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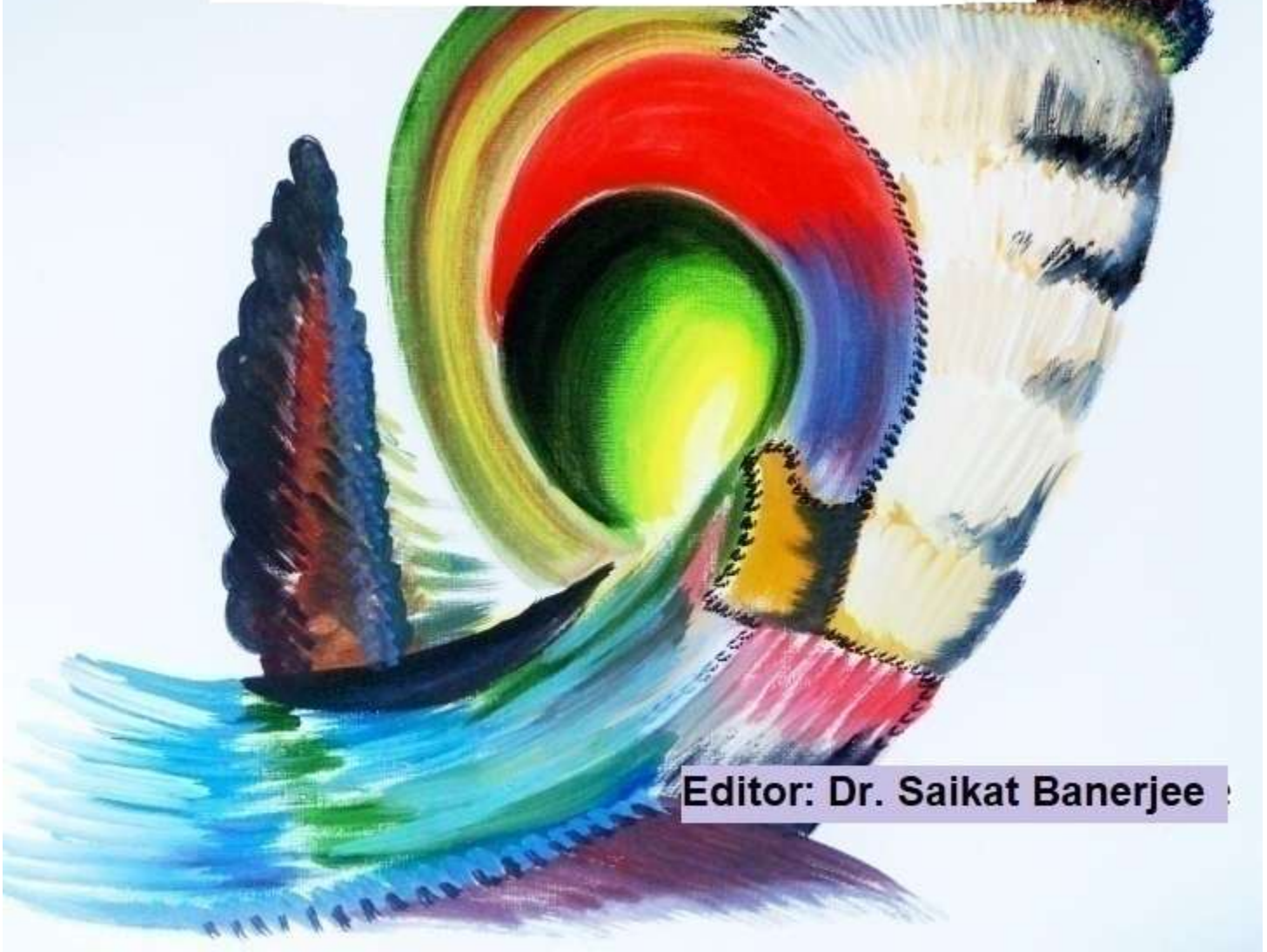

