form to take (e.g. image quality, OCR quality, etc.) and, most importantly, of how to describe it using some metadata: all of them are points at which biases may creep in or be preserved. Overall, metadata schemes, often based on Western models of knowledge, may not capture the details of postcolonial environments effectively, and the danger exists of misrepresenting, or simplification of their various cultural products (Koh, 2015). In this case, literature selection process can preserve the canons of authors or genres, and benefit one over another, and reestablish the power relations of the pre-digital world in the supposedly neutral world of the digital. Here the so-called digital palimpsest comes in. Digital procedures can erase or overwrite original contexts and meanings, like a medieval scribe cleaning away a text before him to reuse the parchment. Reading a digitized text on the screen you can lose the important information about the material history of it, the context in which it was produced, and the history of its reception which is all potentially significant to a sensitive postcolonial reading. Also, the digital archives and their format and accessibility by the users actively mediate the experience and interpretation. These particular design decisions, logic of search algorithm and visual representation of contents are able to push the users toward certain interpretations at the expense of others, and the ultimate outcome of reinforcing the status quo or rendering counter histories difficult to locate in the archive. The digital (and ultimately online) representational layer is, in turn, a superimposition upon the original, and more than this, an obscuration of the original, a palimpsest in which the connection between the digital residue and the historical referent is a complicated and even antagonistical one. Besides, even the infrastructure of digital archiving, software, and preservation standards is mostly produced and nourished in the Global North. This is an indication of a digital colonialism where technological and epistemological frame of mind of the mighty carries the day worldwide, and this may in turn be the source of dependencies and lack of agency of (postcolonial) societies to manage their own digital inheritance. There are also access problems, flip sides of democratization: the digital divide, paywalls, and necessary technical literacies may become obstacles in such a way, that the advantages of the online archives become uneven. In this way, as much as digital archives offer strong preservation and access capabilities, the authority of digital archives to sustain the colonial order and introduce new erasures requires constant critical questioning. There is a continual questioning of its palimpsestic layers of representation and the power relations of its structure and interfaces in consuming this digital archive.

2.0 Bias, Algorithmic Curation and Digital Colonialism. Besides, beyond the digital content and form of digital archives, the processes by which postcolonial literature is found and brought into sight in the overwhelming digital world is more and more being mediated by algorithmic curation. Algorithms are used to rank, sort and push content in search engines, library discovery systems, online stores, and social media streams, and they act as powerful intermediaries between the readers and the texts. These systems as much as they are meant to make user experience personalized and have a way of managing information overload, they are not neutral

arbiters of cultural value. Rather they encode assumptions and bias that are encoded in the underlying data and operate by logics which can arguably marginalise or otherwise misrepresent postcolonial voices unintentionally and thus, may be part of digital colonialism. It is more of an algorithmic discrimination problem. As is shown in numerous domains of application, including facial recognition software, job application, and content moderating algorithms tend to reflect and multiply the existing disparities in society (Noble, 2018; Benjamin, 2019). Bias may be of many forms in the field of literary curation. In addition, the type of data preponderance on which these algorithms are founded - which is inclined to recreate mainstream Western literary canons - may end up unable to identify, or to classify postcolonial literature properly. Recommendation engines may be biased to the most popular books or the most-reviewed, and in any case, non-dominant market literature or books in non-English languages may be undermined. Furthermore, user input information, particularly that which is indicative of the effect of personalization algorithms can be a force behind the creation of filter bubble or echo chamber situation on the one hand making reading patterns of the user, and on the other also making them ever more difficult to break (Pariser, 2011). The sources found in the initial stage of search make a direct focus on the algorithmic bias of the literary discovery systems and its potential impact on the marginal literatures. The algorithmic gatekeeping as it overlaps with the colonial past in a significant way. The technical infrastructure, the prevailing platforms, and even the very logics of categorization and relevance are stewed in such systems are constructed mostly in the Global North, in particular, in Silicon Valley. The operation of such systems on an international scale, however, would run the threat of being the establishment of a specific cultural and epistemological order, which would mediate local manifestations and marginalize non-Western knowledges/epistemologies. It is a form of digital colonialism in which the gates of information flows, cultural presence continue to be in the hands of the former colonial powers or global IT conglomerates (Couldry and Mejias, 2019). Postcolonial work, often explicitly questioning the colonial power relations and challenging in other ways the process of decentering Western modes of narrativizing, is thus subject to being lost and/or misunderstood by algorithms that are developed in and towards a different discourse(s). The concept of cycles of injustice as defined by Nyrop, Chu, and Falco (2023) as discussed in the context of digital ageism can prove to be a beneficial way of understanding how algorithmic bias can be institutionalized in the literary field. In case the postcolonial literature (or the readers thereof) is underrepresented in the training data or in other cases than this receive lower engagement due to such biases, the algorithms will be trained to prioritize them. This causes less individuals to view it, thus having a smaller chance of being interacted with, and the original bias propagates in a vicious circle of feedback. Such kinds of cycles oppress, in new forms, the capacity of postcolonial writers to circulate work and puts readers in access to non-canonical alternative readings thus silencing the non-canonical. These, in turn, can also be reinforced by the design process, which is often lopsided in its representations, and leave the space of the special needs and contexts of the postcolonial literatures and their readers (Nyrop et al., 2013). Therefore, the algorithmic curation layer turns out to be a significant component of the digital palimpsest as well. It directly influences what postcolonial writing is brought into the limelight and accepted as pertinent, in patterns that tend to reproduce and emphasize existing patterns of power inequality. In order to critically work with them, we will need to go beyond recognising the existence of bias: we will need to work towards becoming familiar with the infrastructural possibilities (data practices, design philosophies, economic incentives, geopolitical contingency) that put postcolonial voices back in the background of the algorithmic age. It is going to take an alternative approach to curating to defy these patterns, an algorithmic transparency and establishing the base to consider equitable and diverse system design.

