

Virtual Reality, Cyberspace and Adolescent Dissipation: A Close Reading of Kirsten Krauth's *Just a Girl*

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Just a Girl is a novel by Kirsten Krauth, an Australian writer, who has won popular attention with it. This novel starts off on a usual, much-trendy note, where the craze of social media is portrayed through a fourteen-year-old girl, Layla, who keeps on going out for meeting up new friends, especially men, with whom she strikes friendship in the virtual world. Sometimes she goes overboard to think aloud, “He’s not bad enough to make me run away. But he’s older than I thought. Old enough to be my...maybe” (1). It is a bit daring of a wisp of a girl of fourteen to think in this vein and that too, with a man who is not just handsome, but, old enough to be a doting parent to her. Is it just making friends on the social media as we all to some extent do or something even more perilous, sending potential threats to the security of the individual, especially when she is a girl of a tender age and un-mellowed sensibilities?

An online review (Goodreads) says, “*Just a Girl* is a novel about being isolated and searching for a sense of connection, faith, friendship and healing, and explores what it’s like to grow up negotiating the digital world of facebook, webcams, internet porn, mobile phones and cyber bullying- a world where the line between public and private is increasingly being eroded.” It is quite interesting to note, how the virtual world takes on the real existence of a little girl, who grows up abruptly because of her regular access to the computer. Though her “mum says she needs to focus more on the here and now” (5), and, she decides to dance at the school social, mingle with her friends and even to have occasional flings with boy-mates. But, where would the child in her go? Hence, she also indulges in asking her mother foolish queries, while taken away to a museum:

Would a tyrannosaurus eat a stegosaurus?

Why are trees different colours of green?

How do you know god really lives in the sky?

Can you find gold if you crush up rocks?

If there was a drought forever would we all die? (7)

How can such a child-like girl change into an abruptly-grown-up sporty adolescent who is somewhat strange at her age? Perhaps, the call of virtual world can hardly be denied by her. She looks up to this world of many shades

with interest, may be, to ward off her loneliness or a sense of insecurity as her father walked out on her mother, leaving them in the lurch. She doubts her mother having an affair with the pastor in the local church and she, too, thinks of finding comfort and shelter in the lap of virtual reality, a world she can explore on her computer. Her loneliness is writ large on her face and she recounts, “On Christmas day it’s always just me, mum and Rusty. On the verandah, in Spingwood. Sometimes I wish she had some friends. Or family who’d want to drop by. But since Auntie Jeannie died, there had been nobody” (7-8).

Though, the world of virtual reality for 14-year-old Layla is for making a foray into the world of men and pleasure, the child in her stays in two minds listening to the dictates of her mother and flouting them, at the same time. Layla disgruntles,

Mum’s not happy that I’ve been going out with Davo. She’s never had that little talk to me about sex. But I know that’s what it’s about.... My mum’s just not touchy feely. She doesn’t even really like being cuddled. When I used to try as a kid she went stiff. Her face smiled but her body said no. But I know a lot more than she thinks. I’ve seen it all on the internet.... Mum told me never to trust a man. Who doesn’t look you in the eye. ..But a lot of sleazes give you heaps of eye contact. (25-27)

After all, Layla still nurtures a fairy-tale image of a lover and a beloved. The world of internet may win her male-partners but not a true lover. She still fantasizes of a true lover, who would pen romantic billet-doux for her. So on her birthday, apart from expecting a birthday present, she says, “What I’ve always wanted from a guy is a love-letter. Not an email but actual words down on paper. A romantic sentence that’s just about him and me. But Davo’s not a love-letter kind of guy” (14-15).

In the age of internet, the virtual reality sometimes tends to obliterate the physical distance between the friends and they often meet up, without any prior information about each other. It leaves room for charm, and there are chances of dreadful conclusion too. Aleks Krotoski in his celebrated book, *Untangling the Web: What the Internet is Doing to You* writes,

A virtual lover is so much more attractive because the blanks can be filled in according to what you want to believe, and if something turns up that doesn’t match the fantasy, the online affair can be

turned off with the click of a button. There's a big difference now in the age of the internet. Our romances aren't curated by human matchmakers, but algorithms, and we're falling in love via machine, not via candlelight...But by letting the machine do this for us, we may be ignoring the possibilities that the web uniquely offers, not to mention the fact that it also has the potential to divide us, rather than bring us together. (107-8)

Thus, Layla's scope for altering her mates she made on the internet was quite wide and varied. This, of course has a deadly impact on her getting used to meeting up this man in the morning and that bloke in the afternoon, quite indiscriminately. The adolescents of this era, are smart enough to start dating at such a tender age that it becomes detrimental to the society very often. In fact, since the last twenty-five years, since internet made a foray into almost all nooks and crannies of the globe, scrounging a 'global village' out of it, especially the youngsters are keen on making the most of it.

