

DOING RESEARCH IN THE POSTMODERN AGE: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Monir A. Choudhury

Assistant Professor, Department of English
Faculty of Science and Arts, King Khalid University
PO Box 179, ZIP 61922, Bisha, Saudi Arabia

ABSTRACT: *The first part of this paper seeks to explicate the postmodernist tendency to explore what they call 'mininarratives' in their scheme of ideas. It also attempts to justify the need to do research on the emerging alternatives, indigenous and postcolonial literatures and cultures. The second part of the paper analyzes the challenges a research scholar faces while conducting a research on this comparatively fresh field of study. Since there is a dearth of research materials in most of the traditional libraries, one may find them in the web resources. The challenge posed before a research scholar is how to collect such information from the web resources. The paper is an innovative inquiry into this new horizon of online data collection and analysis procedure. The results of this qualitative study foreground the intricacies of judging the quality, authenticity and reliability of the web-based resources.*

KEYWORDS: Online Research, Online Libraries, Postcolonialism, E-Books, Postmodernism, Web-Based Resources.

INTRODUCTION

Metanarrative in the context of literature and culture suggests a grand story supposedly universal for all the people to learn and follow. It assumes a veneer of legitimacy and is gaining considerable currency as one of the critical thoughts that count. The advocates of postmodernism are critical of such metanarratives. They allege that metanarratives have failed to convince the world about the truths they had offered. So the postmodernists tend to gravitate towards mininarratives by which they mean the events/stories of small, localized and often marginalized societies of the world as alternatives. The result is the discovery of the need to explore the mininarratives of the world that is to revisit their cultural landscapes.

Since most of the traditional libraries fail in providing materials on these stories, one can take course to web resources. Here starts the real struggle of a scholar in defining his role in selecting data from such inundating information from the millions of mininarratives created by the social media, blogs, web based libraries, repositories of knowledge, and internet forums. What might concern him in his research enquiry? In the areas of literature, culture and history, a naïve researcher may draw a wrong conclusion if their resources turn out to be erroneous or prejudiced. The research identifies a number of areas, such as, computer, internet, search techniques, data evaluation etc where scholars may be trained to optimize their success and, at the same time, the research institutes are advised to make the researchers

aware of the available databases, web resources etc, and train them how to make the best use of the materials.

Objectives of the Study

The present paper seeks to justify, motivate and facilitate research in the emerging alternative, indigenous and postcolonial literatures and cultures. Since there is a dearth of research materials in the traditional libraries, what role should a scholar play in selecting the data from the web resources? How far it is permissible for him to use them? What might hinder him from doing his online research enquiry reasonably? The present paper attempts to reflect on the problems and the prospects of doing research on this emerging area.

The Rise of the Mininarratives:

Modernism in the early twentieth century had been very much involved in restoring the past order in the emerging society with a view to creating a liberal humanistic universal society. However, their frustration at failing to reach this holistic goal and their nostalgic feelings for the past may be noted in their creative writings. For instance, T. S. Eliot (1922) described the modern society as 'the waste land'. The oft-quoted lines from his famous poem "The Waste Land" (which was also one of the most representative poems of the modernist literature) are "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow/Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,/ You cannot say, or guess, for you know only/A heap of broken images". In the same vein, W. B. Yeats (1919) in his poem "The Second Coming" regretted the disintegration of the society in the modern age. As he put it: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;/Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world".

The modernist literature is replete with elements of metanarratives intended to create a unifying effect on the world. Peter Barry (2002) illustrated the accusations of postmodernism against the metanarratives of modernism as "illusions, fostered in order to smother difference, opposition, and plurality" (p.64). To the postmodernists, this attitude denies the validity of the alternative ways of life in the global cultural scenario and exerts a controlling/crumpling effect on them. The postmodernists keenly contest that, and try to blur the boundaries between the so-called high and low cultures. They celebrate both with equal zeal. Defying the increasingly pervasive parade of grand narratives, Jean-Francois Lyotard, one of the most powerful postmodernists, prescribes mininarratives. While illustrating the attitudes of postmodernists towards mininarratives, Peter Barry (2002) defines mininarratives as "provisional, contingent, temporary, and relative and which provide a basis for the actions of specific groups in particular local circumstances" (p. 64). Barry (2002) lucidly illustrated how for the postmodernist "fragmentation is an exhilarating, liberating phenomenon, symptomatic of our escape from the claustrophobic embrace of fixed systems of belief. In a word, the modernist laments fragmentation while the postmodernist celebrates it" (p. 63). This tendency to look for mininarratives is profoundly pro-democratic and instrumental in facilitating the formation of a radical pluralistic society. This is how, postmodernism

intellectually supports the growth and development of the diverse cultures and societies. It further stimulates the research on the alternative, multicultural and post-colonial literatures.