3.0 The Tensions and Ethical Imperatives Caught in the Crossfire.

The problem of postcolonial literature and digital archiving as well as an algorithmic curation is fraught with critical tensions, and ought to be handled with ethical sensitivity. The necessity to digitize and practice algorithmic surveillance tends to compromise the most valued principles of the politics of postcolonial critique contextuality, specificity, the opposition of homogenization and de-centrifcation of the mainstream narratives. As we move through this landscape with complexities, we need to be aware of these tensions and be able to rely on ethical frames based on equity, representation, and development of a critical consciousness to inform the conception and implementation of digital tools and platforms. It is also subject to the tension in between preservation and representation in terms of its sustainability. Since the digital archive is committed to safeguarding postcolonial materials, by digitizing these problematic texts, one will distort the materials. As we have observed, metadata structures have the ability to apply external categories, digitization may eliminate the physicality of the material, and interface design may steer the interpretation to a story aligned with the

overarching cultural discourses of the text, rather than the contexts of the text or the purpose of criticism (Koh, 2015). Ethical practice entails doing something more than preservation to the responsible representation of one's source communities which entails working with those communities, as the source communities have been doing since ancient times, to make our metadata standards culturally sensitive, and to create interfaces that foreground rather than simplify and historicize, the form of texts in which they originated. Access and control is also a great tension. The aspiration toward the democratization of access via digital platforms also often runs into the issues of digital divides, proprietary platforms, and the concentration of power in the hands of large tech firms or institutions the anthology of which is dominated by the Global North. The question arises who gains the advantage of digitization and who decides on the narratives. Besides this, the commercial and engagement-based rationality of algorithmic curation can have a clash with the requirement of providing a range of postcolonial voices, where easier or more popular pieces are favored to the ambivalent or more critical pieces. These power relations must be challenged in an ethical approach: open access models, initiatives that are run by communities to the archiving and algorithmic systems aimed at making data findable beyond commercial interests and beyond the standard of popularity should be encouraged, and the issues of digital colonialism should be addressed (Couldry and Mejias, 2019). This efficiency and (critical depth) equilibrium is also critical. Now, as in the Fifties, machine reading and algorithmic analysis offer potent technologies to process large volumes of text, and even to identify big patterns within it (Frangos, 2013). However, approaches of this kind put more emphasis on quantitative evidence as opposed to qualitative finesse, and can thus be insensitive to the sort of stylistic experiment, rhetorical maneuver, and political inquiry that often accompany postcolonial writing. Excessive focus on the algorithmic/glance analysis may well level the literary landscape and to underestimate close reading practices which must play a vital role should we aim to find sense in the nuances of postcolonial texts. Moral responsibility of the digital humanities project as well, as we proposed, lies in balancing between computation as an addition to critical interpretation and not its replacement and between theory-directed algorithmic practices that are sensitive to postcolonial thought. And lastly, there is bias and equity which is, naturally the necessary setting to all this. Being the continuation of the society that creates them, the algorithmic systems pose a threat of the deepening and further aggravation of the preexisting biases, including those concerning race, gender, classes, and geopolitical location (Noble, 2018; Nyrup et al. 2023). As well, in the postcolonial sense, it implies that algorithms are useful at reproducing colonial stereotypes and erasing non-Western knowledge systems, as well as reproducing the global inequalities. The nature of how such harms can be corrected requires an active approach of fairness and equity in designing algorithms, collecting data, and evaluating the system. It entails auditing bias, training data diversification, involvement of a diverse and representative stakeholder in the process of design and development and it entails transparency and accountability mechanisms. To comply with these ethical demands, digital practice must be transformed into a practice that is critical. It is concerned with questioning the neutrality of technology, with acknowledging the power relations involved in digital systems and, in this context, it provides a preference to the values of postcolonial critique in the design and use of digital tools in literature research and cultural documentation. It will involve interdisciplinary collaboration between computer scientists, DH experts, postcolonial critics, librarians, and archivists and community members to build digital infrastructure and digital praxis that is actually serving decolonial interests rather than (inadvertently) reproducing colonial histories.

