THE CYBORG AUTHOR AND THE LIMITS OF TEXTUAL EXPLORATION IN THE WATER SELLER (MAI RUWA)

Haikal Riza,[1]* Alung,[2]

[1] Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
[2] Universitas Hasanuddin, Makassar, Indonesia

*Corresponding author: haikalriza@mail.ugm.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Reader or user interaction is one of the main attractions of Cyber Literature. Cyber literature allows its readers to be involved in shaping the story or altering the plot within a narrative. This is made possible by the development of Hypertext technology in cyber literary works. Hypertext enables user and reader involvement within the text of a literary work. This study uses the theory of hypertext and the cyborg author by Espen J. Aarseth. The theory is used to understand how users and readers operate within cyber texts and to comprehend the function of hypertext in cyber literature. The work The Water Seller (Mai Ruwa) (2023) by Faith Bassey and Deena Larsen serves as the material object of this research. The study finds that the use of hypertext in The Water Seller (Mai Ruwa) appears merely as an attachment and does not provide an active interactive experience for the reader (user). As a result, the interaction of the cyborg author with the work is limited, resembling the interpretation of conventional literary texts.

Keywords: *Cyber Literature, Cyborg Authors, Hypertext, Aarseth, Mai Ruwa*

INTRODUCTION (Use this style for main parts of paper)

In one of his prefaces on the production and consumption of cyber literature in the book entitled *Sastra Siber: Beberapa Penjajakan atas Tekstualitasnya* (*Cyber Literature: Some Explorations of Its Textuality*), Faruk expresses his concern about the growing tendency of cyber literature to increasingly serve commercial and business purposes:

"*Yang menjadi kecenderungan umum di Indonesia adalah menjadikan teknologi digital, termasuk internet sebagai salah satu produknya, untuk penyebaran karya-karya sastra yang berbasis tulis/cetak ataupun audiovisual. Penyebaran itu dapat dengan tujuan yang sepenuhnya sosial untuk berbagi dan berdiskusi, tetapi yang makin pesat perkembangannya adalah untuk tujuan perdagangan atau bisnis seperti makin banyaknya toko-toko dan penerbit-penerbit buku, bahkan surat-surat kabar dan majalah online*" (Faruk, 2022)*.

["The general trend in Indonesia is to use digital technology, including the internet as one of its products, for the dissemination of literary works based on written/printed or audiovisual works. This dissemination can be for the purely social purpose of sharing and discussion, but increasingly it is for commercial or business purposes, such as the growing number of bookstores and publishers, and even online newspapers and magazines." (Faruk, 2022).]

This phenomenon is certainly inseparable from the increasing interest of users and *audiences* who enjoy the ecosystem of cyber literature. Koskimaa (2007) defined cyber literature as a new genre of literature created and presented by means of computer. Even though some experts do not use the term cyber literature, this can be seen from how Aarseth defines it instead as *cybertext* (1997). The development of digital platforms that can accommodate any and all "authors" and readers has made these platforms increasingly popular. Everything feels instant. There is no need to go through the hassle of submitting to newspaper editorial boards, which may take weeks to publish a piece—or even reject it without any further notice. Similarly, publishers who go through the trouble of printing books must follow a selection process involving editors, which can also result in rejection for various reasons deemed valid by the publishing team. Such obstacles constantly haunt "authors," especially those eager for popularity. Not only for authors, but for readers as well, literature in digital form is easy to access anytime and anywhere.

Online platforms such as blogs, websites, Wattpad, Webtoon, Medium.com, and many others are highly favoured because they do not involve editors or third parties to edit the authors' or writers' works. The only indicator that cannot be separated from this type of literature is the reader. Popular culture products still remain within society, and it is society that becomes the indicator of a cultural product's popularity (Adi, 2016, p. 13). The phenomenon of popular culture will continue to be exploited for profit, not only by individuals but also by companies (Fraculj, 2021, p. 46). Therefore, literary works on such platforms are sometimes viewed as "trash" literature because they are created solely in pursuit of popularity by certain parties. However, this does not automatically serve as an indicator or benchmark within cyber literature. This can be seen in Edward Falco's earnest effort to avoid such negative branding in his works of cyber and digital literature.