Layla, a girl of impressionable age is vulnerable to any kind of emotional entanglement, the internet might offer and she enjoys it too. As an adolescent of modern times, Layla should use the social media as an open platform for making friends but daring out to meet them or spend hours with them in a hotel room can be dicey, risk-involving ventures. But, fighting off her solitary confinement in a fatherless ambience, she gets desperate enough to try out any relationship that comes her way. This is, no doubt, one aspect of Layla's using the internet. The other aspect is absolutely innocuous and common. She uses the internet for research purposes too. That is laudable, but, a little guidance to her understanding of the figures she was researching on would come handy. To quote directly from the book:

I google *girls+guns*. And I click through to YouTube and come across this video. It's a woman who's been in prison. Since she was 18. Now she's on some talk show. She says she was raped by the guards. She has recently been let back into society. And the audience boos her when she comes on stage. But I feel really sorry for her. Because she has this beautiful long and shiny brown hair. Doesn't look like someone who's been in prison at all. So it turns out she's known as Long Island Lolita. I've heard about this book called *Lolita*. Lolita must be the name you call a girl in trouble. So I thought I'd tell her story to my class. (Krauth 31-32)

Layla's generalization of the name 'Lolita' needed some proper guidance to who she was and how Nabokov intended her to appear. Her foray into the world of internet was not just for making friends but also for some honest intents and purposes. Another aspect of her use of internet leads her to precocity in her snide remarks on her mother's behavior, especially when her mother wants her to stop spending too many hours in front of the computer. She could guess her mother's train of thoughts while she herself chanced upon all covert matters related to sexual union. Being a girl of fourteen, imagining her mother's inner thoughts is nothing but a serious offence on her part. Times are changing and so are the norms of behavior of the adolescents. And, in the age of virtual reality, no set rules of behaviour are tenable in case of the young adolescents like Layla.

The world of reality and virtual reality run hand-in-hand in *Just a Girl*. Layla's introduction to the readers starts off with her mention of a guy who was 'formerly known as *youami33*'. This pastime of making friends on a social networking site and going out to meet him, on a train or elsewhere, keeps her busy. The detrimental aspect of it could not be felt by her immediately. Thus, she got to know Davo, almost her age or a little older. But, Layla did not stop at him. At Newcastle, she did not even bother to snatch a small-time fling even with a cab-driver. She was so engrossed in the world of virtual reality that she did not even fumble when asking the cabbie, "Have you ever been to Google Earth on the World Wide Web?" to the cabbie, the words sounded like Latin and Greek (109).

She enjoys the company of men and loves dating them and hates her mum keeping an eye on her. At the tender age of twelve, she feels she can easily be judgmental about everything her 'mum' tries to impose on her. For example, when she says that over the past couple of years, her 'mum' had not given her anything more than just a few knick-knacks, which had a shrewd motive of boosting up her morals: "An interactive board game about the life of Jesus (which we played once and she annihilated me, of course); novels cunningly disguised as being about teenage girls on the eve of destruction through drugs and sex (cool) who then are redeemed by following the true path of god almighty (gag); and a CD of top ten Riverlay hits even though I don't go to church any more." (9)

Layla's mother had broken down after she was left in the lurch by her father. In her soliloquy, she confides in the readers:

I pray the Lord is proud of me because it's my first time in nine years without antidepressants, and I know I can do it, I'm doing a self-help workshop with Pastor Bevan at Riverlay, and it's the right time to attempt it because I don't have any streets right now, you know, it's school holidays and my clients are a bit on the quiet side, and it's a new year and all, can't believe we've arrived here already, 2008, and I'm trying to stay focused and keep up with how my mind works and use the Power of Now, so I'm asking the Lord for the strength to get through this and find my way back, because while the drugs have evened me out, a lot of the past feels a bit foggy and I'm worried that my memories are slipping away from me, like wet little fish through my fingers, but I have faith that this is a new beginning for me and for my daughter, a chance to wash away those fears, and I need to get up to check on Layla because she creeps around and comes and goes, and I'm noticing that with no meds I get more anxious about her whereabouts and what she's doing, but I'm watching, and I'm starting to feel angry and upset at being out of the loop. (11)

In order to flout all norms of a normal existence, Layla had taken recourse to the world of virtual reality to get an added pleasure of life. Though, from her real lover, she expects nothing 'virtual' but all 'real and tangible'. Layla, naturally being bitten by a bug of promiscuity, sells her heart to Tadashi, another man, and then another, someone else again in search of mental satiety as well as physical. Her tender age had not left much room for reason and logic, and hence, physical urge and its immediate gratification became her sole aim. Internet helped her come in contact with new contacts and these were based on extracting immediate gratification and were flimsy, fake relationships, which stayed based on the bond of physique only. But, what exactly drew her to men, she picked up from the social sites? This game of random pick and choose, no doubt, reflects the psychology of the lonely adolescents, being reared up by a single parent. Yet, it also acts a pointer to the hyper-real presence of man's world reflected in the psyche of the adolescent damsel. This nest-leaving tendency among the young adults in the West, has categorically been analyzed by Frances K. Goldscheider and Calvin Goldscheider in the jointly-composed essay "Family Structure and Conflict: Nest-Leaving Expectations of the Young Adults and their Parents" who write,

The family environment where children are raised is also likely to influence choices about living arrangement. Disrupted and newly-blended families may foster preferences for children's earlier residential independence, compared with persons living in more stable, nuclear families.... Persons in one-parent households or those in families with a stepparent should have higher expectations for PRI [Premarital Residential Independence] than those in other families. (89)

It is really applicable to the family of Layla. But Layla was not that mature to go for premarital residential independence. She, at the most loved to indulge in promiscuous flings, one after another, like a precocious girl of her age. This world of virtual reality is no stranger to the adolescents of today. They find refuge from the world fragmented in smithereens and play with their own demands and tastes in their specific fashion. Through Facebook, she gets to know Tadashi, a Japanese guy, who she meets often on the train to school, but, he appears quite vibrant on the social site than on his interaction in person. Layla writes,

He visits me on Facebook and asks to be my Friend. He has a question mark where his face should be. We start to chat online... I can tell by his rhythms. I've heard them enough. Projecting his voice.... We talk about music and TV and shopping. I type so fast it's hard for him to get a word in. Boys my age can keep up. But he cares about spelling. About getting the emphasis right. And I kind of like that. So I change tactics. I sit and wait for him on the other end. While he sorts out his words for me. But I don't think so much about what I type. I want to impress him but not that much. (61)

When Layla gets a laptop from her dad, she goes crazy online and tries nasty tricks to impress prospective guys, much older than her. Automatically, we are being invited into the world of simulation, which tries to make virtual and the real more permeable to each other, 'hyper-real' grabbing the space of the 'real', outshining the other. She tries to build a community, comprising young men, she loved to be with, virtually, and if possible, really. Sherry Turkle in her interesting book, *Life on the Screen* opines, "We are moving from a modernist culture of calculation toward a postmodernist culture of simulation" (20). Layla really thinks on the internet, dates on the internet, makes love on the internet, and, lives by the internet. For her, the virtual and the real existence change places.

Turkle cogently argues, “if the politics of virtuality means democracy online and apathy off-line, there is reason for concern” (244). While commenting upon the significance of permeability of virtuality and reality, Turkle in an article in *American Prospect* suggests, “We don’t have to reject life on the screen, but we don’t have to treat it as an alternative life either ... Having literally written our online worlds into existence, we can use the communities we build inside our machines to improve the ones outside of them” (“Virtuality” 57). For Turkle, the culture of simulation “may help us achieve a vision of a multiple but integrated identity whose flexibility, resilience, and capacity for joy comes from having access to our many selves” (*Life on the Screen* 268). James Slevin writes, “For Turkle, virtuality is to be understood as a transitional space that can be put in the service of the embodied self” (105). For Layla, it is something more. It is a way of life. It is an escape into a world of charm, a world of adventure, altogether. The adolescents of today, especially, those who are alone, having a single parent or the relationship between the parents soured, fall back on the world of virtual reality in search of friends and solace. It may be a mode of staying connected with a wider world, to fight off the sense of loneliness or insecurity. Aleks Krotoski comments quite relevantly,

