Posthuman Childhood: Loss of Wonder and Social Exclusion in the Digital Age with reference to *Childhood 2.0*

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Abstract— The everyday of children in the contemporary digital is filled with technologically saturated environments where screens, algorithms, and immersive media shape their experiences. This epistemological and ontological paradigm shift leaves them in a state where the basic sensory experiences of curiosity and wonder are displaced by digitally mediated forms. This results in the emergence of a new subjectivity with heightened dependence on simulated experiences, and the gradual erosion of spontaneous exploration. Theoretical insights from Jean Baudrillard and Rosi Braidotti provide critical tools to understand these transformations. Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality and Rosi Braidotti's posthuman childhood give in depth analysis of how children are engaged in constant entanglement with technological systems affecting their emotional and cognitive environment. Both the theories offer a broader perspective of the posthuman condition wherein children's lived realities are mediated by AI-driven infrastructures that restructure their emotional landscapes and social relations. Against this backdrop, the present study examines the documentary Children 2.0 to analyse how digital ecologies and AI-mediated platforms contribute to children's seclusion, mental vulnerability, and diminishing real-world curiosity. By situating the documentary within posthuman and hyperreality frameworks, the study aims to critically map the emerging contours of childhood in the age of artificial intelligence.

*Keywords— **Childhood- Posthuman- Hyperreality-Altered Subjectivities-Social Exclusion***

Childhood has been considered as the most important phase in the lives of humans as it is the formative stage where the moulding of an individual takes place. This phase is marked by innocence, imagination, curiosity along with cognitive and emotional growth. Researches have shown that those with inquisitive minds tend to be less anxious and more happy than the less curious ones, and also have a greater sense of well-being. When one is curious about a thing or event, they are more engaged with it that they remember it with ease, and helps brain to retain information better. Curious minds result in increased creativity and also stronger interpersonal relationships as well.

In psychoanalysis, childhood is seen as the formative phase in the development of human psyche, the phase where self-actualization begins and leads to personal growth. In Freudian perspective, curiosity emerges as a biological drive in the anal and phallic stages and is a way of challenging the knowledge and boundaries set by the old generation. But in post-Freudian view, curiosity is not just sexual, but therapeutic tool which helps to understand reality by fostering creativity, learning, communication thereby enabling the child to confront its internal conflicts. The Lacanian Mirror Stage where the child encounters its self for the first time resulting in a sense of alienation and jubilation talks about the 'innate inquisitiveness' that children are associated with. This phase establishes the relationship between the 'self' and the 'other' which is quite symbolic of the emotional balance inherent to human lived

experience, wherein the fragmented self is fortified by a spirit of resilience.

Over the past two decades, things have changed rapidly with the intervention of technology. The fast-paced life and the far-reaching changes have initiated lots of debates and discussions on the ontology of human beings and humanity as a whole. Had the initial concern be about the replacement of humans by machines with loss of jobs, it was proved unfounded; and it required time for the other implications of technology to be fully understood. The alternate world with altered conditions initiated by technology has engulfed not just the physical but the cognitive as well as social skills of humans, especially children. With access to digital technology, the cognitive exposure has expanded but it marked a decline in the qualities that are generally associated with children- the most important ones being curiosity and wonder.

Childhood 2.0 is a documentary directed by Jamin Winans, Kiowa Winans, and Robert Muratore which features interviews with real parents, children, psychologists, doctors, educators and other experts in child and safety development. It explores the issues faced by parents and children in the current world by bringing in people from old and new generations to show how the world was before the introduction of technology and after. The dangers lurking in the web world and its repercussions, mental as well as physical, are brought to the forefront through a series of questions and answers. The unprecedented challenges that children face as they grow up in the digital era present an alarming picture as the concerns raised are universal.