In response to these concerns, Edward Falco founded a journal website called *The New River* (accessible at https://thenewriver.us/). This journal is dedicated to publishing works of digital art and literature. In the fall of 2023, *The New River* began publishing innovative prose and poetry—at least, that is what is stated on its website. This journal is far from commercialism, as Faruk mentioned earlier. It aims to curate cyber literary works that are interesting for further research and more innovative. One of the innovative prose works that drew attention is a piece titled *The Water Seller (Mai Ruwa)* (2023).

This prose was written by Faith Samuel Bassey and Deena Larsen. It tells the story of a "Water Seller." The prose depicts the determination of an African woman named Aiwa to succeed, to learn, and to heal from the trauma of her husband's death and her village's disapproval of her resolve. Aiwa's

determination is to break away from the beliefs or traditions of her village that harm and oppress women. The story is set in Nigeria in 1988. It centres on Aiwa's questioning of traditional beliefs that disadvantage women, while also highlighting cultural values that support and advance everyone. During pre-colonial times, "the domestic water supply was through individual and community efforts of water fetching by women and children from streams and rivers. The colonial era jumpstarted a move towards a safer supply of water by putting forward the first ten-year plan (1944 - 1954) which made provisions in the Country's overall budget to set aside 5.7% of the projected total expenditure for development in that sector. With this move, concrete open wells were constructed under the supervision of the then Public Works Department (PWD) of the Regional Governments which were responsible for providing safe water to the rural communities." In this context of limited access to centralised water supply, the Hausa language highlights the centrality of water through the term ruwa. As noted, "Rusafiya is an acronym in the Hausa language for Water which is Ruwa, Sanitation which is (T)sabta and Health which is Lafiya." Taken together, these accounts show both the historical difficulties of water access and the linguistic centrality of ruwa (water), which underpins the socio-cultural emergence of mai ruwa—those who deal with or sell water in the community (Ikotun, 2018, pp. 19–22)

Quoting from *The New River* (2023), this prose is one of the first works to be "digitally delivered" for African Electronic Literature. It was designed to offer a unique storytelling experience for Nigerian communities. The new format in electronic literature allows the story to be accessed via mobile phones. Bassey and Larsen hope to use this new experience of immersive storytelling and the various possibilities of electronic literature to convey messages about traditional practices and to explore ways to keep this unique culture alive and thriving in the modern world.

Based on the previously outlined point that society functions as the main determinant of a cultural product's popularity, it becomes interesting to examine the reader's and author's experience with the texts within this prose. The texts are presented in a non-linear manner and also involve other media such as images and paintings, within which there are links that can be accessed by clicking on the text. Nelson in Landow (2006, p. 3) refers to such "non-sequential text" as hypertext, which branches and allows choices to the reader, best read on an interactive screen. According to Aarseth, hypertext also opens the possibility for active interaction from the reader—to interpret, navigate, configure, and even write—compared to conventional texts, then there is only one user function involved, here called interpretation (1997, p. 64). Hypertext invites readers into an interactive and non-linear form of storytelling by creating the impression that they are making choices. Through selecting hyperlinks, readers can engage with the narrative in ways that appear to shape its direction (Holt, 2025, p. 1).

Departing from the problem statements above and the cyber literature prose *The Water Seller* as the material object, this study raises two research questions. The first research question concerns the way hypertext operates within the prose *The Water Seller.* The second research question addresses the roles of the author and the reader within the prose *The Water Seller.* This study

employs the formal objects of Hypertext and the Cyborg Author, as conceptualized by Espen J. Aarseth (1997).

Hypertext is often understood as a medium of text, serving as an alternative (among others) to codex formats found in books, magazines, and bound manuscripts. It is often described as a mechanical (computerized) system of reading and writing, in which the text is organized into a network of fragments and the connections between them (Aarseth, 1997, p. 76). Meanwhile, the Cyborg Author, according to Aarseth (1997, p. 134), is a combination of human and mechanical activities in presenting tentative typology or *cyborg* literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the process of writing about Hypertext and Cyborg Authors, researchers need to review relevant literature and previous studies. This is done to avoid repeating existing research and to find updates in research. Several studies related to this research will be described. First of all the study, *Mitos: Jembatan Antara Makna dan Audience dalam Karya Sastra Hypertext "Tales From The Towpaths" Karya Kolaborasi Maya Chowdhry dkk* [Myth: A Bridge Between Meaning and Audience in the Hypertext Literary Work "Tales From The Towpaths", a collaborative work by Maya Chowdhry et al] (Rusdianti, 2022), explores the use of myth in hypertext collaboration. This research applies Roland Barthes' theory of myth and Marie-Laure Ryan's immersion reading method to uncover everything presented by the hypertextual work, not limited to written narrative alone. The findings show that hypertext literature is informative literature because each reading journey provides clues and information about the continuation of the story or details beyond the narrative. The myths embedded in hypertext literature act as a bridge between the literary work and society, making it easier for audiences to accept the underlying messages within the hypertext literary work.