Discussion and Conclusion The postcolonial literature has been grappling with this shifting ground, the digital archiving, algorithmic curation, which has been enacted by the metaphor of the digital palimpsest to understand the complex and contradictory overlapping. This critique is based on a primary tension: on the one hand, digital technologies offer powerful means to sustain, reproduce, and read postcolonial works to act the possibility of potentially reclaiming multiple histories suppressed and they are being rediscovered under new conditions; nevertheless, on the other hand, they also bring about the threat of reinforcing and reproducing colonial orders, coding biases, and creating or creating new digital divides. The ghosts of historical forms of power always follow the digital promise reorganized in technological apparatuses. An abstract on the study highlights the fact that digital archives are not neuter archives but artificial spaces created through the choices of the caring curator, the standardization of metadata and user interfaces that can unwittingly reproduce Eurocentric biases (Koh, 2015). Similarly, as opposed to being an objective guide to discovery, algorithmic curation systems are strong intermediaries that have imperfect mechanisms that are easily controlled by biases within data and design, thus, which can then contribute to the marginalization of voices of the post colony and ultimately to a result of digital colonialism (Nyrup et al., 2023; Couldry and Mejias, 2019). The efficiency of the machine

reading and mass analysis should be severely evaluated in contrast to the depth of context and means of interpretation that is highly needed when reading a postcolonial literature (Frangos, 2013). Researchers, archivists, librarians, technologists and readers are interested in the findings of the current study. We should move beyond our techno-optimism and we should critically play with the tools and platforms that constitute the digital literary world. This incorporates the designing and embracing of ethical principles anchored on the concept of equity, representation and decolonial thought. They need to be done by actions like collaborative curation with source communities, building culturally sensitive metadata, transparent and auditable algorithm systems, and responsible digital literacy education. Besides, such interdisciplinarity is also significant to bridge the technological development to the critical cultural theory to ensure that digital tools are being put together and used within a way that is sensitive to the specific needs and local politics of postcolonial studies. Certain tensions continued and give indications of where further research should be conducted. More empirical studies would be needed to gain a clearer insight into the reality of the effects of various types of algorithmic curation systems to the (in)-visibility and perception of postcolonial literature in these types of platforms (library catalogs, online bookstores, academic databases, etc.). The development and experimentation of alternative, non-extractive frameworks of digital archiving and algorithmic curation should also be analysed in terms of principles of community control, ethical representation as well as varied paths of discovery. Exploring the ways in which digital technologies and algorithmic culture is itself being represented and criticised in creative work by contemporary postcolonial authors would offer a parallel fruitful field of interest. And, finally, the labor of creating a theoretically or conscientious work that is unapologetically engrossed in digital colonialism, which is an active project drawing normative sketches of what sorts of ways of doing digital humanities can be created out of a decolonial approach, is, I think, a work in progress. Overall, the digital era is a two-sided gift in the perspective of the postcolonial literature. The digital palimpsest is written upon, coded with alternative ways of representation, mediation. This reproduction of wrongs should not be permitted to pass without questions and we should stand guard and be ethically engaged in this process critically interested. In acknowledging the complications and trying to do our part in helping create more equal digital futures, we have apparently one more thing to look forward to: the utilization of technology as the means not to make blind but to light up the colorful, heterogenous, and diverse voices that constitute what we refer to as the field of postcolonial literature.

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