

From Consumers to Creators: A Critical Assessment of Fanfiction as a Transformative Power in Modern Narrative

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Abstract: *Fanfiction is an emerging genre of literature that has been gaining a strong hold on mainstream literature, emerging from the periphery. Fanfiction fosters a participatory culture where readers actively contribute to meaning-making, rather than passively consuming content. In the contemporary literary horizon, fanfiction is making its way from passive consumption to active production. This genre has achieved a place as a literary and cultural form, drawing the attention of both audience and critics. Till now date, the enthusiasm and acceptance of the audience and readers have made the commercialization of fanfiction possible by launching the careers of fanfiction authors like E.L. James, Cassandra Clare, and Anna Todd. This paper intends to discuss the transformative power of fanfiction and trace its journey of claiming agency by giving voices to the marginalised. Online fan fiction platforms such as Archive of Our Own (AO3), Wattpad, and FanFiction.net function as a space for literary creation and create digital communities where users support, critique, and collaborate on each other's work as participatory communities.*

Keywords: *Fanfiction, slash fiction, ships, zines, participatory community, transformative, modern narrative, infringe.*

Introduction

Fanfiction, also known as fanfic and abbreviated as FF, is a rapidly emerging form of participatory storytelling that has emerged as a transformative force in modern narratives. It is reshaping the traditional understanding of storytelling, authorship and audience engagement, allowing enthusiasts to extend, reinterpret, and reimagine canonical works with a fresh perspective without the confines of officially provided narratives.

The term *fan fiction* has been used in print as early as 1938; in the earliest known citations, it refers to amateur-written Science Fiction as opposed to "pro fiction". The term also appears in the 1944 *Fancyclopedia*, an encyclopaedia of fandom Jargon, in which it is defined as "fiction about fans, or sometimes about pros, and occasionally bringing in some famous characters from [science fiction] stories". It also mentions that the term is "sometimes improperly used to mean fan science fiction; that is,

ordinary fantasy published in a fan magazine. (Wikipedia). It is unofficial fiction written by a fan that infringes on the original canonical works, such as a book, movie, TV show, video game, or comics. The amateur authors draw their storylines upon the original characters, setting, and other intellectual properties, but add their creative twist. The writers of fan fiction may choose to retell the original story with certain changes, such as altering the climax, adding new plot twists, or exploring “what if” scenarios. In many cases, they also add original characters or develop romantic pairings (often called “ships”) that were not part of the source material. The authors of such fictions share a multifaceted universe on Online platforms like Archive of Our Own (AO3), FanFiction.net, and Wattpad. The multitude of youth, sharing the same taste in a canonical work, creating multiple versions of their favourite shows, movies, and even characters, is quite evidence of the popularity of this current form of storytelling. Though having unofficial status, fan fiction is thriving on such platforms, liked by both the audience and the original creators for its engaging capacity. It has even launched the career of published authors, for example, E.L. James’s *Fifty Shades of Grey* famously began as *Twilight* fan fiction. Hans Robert Jauss, in his Reception Aesthetics theory, argues that each text is received within a “horizon of

expectations” based on the reader’s cultural background, past reading experiences, and judged by them later, either finding content or disappointment, and sometimes with a strong impulse to re-narrate. Similarly, the writers of fan fiction attempt to fill the gaps, muted voices, and empty spaces left by the canonical authors. This process of recreation and reinterpretation of canonical works with a fresh perspective, ranging from giving voice to the unheard voices to satisfying endings, stands for the breach in their horizon of expectations. Thus, the imbalance between what the fan desires and what the mainstream authors provide becomes a strong trigger in the re-generation of canonical work. Together, they create a space where not only are the desires met but expanded through collective reinterpretation. Readers literalize the concept given by Roland Barthes in his work “The Death of the Author” that once a text is produced, the author’s authority is dissolved and meaning belongs to the reader (Barthes 4). In further expansion of this huge universe of fanfiction, technology has played a significant role. Sites like Archive of Our Own, Wattpad, and Fanfiction.net provide easy access to publication to the readers, unlocking the possibility for every fan or reader to become a potential author. On such websites, the comments and likes by fans make these stories more engaging and provide further

possibilities of fresher perspective. This shared space, the loop of storytelling, and the urge of every reader to break the hierarchy, give voice to the unheard, fill the gaps, make them prosumers, a hybrid concept given by Alvin Toffler. This paper attempts to investigate the transformative power and role of fanfiction in modern retelling and its profound impact on the sense of identity, belonging, and fostering emotional belonging in digital fan communities.