The next study, *Analisis Hypertext dan Pemaknaan Puisi "The Material" Karya Jim Andrews* [Analysis of Hypertext and Interpretation of the Poem "The Material" by Jim Andrews] (Faradilla, 2022), was conducted to understand how hypertext functions in Jim Andrews's poem *The Material* and to interpret the poem's meaning. This study employs hypertext theory and semiotic theory. The findings reveal that the hypertext form in the poem contains links that connect readers to other texts, and the meaning of the poem expresses an artist's struggle and how they create their extraordinary work through perseverance.

The final study reviewed in this research is *Representasi Hipertekstualitas dalam Cerita "History of Kingdom" pada Aplikasi Wattpad* [Representation of Hypertextuality in the Story "History of Kingdom" on the Wattpad Application] (Ardianto, 2022). This study uses Aarseth's hypertext theory and Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic approach. It focuses on the short story *History of Kingdom* on the Webtoon and Wattpad platforms. The research found that the hyperlink short story offers easier access to readers. These applications allow readers to comfortably continue or revisit the story simply by scrolling up and down on their device screens.

From the three previous studies reviewed in this research, it is found that all three are still trapped in what Aarseth calls *traditional literary theory in the criticism of participatory literature* (1997, p. 141). The use of approaches such as semiotics and psychoanalysis in earlier hypertext studies causes works categorized as cyber literature to still resemble traditional literary formats, even though they aspire to be part of a new literature. According to Aarseth, this is an *unrealistic (and irrelevant) goals* (1997, p. 141). Therefore, although this study also uses a hypertext approach, it does not apply discursive approaches outside of cyber literature. This study also does not find similarities in the material objects examined. The only similarity lies within the scope of the formal object, namely Hypertext by Espen J. Aarseth, which was also used by the three previous studies. Meanwhile, the formal object concerning the '*Cyborg* Author' is not found in those prior studies.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method to collect and analyze data. The data in this study is prose in the form of hypertext. Data collection was conducted through a close reading of the text The Water Seller (Mai Ruwa) (2023) by Faith Bassey and Deena Larsen. Close reading enabled the researcher to carefully examine the structure of the hypertext, including its nodes, links, and narrative pathways. Unlike linear prose, hypertext requires the reader to follow multiple routes and connections, and therefore the process of close reading in this context also entailed tracing the interplay among textual fragments and identifying the ways in which meaning emerges from their interrelations. Following this, the data analysis stage was carried out to identify relationships among the data as a whole (Faruk, 2015, p. 24). During the analysis and grouping phase, the data were aligned with the chosen formal objects, namely the theories of Hypertext and the Cyborg Author. In the process of writing about Hypertext and the Cyborg Author, the researcher required a literature review of previous studies. This was done to avoid duplicating existing research and to discover new insights within the study. Through this method, the study establishes a methodological framework that is both textually grounded and theoretically informed, enabling a critical exploration of The Water Seller while advancing broader discussions of hypertextuality and cyborg authorship in cyber literature.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

a) Hypertext in *The Water Seller*

The text *The Water Seller* (Bassey & Larsen, 2023) is an intriguing prose not only because of its electronic format but also because it addresses significant issues in Africa, particularly in Nigeria at that time. Naturally, a detailed and focused discussion on the intrinsic story elements will not be covered in this article. Furthermore, this prose is also recognized as the first work to be "digitally brought" into the realm of African Electronic Literature,

as stated on the homepage of the journal website *The New River* (Bassey & Larsen, 2023).