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The Paradox of Digital Presence: Loneliness and Absence in Contemporary English-Language Literature

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Abstract: In the digital age, technology promises unprecedented connectivity, yet it often amplifies individualization, creating paradoxes of presence and absence. This essay examines how contemporary English-language literature portrays this phenomenon: individuals experience illusory loneliness while alone online, immersed in virtual societies, but feel profoundly absent in physical interactions due to digital distractions. Drawing on posthumanist theory from N. Katherine Hayles, Franco Moretti's distant reading, and Eliza T. Dresang's radical change theory, the analysis focuses on three novels—Dave Eggers's *The Circle* (2013), Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* (2021), and Lauren Oyler's *Fake Accounts* (2021). Through fragmented narratives, ironic language, and symbolic representations of technology, these works critique how digital mediation reshapes identity and society. The essay argues that literature serves as a mirror to these shifts, revealing technology's role in eroding authentic connections while fostering superficial ones. Ultimately, it highlights literature's potential to foster critical awareness in an era of mediated existence.

Keywords: Digital-Individualization, Virtual presence, Posthumanism, Contemporary literature.

In the digital age, where smartphones, social media, and constant connectivity define daily existence, the boundaries between solitude and society have become profoundly blurred, giving rise to a paradox that reshapes human experience. When individuals sit alone, engrossed in the glow of screens—scrolling through Twitter feeds, posting on Instagram, or engaging in virtual forums—they often feel a pang of loneliness, as if disconnected from the world. Yet, this isolation is illusory; their likes, comments, and shares ripple through digital networks, embedding them in a virtual society where their presence is felt by countless others, from friends to strangers. This phenomenon creates a false sense of loneliness, as the individual is never truly alone but rather hyper-connected in a performative, often superficial, digital realm. Conversely, in physical

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gatherings—family dinners, social events, or casual encounters—the same individuals are frequently absent, their attention hijacked by notifications or the pull of online personas. This digital distraction renders their physical presence hollow, felt as a void by those around them, transforming moments of potential connection into parallel solitudes. This paradox of digital individualization, where technology simultaneously fosters connection and alienation, lies at the heart of contemporary English-language literature. Authors like Dave Eggers, Patricia Lockwood, and Lauren Oyler capture this tension, using narrative techniques to explore how digital mediation redefines identity, presence, and societal bonds. Drawing on N. Katherine Hayles's posthumanist theory, which posits that technology dissolves embodied presence into "virtual bodies" within information flows (Hayles 2-3), Franco Moretti's distant reading for identifying patterns across texts (Moretti 1-2), and Eliza T. Dresang's radical change theory, which highlights how digital-age narratives reflect interactivity and nonlinearity (Dresang 19), this essay analyzes Eggers's *The Circle* (2013), Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* (2021), and Oyler's *Fake Accounts* (2021). Through fragmented narratives, ironic language, and symbolic representations of technology, these novels expose how digital individualization creates illusory loneliness in solitude and enforced absence in society, contributing to literary discourse on the human condition in an era dominated by screens. This study not only illuminates the evolving role of literature in critiquing technological culture but also urges readers to confront their own mediated existences, questioning the authenticity of connection in a world where presence is increasingly virtual.

The literature review situates this paradox within broader scholarly conversations. Posthumanism, as articulated by Hayles, critiques how digital technologies redefine embodiment, arguing that "information loses its body" and humans become posthuman through cybernetic integration (Hayles 4). This framework illuminates characters' fragmented identities in virtual spaces. Moretti's distant reading complements this by advocating quantitative analysis of literary patterns, such as recurring motifs of digital isolation across genres, to uncover systemic changes in fiction (Moretti 1-2). Applied to contemporary novels, it reveals a "distant" view of how technology themes proliferate, moving beyond close reading to map broader evolutions. Dresang's radical change theory, originally for youth literature, extends to adult fiction in the digital era, emphasizing how books embody "synergistic" elements like nonlinearity and multimedia influences that mirror online experiences

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(Dresang and Kotrla 92). Electronic literature theorist Scott Rettberg adds that digital narratives often feature "fragmented presence," where interactivity simulates but disrupts real connection (Rettberg 5). Existing criticism, such as analyses of *The Circle* as a dystopian warning against tech overreach, often overlooks the bidirectional paradox of presence/absence, a gap this essay addresses. Similarly, studies of Lockwood and Oyler focus on social media satire but underexplore literary devices tying to individualization.

