Plenary 4

Saturday 13 September h. 11:30-12:30, Auditorium

Deep Fake: Plato's cave and the Virtual World
Radhika Jha (Cosmopolitan Author) radhujha69@gmail.com

Human beings are animals who use tools. But the tools we use also reshape us – changing the way we think, the way we organize our lives, our relationships, our societies. Each time, the introduction of a new technology into human societies has brought war, the destruction of human lives. Because with technology change we get paradigm change. When there is paradigm change, what it means to be human changes too. For the way we see and interact with the world around us determines who we are.

And yet, some things don't change. Essential to being human are two things - ideas and love. But today, with the coming of the internet and the smartphone, how we access love and ideas has changed. No technology has had quite as much of an effect on so many human lives at once as the internet. We all spend at least a few hours on our computers and phones. We all have at least two identities, a digital one and a real one. This is as true in Africa as it is in Iceland, in Delhi or New York. Today we find and enact love through apps. Accessing news and ideas is happening mostly through apps. We see ourselves through the eyes of social media apps. We listen to music on apps. And social media 'influencers' can bring down governments or get a president elected.

Technology also affects the words we use. It can even produce new words. In the eighties, the spread of cheap music technology brought words like 'rewind' and 'fast forward' into the English vocabulary. 'Groovy', a very seventies hippie word, came from records and vinyl technology. Most of these words died along with the technologies that produced them. But some didn't – they lingered, taking on a life of their own as they attached themselves to concepts that were important to us humans.

The internet has generated all kinds of interesting words – 'reddit', 'ping me', 'like', 'emoji'. But I will concentrate on one word, 'deep fake', for it symbolizes, for me, the central problem of the internet age: trust. I came across this word around the time of the first Trump election and since then my mind won't let go of it for it symbolizes the central conundrum of our internet world – the loss of trust. Society is built on trust. One has to have some trust between people in order for society to function. Trust is an important part of any relationship whether it is with one's partner or with one's banker. But how do you trust a person when you are communicating through a machine? How do we know what is real and what is not?

Deep Fake, to me, refers to something that is fake but which people believe in and act upon because they no longer trust. I believe we are living in an age of 'deep fake' where certain concepts such 'truth' no longer play an important part in our political and social lives, what matters more is liking or not-liking ideas/people. Trust has been replaced or is being replaced with liking or disliking, loving or hating.

Lastly, I will look at the relationship between trust and education. What does one study in a world where one cannot trust that what one is being taught/learning is important? What can one learn if liking what one is learning feels more important than learning something new? And how does the crisis of trust affect literature and writing fiction?

Which brings me to Plato's allegory of the cave. Today Plato's cave is the digital world. When we are online, we do not, or cannot, look behind or around us. We forget that it is not the real world at all, but a simulacrum of the real world, and that the knowledge we seem to be able to access so easily, is not really knowledge at all but a shadow of knowledge, a compilation of knowledge with some important elements left out or misunderstood. Have we entered a time when even philosophers cannot get out of the cave for 'light' (truth in Plato's case) itself is no longer important?