Not only does the work stop there, but it is also very interesting because it involves multiple media. These media include language, images or paintings, generated links, and hypertext. Language serves as the primary medium in *The Water Seller* text, as stated by Wellek (1948), who described language as the most essential medium of literary works. Other media besides language, such as images, generated links, and hypertext, function as additional or supplementary media to shape electronic literature, as exemplified below:
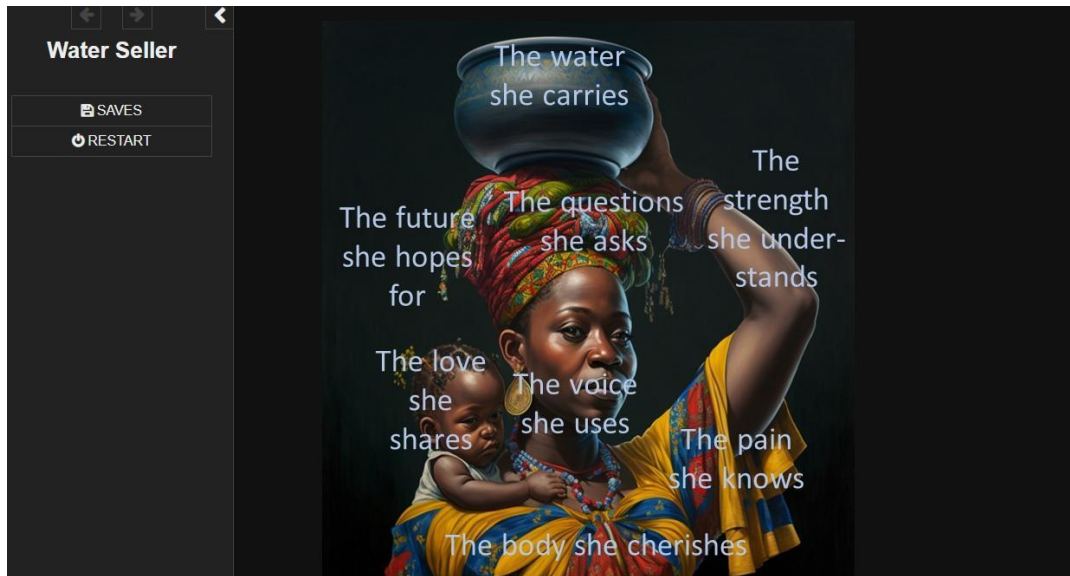

Figure 1. *Poetry in Hypertext Form (accessible at https://thenewriver.us/)*

These media do not merely serve as decorations but also enhance the beauty and aesthetic values within the work. It is evident that within the paintings there are several hypertexts arranged or located in specific parts.

In *The Water Seller*, there are two categories of hypertext placement. The first category, as shown in **Figure 1**, features hypertexts located within the image itself. There are eight hypertexts scattered randomly across different parts of the body or face in the image. The hypertexts included in this image are as follows (listed in no particular order): *1.) The pain she knows, 2.) The strength she understands, 3.) The love she shares, 4.) The future she hopes for, 5.) The questions she asks, 6.) The body she cherishes, 7.) The voice she uses, 8.) The water she carries.*

In the second category, the hypertext is located on the same page but at the bottom. Some hypertexts are organized with The Story Line titled on top, as seen in the image below:
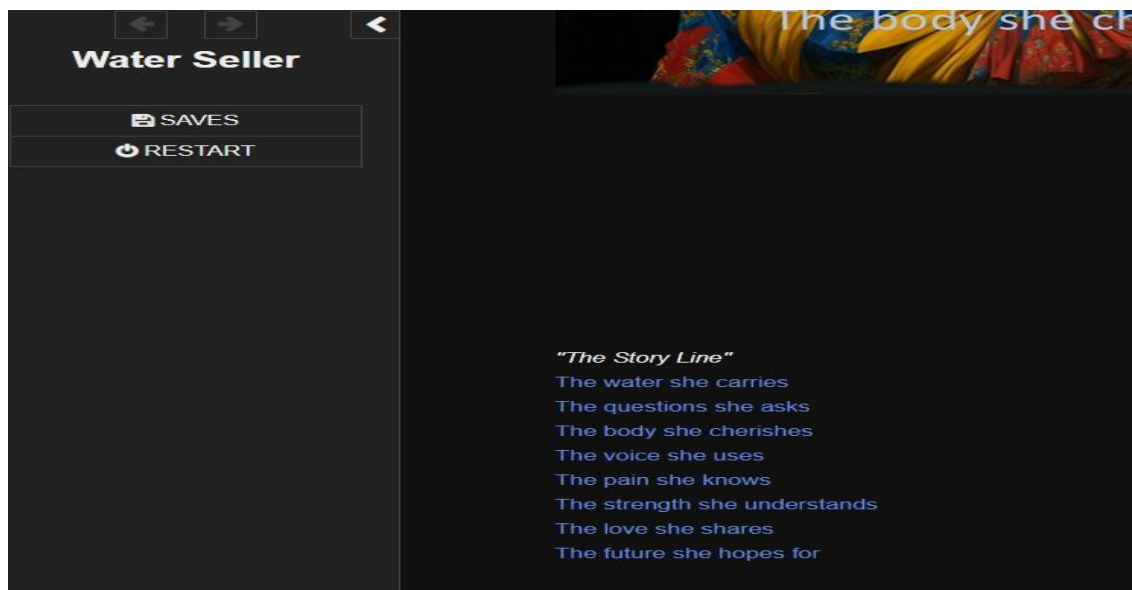
Figure 2. *Story Line in Hypertext Form (accessible at https://thenewriver.us/)*