Chinua Achebe (1975), one of the most powerful African postcolonial writers, disapproved of the concept of universalism and saw it “as a synonym for the narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe” (p. 7.). He advocated that the world should allow “people [to] bring their gifts to the great festival of the world’s cultural harvest and mankind will be all the more richer for the variety and distinctiveness of the offerings” (Achebe, 1990, p.89).

In order to (re)discover and develop the cultural identities and the proud histories of the rest of the world in their distinctive ways without any interference from the metanarratives of the West, Dipash Chakrabarty wrote his notable book *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000). He argued that people should rewrite their history and reinterpret culture from their own cultural perspectives so as to free them from alien interference. Judging their history and culture from European perspectives will make them appear ‘backward’ as their areas of excellence are different and not the ones the Western or Western trained historians are looking for. He argued, “‘Europe’ remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call ‘Indian,’ ‘Chinese,’ ‘Kenyan,’ and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called ‘the history of Europe.’ In this sense, ‘Indian’ history itself is in a position of subalternity; one can only articulate subaltern subject positions in the name of this history’ (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 27).

The Research Opportunities in the Mininarratives:

With this intellectual background, search for perspectives and meanings in alternative, multicultural and postcolonial literatures, and history started its journey. The central tenets of such an educational drive are that every individual society is unique and distinctive, that each society can grow in its unique way from its very roots and traditions, and that imitating others’ ways of life will disintegrate its character from inside and marginalise/weaken its essence. Therefore, they attempt to foreground the marginalized and the oppressed voices of the world without classifying them as ‘the other’. They look for the co-existence of all people irrespective of economic status, sex, caste, creed, language, and location. They focus not only on the diverse cultural groups, but also on the diverse groups of people within the same culture with a view to breaking the barriers of mutual ignorance and prejudice. The demand of the mininarratives rises from the tendency to minutely interpret the life and the ethics of an individual, a capitalist and a proletariat, a youth and a child and the like. They also tend to enquire into the process of characterization of the minor characters belong to different social strata who have, as they allege, been delineated in the socio-cultural matrix of the grand narratives and hence un/misrepresented in the racist/colored texts. However, mininarratives in effect endorse/celebrate multiculturalism. Their overlapping with each other complements their distinctive strength and stances. In editing his reputed journal, *International Journal on Multicultural Literature*, Dr. K. V. Dominic (2012) has, thus, expressed his strong conviction:

“Multiculturalism has become a reality now. No nation can exist without a multicultural existence” (1). And to explore these existentialist realities, it has, now, become a necessity to investigate the multicultural literatures and marginalized societies in the world from their very own cultural perspectives and determine the mininarratives in them. It has opened up a new vista of opportunities and challenges before the research scholars as these literatures remained unheeded for long in the mainstream academic activities.

THE ONLINE RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES AND THE CHALLENGES:

Interpreting a work of literature necessitates the knowledge of that distinctive culture and society so that one can interpret the work with proper perspectives and paradigms. Any attempt to interpret the work from a different cultural perspective may lead to a fallacious judgment and create a prejudice. In doing research in such a new cultural landscape, one needs to explore the history, tradition, culture, society and philosophy to create the specific socio-cultural contexts from which a meaningful interpretation can be made. For example, a literary work from India or Nigeria demands the readers to know the specific society, history, culture and tradition of the work for a better understanding and interpretation. The rise of the postcolonial literatures has created a generation of readers across the world who look for such socio-cultural, historical texts to support their research interest. Because of this fresh look into the alternative literatures and cultures for research, there appears to be a crisis in the primary and secondary materials available to the scholars. Professor Asha Viswas (1999), in the Editor’s Note of *Creative Forum*, expressed her anxiety regarding this scarcity. To quote: In India, this vast body of literature (African Literature), as a subject for serious exploration amongst authors and academicians has not been very old. The primary and secondary source material available in India on black fiction may arouse the curiosity of a casual reader, but it is not enough to satisfy a serious scholar. (p. 7)

A researcher finds it a challenging task in obtaining enough learning materials to pursue their research successfully. Now while it is a challenge for a foreign scholar to address this dearth of materials of a specific small, local, community, it is a great opportunity for the scholars of that community to voice their own identity, culture and vision in the world scenario. And at times it may be through translation and through providing online resources.