In *The Circle*, Eggers depicts digital individualization through Mae Holland's immersion in a tech utopia. Alone in her dorm, Mae engages with the Circle's platform, feeling connected via constant updates: "You sit at a desk twelve hours a day and you have nothing to show for it except some numbers that won't exist or be remembered in a week" (Eggers 45). This quote highlights illusory loneliness; her virtual presence in metrics and feeds integrates her into a societal network, yet it masks emotional void. Posthumanist lens reveals Mae as a "virtual body," her identity dispersed in data streams (Hayles 13). In physical society, absence prevails; during family visits, Mae's obsession with "Transparency" tools distracts her: "The tools you guys create actually manufacture unnaturally extreme social needs. No one needs the level of contact you're purveying" (Eggers 400). Eggers uses ironic corporate slogans like "Secrets Are Lies" to symbolize how technology enforces absence, turning presence into surveillance. Distant reading patterns show recurring motifs of screens as barriers, aligning with Moretti's graphs of genre evolution toward dystopian tech critiques. Radical change manifests in the novel's nonlinear plot, mimicking app notifications, which Dresang links to digital interactivity (Dresang 25). Thus, *The Circle* critiques digital society as a false balm for isolation.

Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* intensifies this paradox via stream-of-consciousness mimicking Twitter. The protagonist, alone yet "in the portal," experiences false loneliness: "It was a mistake to believe that other people were not living as deeply as you were. Besides, you were not even living that deeply" (Lockwood 12). Virtual presence floods her with memes and trends, creating societal immersion without physical interaction. Hayles's posthumanism applies here, as the narrator's mind becomes a "distributed cognition" across networks (Hayles 196). In real society, absence emerges when tragedy pulls her offline: "Why did the portal feel so private, when you only entered it when you needed to be everywhere?" (Lockwood 5). Fragmented sentences and memes as narrative devices reflect Rettberg's "fragmented presence," where digital language alienates (Rettberg 37). Moretti's distant reading identifies patterns of online jargon across similar

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texts, signaling a shift in literary form. Dresang's theory highlights the novel's synergistic reading, blending humor and grief to echo digital multitasking (Dresang and Kotrla 95). Lockwood thus uses irony to expose how social media perpetuates disconnection.

Oyler's *Fake Accounts* explores online personas amplifying individualization. The narrator, discovering her boyfriend's conspiracy account, feels virtually present yet lonely: "The internet is always on, interaction always available, but it could not guarantee I would be able to interact with someone I actually wanted to talk to" (Oyler 23). This underscores false loneliness in solitude, as fake profiles create illusory society. Posthumanist analysis views her as a simulated self, per Hayles, where authenticity erodes in digital simulacra (Hayles 35). In Berlin's physical scenes, absence dominates: "People often say my generation values authenticity," but online deceptions spill over, making real interactions hollow (Oyler 150). Metafictional asides and ironic tone embody Dresang's radical change, with nonlinear dating episodes mimicking app swipes. Distant reading reveals patterns of deception motifs in Trump-era fiction, as Moretti might chart (Moretti 48). Oyler critiques how digital individualization fosters absence, using satire to highlight fragmented presence.

These novels collectively illustrate the paradox, with shared patterns of fragmentation and irony discernible via distant reading. Posthumanism explains mediated identities, while radical change theory shows evolving narrative forms. Implications for English literature include a shift toward hybrid texts that critique yet embody digital culture, urging readers to question their own presence.