The documentary begins with an ironic statutory warning that it is unsuitable for children; paradoxically, it presents the problems faced by children. The very first question is towards the parents regarding what do they love in their children. As they talk about the qualities they like in their kids, they also share the life they had as children- how they used to stand together as a family- parents, kids, neighbours- even during the time of Great Depression. But now, 'kids had to change so much faster than they did'. The second question was for the children on their opinion about their parents' childhood. The answer from young kids to teenage boys and girls varied from- 'no gadgets', 'they had fun', 'they played outdoor games 24x7', 'they were like 'Charlie' in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory','* more genuine, authentic and better than ours'. Though the answers were different, it all highlighted one thing" with the explosion of communication and technology in the last twenty years, everything has become difficult and complex in a world that paces so fast. The evolution of communication industry from land phones, caller IDs,

pagers to video calling facilities via various social media platforms, throws a poignant question: how far accountable is the communication industry?

The fundamental aim behind this development in communication and technology was to stay connected and to support each other. Everything that was exciting initially has become scary. Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality is crucial in understanding this digital world that we live in. in his work, *Simulacra and Simulation*, he argues that the representations, the *simulacra,* dominate the modern society where new realities are not only produced but replaced thereby blurring the distinction between the real and unreal. Social media platforms with their algorithms are manifestations of what he names as 'hyperreality'. The lived experiences of the 'real' world is replaced by the filtered, fake online identities and curated images that act like simulations. It is critical to remember that these simulations do not imitate reality, rather it precedes and shapes it. He defines simulacrum as,

> it is the reflection of a profound reality;
>
> it masks and denatures a profound reality;
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> it masks the absence of a profound reality; it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum. (4)

Curiosity, which once emerged as a result of a child's innate exploration of nature and interpersonal engagement with the people and the surrounding is replaced by digital consumption and algorithm-driven stimulation. As these technologically saturated environments shape their lived experiences, there occurs a paradigm shift epistemologically and ontologically, creating a new subjectivity highly dependent on simulated experiences. This leads to a gradual erosion of the curiosity-driven exploration, and makes one analyse critically how agency, imagination and emotional development are constituted within digitally constructed realms.

Both parents, children and other experts unanimously agree to the physical as well as the mental issues faced by them, especially teenagers. Their brains are wrapped around by technology that they do not know what to be afraid of. According to a recent survey, 53% of kids use mobile phones 24x7. The average time a teenager uses mobile phone is between 8 to 11 hours. The reason for this skyrocketing of the time they use mobile phones are the precision and the algorithm with which various applications and virtual platforms work. A professor in Harvard University has made a very interesting observation on the working of these algorithms. 'Man is a predictable animal'- this is the principle with which gambling and other card games work. Similar is the case with social media platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, Fortnight and others. Children

connect virtually when they are bored as they needn't use their brains online, resulting in a loss of sensory skills, social skills and coping skills. Thus, they connect online to disconnect socially.

Children have become incredible social creatures that they do not want to talk about their problems to anyone. The current rise in mental health issues problems like depression, anxiety, addictions, lack of resilience when confronted with online bullying, increased suicidal rates, issues related to eyes are all the aftermath of this alarming transition of childhood experiences. Another matter of grave concern related to this is 'cloud addiction' which in simple terms can be defined as an affective and cognitive dependence on cloud infrastructures. All the children being interviewed admit how rewarding it is for them to get 'likes and followers' in Instagram. 'They feel good, better when they have more likes and followers, and otherwise they feel horrible. This instant gratification and social rewarding could turn to punishment anytime. The persuasive technology used by most of the online apps where the merit of one person is measure by comparing the likes one get with that of others lead to narcissism, one of the dark triads of personality traits. Thus the attention seeking self always tries to keep a perfect image online. In a world with rapid technological advancement and accelerated lifestyle, the question is: Is there safe place for kids?

Rosi Braidotti in *The Posthuman* presents posthuman childhood as relational, embodied and technologically mediated. Embedded within ecological, social and digital assemblages, the digital devices and virtual platforms with their algorithms act as formatives forces, not as external tools, in shaping childhood. A posthuman child is a relational subjectivity which exist within the network of digital relationships techno-mediated interactions. Posthuman childhood becomes part of digital screens, codes and simulations and these digital entanglements decentralise the concept of an autonomous entity. The posthuman child emerges through assemblages where agency is distributed or relational rather than individualized. She further states,

> the old modernist idealisation of the unitary, rational, independent, dislocated, objective, able-bodied human subject has been revealed as the fiction that it really is. The self, subject, person, citizen, the human – each of these individualised entities – is now firmly interconnected, tied into and caught up in the ever-growing whirlpool of capital, technology, communication that shift us through real and virtual places and contexts. The twenty-first-century citizen is a

'knowing subject' with the potential to 'free us from the provincialism of the mind, the sectarianism of ideologies, the dishonesty of grandiose posturing and the grip of fear' (11).