How is the web affecting what they think or do? You can see this most clearly in the group that’s going through the biggest social change: adolescents.... Pre- to late- teenage kids get their culture, gossip and attitudes from Google and Facebook. They, more than anyone else, are constantly on, constantly showing off and constantly connected.... Do they really think filming their mates slapping strangers and then putting the videos up on YouTube is hilarious? Are they really sexting like hormone-fuelled.... well, teenagers? Is everyone a cyberbully, or being cyberbullied?.... Youth culture, on the surface dominated by musical tastes, slang, fashion and objectionable hairstyles, is nothing but part of growing up. It’s about expressing yourself, becoming part of a tribe, making your mark. It’s about defining yourself as separate from your parents and everything that’s ever come before, ever. It’s also about finding out where the boundaries of social acceptability lie. It’s usually about reinventing the wheel. (81-82)

For Layla, virtual reality had a specific meaning, for Tadashi the world of make-believe had some other meaning. For him, it is to trawl the internet in quest of support networks in the form of online clubs or the ilk. He had found Mika, his doll-friend, he still needs in his twenties to fall back on, in hours of craving for togetherness. He came in touch online with Orient Industry, the

‘official supplier of love-dolls and the rest is only silence and togetherness. He wanted Layla to be his soul-mate, but, later he understood that save occasional meetings in the train, nothing substantial would result. He thought about Layla, the girl on the train, but, he loved Mika, who “wouldn’t argue over small things, wouldn’t try to impose herself” (Krauth 157).

Though Layla ventured out with total strangers, on the train or elsewhere, Davo her boyfriend kept vigil on her surreptitious movements. Davo intrudes upon her privacy even and she relates an incidence,

Davo grabs my laptop and starts scrolling through my inbox. Through my Marco’s and Mr. C’s.

- What’s his name? Show me.
- We chatted on the web. I don’t even have his email.

Davo tears the printer and internet cables out. I wait for him to throw the laptop but he just walks.... (159)

And, traversing through the infatuated links with Davo, Mr. C (Pastor Bevan, in reality, who happened to be her mother’s heartthrob), Layla had to settle down with Marco, in the long run. Her mum got the shock of her life when she found Pastor Bevan waiting for her daughter in her bedchamber. And, Tadashi remained referred to as ‘the man on the train’, and, he had his Mika to turn to in his hours of distress as ever. Why then Layla had been wooed by the lure of the internet, the hyper-real? No doubt, the young adults are restless, unfocused, impulsive and indecisive. But once the things start falling in places, the reality outruns virtual reality, they come out of make-believe chimera and accept the reality—hardcore and unalloyed.

In conclusion, it is interesting to point out that, this novel has a reversion back to ‘real’, though, ‘loss of the real’ was about to leave all relationships topsy-turvy. Let me quote from Chris Snipp-Walmsley’s famous essay titled “Postmodernism”:

In the age of the hyperreal, the image dominates, the ‘normal’ relationships are turned on their head. Simulacra [a term Baudrillard uses which not only refers to representation, but carries with it a sense of the fake, the counterfeit] pervade every level of our existence, and we cannot escape from them or express ourselves in terms other than through the codes which saturate us.... Through internet chat-rooms and discussion groups, we can create and remould

our virtual selves, promoting an image that frequently has little basis in reality; through twenty-four-hour news services we are bombarded with information to the point where the representation becomes more important than the events being represented. Every social role we adopt has, to a certain degree, already been pre-coded to such an extent that there is no possibility of breaking free from the matrix of representations into a genuine, personal response. (412-413)

No doubt, *Just a Girl* ends on a positive note, though with multiple tortuous bends and turns. The postmodern criterion has been successfully flouted by its desired return to ‘real’. At the end, the novel leaves the reader happy, seeing poetic justice established, at long last.

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