Evolution of fanfiction through the decades

Over the past three decades, the genre of fanfiction has evolved into a vast interdisciplinary field, with its foundation deeply rooted in cultural studies and media studies. Now, audiences are the creative agents reworking, extending, and contesting the meaning of popular texts, movies, or shows, rather than being merely the fringe audience. Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers* (1992) is widely recognized as a foundational text in the fanfiction genre. Jenkins builds on a definition of "poaching" originally introduced by Michel de Certeau in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, where de Certeau differentiates between individuals who are "consumers" and others who are "poachers," depending on how they utilize resources provided by producers. He takes the idea from it for his term "Textual Poachers" to describe the fans who actively get

engaged with the parts of their favourite shows. His use of the metaphor "poaching" emphasizes both the subversive and creative dimensions of fan activities, situating fanfiction as a legitimate form of cultural production rather than a derivative or secondary one. In later work, we find the expanded insight of Jenkins, which shows how online spaces like forums, blogs, and platforms like Archive of Our Own (AO3) have further democratized the act of storytelling. Fanfiction, though, is the modern trend, but its roots stretch back to ancient times. While the term "fanfiction" didn't exist, the practice certainly did. The earliest examples of fanfiction can be seen in the unauthorised version of the bible, stories inspired by Dante's prolific work, *Divine Commedia*, and countless stories inspired by Greek mythology. Literature has ample examples in the 18th century, for instance, Alexander Pope's series of poems was heavily inspired by *Gulliver's Travels*, a masterpiece by Jonathan Swift, which showcases the perspective of Gulliver's wife on his constant absence. Literature is filled with such examples where one work is based on another work in the form of a sequel, prequel, or parody, even one whole work with the same original plot but with a different climax. For example, Nahum Tate provided a happy ending to *King Lear*, one of the greatest tragedies of William Shakespeare. Which ends with the survival of *King Lear* and the death of the evil

sister, a perfect ending carrying a tit for tat kind of lesson for evil and happily ever after for the favourite characters. So this urge to re-narrate the story with a fresh perspective has been there since ancient times. In the 19th century, there was a surge in fan-written stories on the legendary series Sherlock Holmes. When Arthur Conan Doyle killed off Holmes in 1893, fans were outraged, writing their own stories to keep him alive, which was a fine example of a proto-fandom moment. A remarkable advance was seen in the mid-20th century in the fanfiction genre; sci-fi zines (magazines by fan fiction) became popular, and this was the time that witnessed the birth of modern fandom. Zines were the fan-made magazines, re-narrating the story from the perspective of their favourite characters. These magazines were circulated among fans by fans via mail. This was the time when fanfiction witnessed another huge development in the form of slash fiction. It features the romantic relationship between same gender characters, mostly male, represented as (Male/Male). The term "slash fiction" originated in the 1970s from *Star Trek* fandom, specifically, stories about Kirk/Spock being in a romantic or sexual relationship (which wasn't there in the canonical work). As Judith Butler states in her "Gender Performativity Theory," gender is not biological but performative in nature; it is not an innate identity but a repeated set of socially

constructed acts, aligning closely with the dynamics of slash fiction, where fan writers reimagine mostly male characters in same-sex romantic or sexual relationships. Slash fiction subverts traditional gender norms by disrupting rigid portrayals of masculinity and exposing how such identities are performative rather than essential. In the journey of tracing the growth of fanfiction, the remarkable revolution brought about by the internet cannot be overlooked. In 1998, Fanfiction.net was established by software designer Xing Li, and currently has over 12 million registered users. It played a significant role in fanfiction culture by providing a platform for fans to share their work and connect. This era witnessed the mainstreaming of the genre with an abundance of fan-created fiction on Harry Potter to Twilight; however, in recent times, it is considered outdated. Further advancement was made by the 2010s; in 2009, Archive of Our Own (AO3) was launched. These online platforms led the fanfic genre to cultural recognition, attracting the attention of both media and academia. The commercial success of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, originally a *Twilight* fanfic, helped shift public perception, while AO3's Hugo Award win in 2019 marked a major milestone in legitimizing fanfiction as a respected form of storytelling and participatory culture.

In the current scenario, fanfiction is in its full bloom with a vibrant canvas of countless stories, challenging the mainstream media by giving voices to marginalised ones. For example, the Archive of Our Own (AO3) platform has become a vital hub for LGBTQ+ fanfiction, allowing queer fans to explore identities and relationships often erased or underrepresented in original texts. Kang's (2024) computational study reveals the portrayal of characters with altered gendered traits and emotional associations compared to their canonical counterparts, proving that fan authors use narrative space to challenge traditional gender roles and explore alternative identities. For example, male characters involved in ships are shown with softer or more emotional means more feminine. Fanfiction has many different genres besides slash fiction. Alternate universe, fix-it fic, smut, fluff, crossover, and multiverse are some other popular ones in current times. On the one hand, the genre is making remarkable growth; on the other hand, the legality remains in the grey area. Given the copyright restriction, it is tolerated only if written and circulated non-commercially with the transformative intent. Fan fiction communities foster inclusive storytelling, yet they also face criticism around issues like cultural appropriation, ethical boundaries in real-person fiction, and internal gatekeeping,

yet continue to thrive as a collaborative space with its transformative power.