The lack of resilience and coping skills in children in the current world throws light into the crimes that happen online. Many kids prefer online because they see it more viable and safer to be bullied online rather than hitting in front of a broader and larger audience. When a study is conducted on 'what gets more response online?', it was revealed that moral outrage gets the more engagement, resulting in an increased rise in online crimes. The neutrality of crimes online, i.e. they do not see each other face to face, make it more convenient and seemingly less consequential. Experts in the field of Child Development cautions parents to be aware of the spectrum in which the kids are in the development cycle. The lack of resilience in today's children show their inability to cop up with failures. It shouldn't be a proper failure, just a trivial thing like being blocked by someone in Instagram or if not tagged in a photo or video or if not invited for an event trigger unlikely emotion of not being liked by others.

An additional matter of critical concern is pornography. When asked about the surge in pornography and other matters related to it, parents and children who belong to two entirely different generation had diverse experiences. While the older generation during their teenage had to content with magazines like Playboy and late-night TV shows, the current generation has access to it 24x7. As physical barriers do not exist, 'sexting' and 'sextortion' have become too common and unsolicited. The teenagers revealed how irrelevant it is to have communication with the opposite person to have sex. The situation is so frightening that kids involved in this are sometimes just 10 years old. Many virtual sites provide platforms for people to meet these young kids. And parents have underestimated the commonality of these issues. Recent surveys have found that more than 8 billion children are abused online globally.

As one explores the reason for the loss of wonder and curiosity among today's children, the hyperreality with its simulacra and simulations emerges as the principal cause. However, on being asked about this, children responded with answers that they perceived the real world as boring and unengaging. As soon as everyone reaches home, everyone go to their rooms and takes out their mobile phones. Now, who should be held accountable for this?

This altered condition of childhood has curtailed sustained attention and wonder compelling one to rethink about the factors and situations that led to the current scenario. The easy blame on technology is invalid here as

technology is great if we can control our consumption of it. If earlier school students were taken to wildlife. forests and planetariums as part of their study tour, now they are being taken to shopping malls. Children often spend more time watching screens than engaging in imaginative play or real-life exploration, which can reduce their interest in discovering new things. The AI-driven images which they can personalise the way they want has reduced the sense of wonder in them. They are no more excited when they find a bird or an animal or anything beautiful in nature.

In *Childhood 2.0,* children's social interactions are often portrayed as mediated experiences conducted through smartphones and social platforms rather than embodied, face-to-face encounters. Validation is measured through likes, comments, and digital attention rather than through direct interpersonal feedback. The documentary suggests that children increasingly depend on digital affirmation for emotional regulation. This aligns with Baudrillard's claim that in a hyperreal society, "the signs of the real" take precedence over genuine lived experience (*Simulacra and Simulation* 2). For contemporary children, digital platforms do not merely reflect social reality but actively constitute it.

While Baudrillard reveals how digital mediation substitutes lived reality with simulation, Rosi Braidotti's concept of the posthuman subject reframes what it means to be a child in the digital age. Braidotti argues that "the posthuman subject is a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity" (*The Posthuman* 49). In contrast to classical humanist notions of the autonomous individual, the posthuman subject is co-constituted through relations with technologies, nonhuman agents, and networked systems. Subjectivity is not located solely within a bounded self but distributed across assemblages of humans and technologies. The emotional landscapes of the children—aspirations, anxieties, self-esteem—are continuously influenced by digital metrics and algorithmic visibility. This supports Braidotti's claim that subjectivity is distributed across human and nonhuman relations rather than confined within the individual. Thus, the transformation of childhood depicted in Childhood 2.0 represents not merely a shift in technology use but a broader reconfiguration of subjectivity, sociality, and meaning.

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