Discussion: The Paradox of Digital Individualization in Literature and Society

The paradox of digital individualization—where technology fosters a false sense of loneliness in solitude while enforcing absence in physical society—emerges as a defining tension in contemporary English-language literature, reflecting broader societal anxieties about connection in the digital age. This phenomenon, as depicted in Eggers, Lockwood, and Oyler, reveals a dual dynamic: when alone, individuals engage with virtual platforms that simulate societal presence, yet this engagement amplifies a hollow isolation; when physically surrounded by others, their digital preoccupations create a palpable absence, undermining authentic interaction. This bidirectional irony, as Hayles's posthumanist framework suggests, stems from technology's ability to fragment the self into "virtual bodies" that exist in data streams rather than embodied reality (Hayles 2-3). The novels' protagonists—Mae in *The Circle*, the narrator in *No One Is Talking About This*, and Oyler's unnamed

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protagonist—embody this fragmentation, their identities dispersed across platforms that promise connection but deliver superficiality. Mae's obsession with metrics, for instance, embeds her in a virtual society, yet her solitude feels empty, echoing Hayles's notion that "information loses its body" (Hayles 4). Similarly, Lockwood's narrator finds solace in the "portal," but its flood of content masks a deeper loneliness, while Oyler's protagonist navigates fake personas that isolate her even in virtual crowds.

This paradox extends beyond individual experience to critique the structure of modern society, as Moretti's distant reading reveals through recurring motifs of screens, notifications, and digital jargon across contemporary fiction (Moretti 1-2). These patterns signal a literary shift toward narratives that mirror the fragmented, nonlinear nature of online life, as Dresang's radical change theory posits (Dresang and Kotrla 92). The novels' stylistic choices—Eggers's corporate irony, Lockwood's stream-of-consciousness memes, Oyler's metafictional asides—reflect this shift, adapting literary forms to capture the multitasking, distracted quality of digital existence. Yet, this adaptation is not mere mimicry; it serves a critical function, exposing how technology redefines presence as performance. In solitude, the illusion of loneliness is dispelled by virtual engagement, but this engagement lacks depth, as seen in Lockwood's narrator: "It was a mistake to believe that other people were not living as deeply as you were" (Lockwood 12). In physical settings, the reverse occurs: Mae's distraction during family visits or Oyler's narrator's detachment in Berlin social scenes illustrate how digital immersion renders individuals absent, their presence felt only as a void by others.

The literary implications are profound. These works suggest that English-language literature is evolving into a hybrid form that both critiques and embodies digital culture, as Rettberg notes in his analysis of electronic literature's "fragmented presence" (Rettberg 5). By blending traditional narrative with digital aesthetics—nonlinear plots, ironic language, and multimedia-like structures—these novels challenge readers to confront their own mediated existence. They ask whether virtual presence can ever substitute for embodied connection or if digital absence in social settings signals a permanent erosion of community. Moreover, this paradox resonates with broader cultural questions about authenticity and identity in an era where algorithms shape interactions. The novels' critiques, grounded in irony and fragmentation, serve as a call to action, urging readers to reclaim agency over their presence in both virtual and physical realms. For literary studies, this demands new methodologies, such as digital humanities tools like Voyant for analyzing linguistic patterns of isolation, to keep

pace with these evolving narratives. Ultimately, these texts not only mirror the digital age's contradictions but also empower readers to navigate them, highlighting literature's enduring role in fostering critical awareness.

In conclusion, Eggers, Lockwood, and Oyler use literature to unpack digital individualization's ironies, revealing technology's false promises. As society grapples with these dynamics, fiction offers insight: Are we truly connected, or merely performing presence? Future research might explore AI's role in exacerbating this paradox.

In conclusion, Eggers, Lockwood, and Oyler use literature to unpack digital individualization's ironies, revealing technology's false promises. As society grapples with these dynamics, fiction offers insight: Are we truly connected, or merely performing presence? Future research might explore AI's role in exacerbating this paradox.

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