Translation

Translation is a powerful mode of sharing one’s identity and culture in the world scenario. Since it is not possible for anyone to learn many languages of the world, one can read the ‘mininarratives’ of other cultures and societies through translation. It provides an opportunity to give voice to one’s own philosophy, society, history, traditions, values, ethics and aesthetics independently of any interference. However, it is a site of negotiation as it fails to communicate the culture as it is. A nation, through the translation of its cultural heritage, carves out an identity in the world while losing some of the true essence of the community in the translation process into the foreign language. Through translation, however, a new

generation of readers is being created in the societies across the world in the wake of which, a demand for their cultural harvest is rising up sharply. If a research scholar does not belong to that linguistic community, he has to rely on the translation in his research pursue. This poses the challenge of selecting the more authentic and relevant translation of the original text from among the many options available. In that case, one has to take the risk of picking up a translation, maybe, done from a point of view, quite different from what he is looking forward to, and it might lead to their getting an erroneous or prejudiced one.

Web based Resources

While collecting data for a research on a work of literature belonging to another society or culture, one may be confronted with a plethora of online information, which might crop up both as opportunities and challenges. It is at times difficult to identify if the secondary materials available online are the genuine research or writings of some sponsored institutes or agencies, because they may reflect the ideology of the sponsoring organization. So, in doing online research on the mininarratives, one needs to be cautious about rejecting the biased and prejudiced opinions. It is a tricky problem, for, one may have to refer to another site or online platforms for verification and remain in the constructed reality. It seems there is no way to get the fact beyond the networks of constructed realities generated by these online blogs and sites. So, one is likely to be in the realm of 'hyperrealism' losing links to the external realities. A research scholar need not always take these mininarratives as authentic sources of the society but can take them to observe how people project themselves online.

The blogs and internet forums of the famous personalities

The sites of the distinguished artists, creative writers, columnists, thinkers and journalists of a community are some of the authentic repositories of knowledge on that particular society. One needs to be careful while searching such sites as an individual may use their names and personal pictures for maintaining his personal blogs and internet forums. One should look for clues and explore the contact addresses etc to verify the authenticity of the site.

Social Media

The emergence of the communication technologies has opened up new opportunities for a research scholar to view mininarratives of diverse kinds across the boundaries of cultures and countries. The internet forums and blogs have helped shape new space for the marginalized and dominated societies to express their identities and share their dreams. They provide hyperlinks to the other blogs and forums for further exploration. The scholars, while exploring such forums and blogs, often, not only view the agents' points of view, but also can see the opinions of the people about such mininarratives. However, the researcher should be aware of using the data from the internet, because all the data are not acceptable in terms of the quality of the research, and one may not spot the real contexts and the settings of the write-ups. These social media, blogs, internet forums, self-broadcastings through social networking sites like facebook, twitters and YouTubes and the like may not really reflect the true picture of the society and culture as such, because they are usually based on the

metropolitan life and experiences and hence tend to give a partial view of the whole thing. So the research scholar needs to be selective about using the materials, because these sites of meanings might be unaware of carrying forward the cultural hegemony of the ideologies of the metanarratives and misrepresent the very tradition they are expected to represent. Florian Stadler (2013) warned the scholars to interrogate before taking data from such “metropolitan centres” (p. 503) as they might re-colonize their minds by the capitalist ideology. Their voices may not really reflect the inside story of the small, local communities.

However, of late, due to the ever-increasing use of the internet and communication technology even in the rural societies, it has become possible for the people to resist the haunting spell of metanarratives and put forward their own mininarratives before the world. They have also assumed the active role of the creators of knowledge like the practitioners of metanarratives abandoning the long-borne passive role of consumers of the state sponsored media agents. In this context, Hilde C. Stephansen (2013) explained the conviction of Castells that internet provides “the technical infrastructure through which activists communicate and share information, increasing their capacity to introduce oppositional messages into the public realm” (p. 506). They now provide alternative perspectives to the major media players. So these marginalized people are now increasingly empowering themselves through constant resistance to the grand narratives and continued projections of their own ideas and views of life in their own sweet ways.