Transformative power of fanfiction

Once considered a juvenile and marginalized genre in literature, it is now thriving in full bloom, sharing the vast universe of thousands of different fandoms. This raises the curiosity about how it made a prominent presence on the literary horizon and why, or what motivated the fans to rewrite the canonical works with diverse perspectives. The foundation of its transformative power can be traced to participatory culture shaped by identity work and fostered by digital platforms. Jenkins says that fans don't merely consume the texts passively but renarrate, recreate, and redistribute them according to what best suits their desires. He states, "Fans construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images" (Jenkins 23). People from diverse backgrounds come together to expand this universe, fostering a cultural engagement that ultimately leads to creative authorship. The biggest fandom is based on Rowling's Harry Potter Series, which was developed by fans sharing the different storylines of minor characters and adding new dimensions to the relationships. The inspiration of the transformative power often takes place in dissatisfaction or absence in mainstream works. It raises questions like, *what if this character*

survived? What if they were queer? What if someone like me existed in this world? Consider the characters like Lexa from *The 100* or Tara from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, revived by fans, after the canonical works killed them off. Discontent with the original ending, fans provided them the story, ending, and the love they were denied in the mainstream work. In such cases, the fanfiction genre and the creative author serve the narrative justice by refusing the canonical endings. This is the empowerment, where fans take control over cultural texts, infusing their own perspective, desire, and emotions attached to any particular character. On the other hand, it enhances the imagination and creative capacity of a consumer, which leads them to become producers. As Alexis Lothian argues, fanfiction allows readers “not only to imagine better endings but to practice the act of imagining otherwise” (546). Fanfiction provides an opportunity for fans to express their creativity, giving a voice to the marginalized and allowing them to imagine themselves in the story. The author of fanfiction most often deals with themselves when they are reimagining the canonical one. It becomes affirming, transforming the internal doubts into the creativity of authors and providing a chance and a medium of expression. A young woman of BTS fanfiction on Wattpad is measuring the emotional depth, creating a structure, building an audience, and marking her presence with the

sense of “her story matters”. In this way, fanfiction functions not only as creative expression but also as a feminist intervention, reclaiming agency for women in male-dominated storytelling spaces. It doesn’t merely build the online community; the genre helped many authors to launch their careers. E.L. James, Ali Hazelwood, Cassandra Clare, Anna Todd, and many more began as fanfiction writers. If we talk about the fanfiction making place in mainstream literature, it cannot be completed without talking about the work that broke the internet. *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E.L. James actually had its origin in the fanfiction writing of Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight*. Edward Cullen and Bella Swan were imagined in a city deeply indulged in a fierce romantic relationship with an ardent interest in BDSM. After the popularity of this fandom, James posted it on fanfiction.net in August 2009 under the pen name Snowqueens Icedragon and with the title Master of the Universe. Though the work was dismissed by many because of its erotic theme and labelled as “The great Idiot American Novel,” none can change the fact of this novel being a commercial hit. Despite all the criticism, she chose to self-publish the work through The Writer’s Coffee Shop, demonstrating the potential for non-traditional publishing avenues to achieve mainstream recognition. Before publication, the author revised the original fanfiction by renaming the

protagonists as Anastasia and Christian and removing explicit references to the *Twilight* series, from which the fanfiction had originally drawn heavily. These changes were essential in transforming the work into a standalone novel suitable for commercial release. This made her a commercially successful author with over 70 million copies (print, eBook, audio) to date, the Forbes listed her as a highly paid author. Her groundbreaking work was adapted into a film, which was quite a hit at the box office, collectively grossing over \$1.3 billion worldwide on a total production budget of approximately \$150 million, despite meeting with heavy criticism. In the chain, another name that pops up is Cassandra Clare, known for the Draco Trilogy (Harry Potter fandom). She is widely known for her series *Mortal Instruments* also started her career as a fanfiction. From 2000 to 2006, she wrote the trilogy, portraying Draco as a clever, snarky anti-hero and sex god, and with a disturbing erotic relationship between Ron Weasley and her younger sister Ginny, and she immediately became popular. But her work was met with heavy criticism, and she was accused of plagiarizing her work from a 1985 fantasy novel by Pamela Dean, *The Hidden Land*. As which consequence, her trilogy was removed and she was banned from the website fanfiction.net. But by the time she made a cult fan following, which helped her launch herself as a commercial author with the

publication of *City of Bones*. Cassandra Clare remained on *The New York Times* bestseller list for three years and, in 2012, secured a lucrative three-book deal reportedly worth a high seven-figure sum. The city of bones was adapted into a film, which, though it couldn't be the box office hit, her *Mortal Instruments* series was later adapted into the television show *Shadowhunters* on Freeform. While the show's first season drew a modest average of 2.2 million viewers, its continuation into a second and third season suggested a stable audience and potential for renewal. Anna Todd, too, started her career as a fanfiction writer as she began uploading her work on Wattpad based on Harry Styles, a member of One Direction. Firstly, she stayed focused on building a fan following, connecting, and posting her work online on platforms like Wattpad and AO3. Once confident in her writing and eager to take the next step, she took a step forward and transformed her popular fanfiction into an original novel entitled *After*, by "filing off the serial numbers," a process where she changed key elements such as character names, settings, and specific references to detach the story from its fanfic origins. For example, Harry Styles became Hardin, making her free from the charge of infringement for using an actual person's story; she made it an original and legitimate standalone character. This novel follows the tumultuous relationship between

Tessa Young, a dedicated and innocent college student, and Hardin Scott, a brooding, rebellious bad boy with a troubled past. Because of its originality, the work was liked by readers, and its success led to the movie adaptation with the same name, which was later expanded into a multi-film franchise. These are the most famous authors; for them, the fan fiction communities and the platforms generated for fans have paved the way to become commercially hit authors. The list goes long, so many authors and so many stories that started or emerged from any fandom are now streaming at Frontline. Fanfiction serves as a platform for such authors, building an audience and receiving feedback, they get to know a grip on the taste of knowledge, as we have discussed in the case of these three authors. Like James got the surety to come into mainstream after knowing the fact that the audience liked her version of Edward and Bella, whereas the base fan following of Clare followed her new work, the same happened in the case of Anna Todd. If we look closely, these authors incorporated tropes like romantic tension, complex/dark, hurt/comfort, slow burn, friends to lovers, and enemies to lovers' arc. Given that the audience was already familiar with these tropes and even developed a strong liking for them, it helped the immediate success of fanfiction authors. This remarkable transformation can never be imagined to be achieved without the internet

and platforms like FanFiction.net, LiveJournal, Archive of Our Own (AO3), and Wattpad. These platforms removed the barrier between the reader and the writer and shared real-time feedback for immediate improvements. Internet communities broke the barrier of cultural difference in that matter; people from different nationalities built an international community. Now the fanfiction is being taken a valid cultural and literary form.

Conclusion

Over the decades, fanfiction emerged from the periphery and marked its strong presence in the centre, declaring its legitimacy as a cultural and literary form. Through digital communities, shared authorship, and a commitment to transforming canonical narratives, fanfiction proved its transformative power not just to alter the storyline but to launch a successful career, which ultimately made the consumer a producer. When viewed through the lens of Roland Barthes's distinction between *readerly* and *writerly* texts, fanfiction emerges as a paradigm of the writerly. Instead of consuming the text passively, readers engage with the text actively, improving, adding, and sometimes bettering the storyline. Their efforts erase the boundaries between consumers and producers by challenging the fixed authorship. Barthes's concept emphasizes that literature's true vitality lies not just in what was written, but in what

readers, through their own creative labour, can write in dialogue with that text. Fanfiction, by its very practice, enacts the shift, turning the reader into a scripter and restoring the “death of the author” in a lived form. Fanfiction serves more than entertainment. Despite the popularity, this genre faces some serious criticism on the grounds of lacking originality, amateur authorship, erotic themes, and copyright issues. My..... However, the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW) advocates fanfiction as a form of legally protected transformative use, offering legal education and defence, and preserving fan culture through platforms like Archive of Our Own (AO3). Its website states: “We envision a future in which all fannish works are recognized as legal and transformative and are accepted as a legitimate creative activity”. Fanfiction as a community has done remarkable work that cannot be ignored. It is constantly reversing the hierarchy of mainstream literature and influencing popular culture to a certain extent. The contribution of fanfiction should be acknowledged and analysed by academia on more deeper level. As Henry Jenkins says in “The Future of Fandom,” “there is a new kind of cultural power emerging as fans bond together within larger communities, pool their information, shape each other’s opinions, and develop a greater self-consciousness about their shared agendas and common interests” (Jenkins

363). Though the genre continues to mark its strong presence on the literary horizon, drawing the attention of critics, but demands further exploration. For example, non-Western fanfiction culture, the issue of AI-generated fanfiction, and the potential of fanfiction as a pedagogical tool remain underexplored and underrepresented. Future studies could investigate its effectiveness in enhancing literacy, critical thinking, and student engagement in both formal and informal educational settings.

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