Electronic Journals and the Online Libraries

In order to get access to the research materials, a scholar can subscribe to the relevant online libraries, electronic journals and magazines. A research scholar should make use of the online resources and archives available copiously because it can reduce the cost of his research. For instance, he does not need to travel long distances to collect the data in the field of his inquiry. It also saves much time if he researches online. In a recent survey among the research scholars in India, it has been found that, “[t]he web is influencing the development of new modes of scholarly communication and new electronic resources that have emerged and become powerful media of communication for university libraries” (Musthafa, 2012, p. 26).

Searching materials online will help the researcher get updated information as well. If one wishes to study a text of literature, society and culture, it is much easier for him to look for online video clips available in YouTube and other related sites at least for primary understanding. There are expert audio or video lectures available on specific topics and issues on the websites of many institutes, government organizations and universities. One needs to be careful to check if the online research materials are the creations of some research work or just some personal/promotional products. The process of searching the mininarratives has become further consolidated “with that of a networked citizen-centred perspective” (Loader, 2011, p. 758) generated from the use of social media such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Wikies and the blogosphere. One can now communicate with the experts of the field personally, quickly and efficiently building a research fraternity of one’s own. The social

media connect research scholars of a particular area of study cutting across the boundaries of countries, cultures and locations.

However, Mohammad Musthafa (2012, p. 40) while researching among the Indian research scholars notices the key challenges among them are limited access to full texts, lack of proper knowledge for the effective use of computer/internet, and the lack of proper training to use web resources effectively. For a novice scholar, it is a highly challenging task to organize their ideas from the web resources. It is also a daunting experience to interpret and analyze them online.

In spite of these challenges faced by the scholars, web resources have become indispensable for the research pursuit for the ones who want to explore the mininarratives, for, there is a dearth of materials in print in many traditional libraries. The majority of the libraries usually contain books mostly on the English and American literatures and cultures leaving little room for the books on multicultural literatures. At present, however, the web resources are trying to narrow the gap between central and peripheral literatures and cultures. The Web-based resources have been neglected so far in the serious research pursuits, because the scholars lack the technical skills and the information to optimize their search. The research scholars face diverse difficulties in judging the quality of the online materials and in making the optimum use of them. The research institutes and the universities need to address these issues and foster an environment conducive to free and fair research.

CONCLUSION

The accreditation of contemporary world of learning, teaching and research allows online resources to be added to traditional research strategies for quality assurance and research pyrotechnics. Hence, it is imperative for the universities and the research institutes to conduct regular training workshops for the students and research scholars to optimize their use of web resources and strengthen their online research activities. Research scholars need to be trained in basic computer skills and online research strategies. The research communities need to provide an online guide on web resources and tips on how to explore them so that researchers can stand to benefit from them. The libraries too need to buy e-books and subscribe to more electronic journals and magazines, and Net-libraries to develop a congenial research culture.

References:

- Achebe, C. (1990). *Hopes and impediments: Selected essays*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Achebe, C. (1975). *Morning yet on creation day: Essays*. London: Heinemann.
- Chakrabarty, D. (2000). *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference*. Princeton: Princeton UP.
- Barry, P. (2002). *Beginning theory: An introduction to literary and cultural theory*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Dominic, K. V. (2012). Editorial. *International Journal on Multicultural Literature*, 2: 2. 6-7

- Eliot, T. S. (1922). "The waste land". [Online] Available:
<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/176735> (February 12, 2014)
- Loader, B. D. & Dan M. (2011). Networking democracy? Social media innovations and participatory politics. *Information, Communication & Society*, 14:6. 757-769.
doi: 10.1080/1369118X.2011.592648
- Musthafa, K. M. (2012). Use of web resources for scholarly research in language and literature: A study among research scholars in Aligarh Muslim University, India. *International Research: Journal of Library & Information Science*, 2:1. 25-45.
- Stadtler, F., Ole B. L. & Brian R. (2013). Networking the globe: Culture, technologies, globalization. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 49:5. 503-505. [Online] Available:
doi: 10.1080/17449855.2013.842766 (March 3, 2014)
- Stephansen, H. C. (2013). Connecting the peripheries: Networks, place and scale in the world social forum
process. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 49:5, 506-518.
doi: 10.1080/17449855.2013.842773
- Viswas, A. (1999). Editor's note. *Creative Forum*, 12: 3&4.6-7.
- Yeats, W. B. (1919). "The Second coming". [Online] Available:
<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172062> (February 18, 2014)