The hypertext location in the second category at the bottom also has eight hypertexts. However, the difference is that the hypertexts are neatly arranged and sequenced linearly downward in the following order: 1.) *The water she carries*, 2.) *The questions she asks*, 3.) *The body she cherishes*, 4.) *The voice she uses*, 5.) *The pain she knows*, 6.) *The strength she understands*, 7.) *The love she shares*, 8.) *The future she hopes for*.

When viewed in **Figure 1** the location of the hypertext is adjusted to the nature of the body or object in the picture. Such as *The water she carries* hypertext is located on the water jug that she puts on her head, *The questions she asks* is located on the position of her head, *The future she hopes for* is located on the little boy she is carrying, and so on with several other hypertexts. Whereas in **Figure 2**, the order of the second hypertext is arranged regularly. It can also be seen how the location of the hypertext has the title *The Story Line* above if interpreted means "storyline".

When clicked on the hypertext in both **Figure 1** and **Figure 2** will bring up hyperlinks that lead to the same story. For example, the hypertext *The water she carries* in the picture and the one in the "storyline" both lead to the same story. There is no difference between the two hypertexts. This is due to

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the computer program that has been arranged in such a way. According to Suefa Lee, et al (2020, p. 16), a computer program *is a program is a set of instructions that a computer follows to perform a task. Programs can be extremely complex, and there can be several different layers of programs working together. Microsoft Windows, for example, is made up of millions of lines of instructions* (2020, p. 16). Therefore it is possible that there are several layers on the same page but the instructions will lead to the same page.

Even so, hypertext that is located in the image will give a surprise or shock effect that is different from the location of hypertext that has been set in the story. Because hypertext that is bound to the storyline as provided in *The Story Line* will only bring the same effect as conventional text or printed literature that has a table of contents order in its work. Because as quoting what Aarseth said earlier in the introduction of this article that Hypertext as a medium of text has an alternative nature or format as a mechanical (computerized) reading and writing system, where the text is organized into a network of fragments and the relationship between them (text and network of fragments) which opens up the possibility of active interaction to readers to interpret, navigate, configure, and write compared to conventional texts that cause interaction with readers only in the form of interpretation.

b) Cyborg Authors and Limited Hypertextuality

Faith Bassey and Deena Larsen (hereafter Bassey and Larsen) are two authors of the electronic prose *The Water Seller* (Mai Ruwa) (2023). The role of both of them is certainly to produce aesthetically good works of traditional literature, or if quoting Horace, then at least the work must have the nature of *Utile et Dulce* which is a literary work that at least contains elements of fun as well as providing benefits (Badrun, 1983). However, the primary focus of the discussion is not on situating the authors' works within the broader discourse of literary aesthetics; rather, it lies in examining how Bassey and Larsen succeed in offering their readers an engaging experience of cyber literature. Certainly, it is not limited to just 'clicking' the hypertext or enjoying the

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hypertextuality, but extends to fulfilling what Aarseth calls the experience of being a *cyborg* author for the readers of their works.

To reiterate what was discussed in the introduction regarding cyborg authors, according to Aarseth, cyborg authors (1997, p. 134) are a combination of human and machine activities that tentatively produce literary texts or cyborg literature. Based on Aarseth's idea, Bassey and Larsen are clearly not cyborg authors here. Bassey and Larsen are the subjects behind the input of stories about *The Water Seller* prose. Although they are the authors of the prose stories, in reality they only function to manage the 'machine'. Because it is the readers (users) of *The Water Seller* who are supposed to produce literary texts tentatively or in flux. So it is agreed that the cyborg authors here are readers outside the system or outside the process of inputting the basic story material.

It is evident that the role of the main story author who takes refuge behind the machine will be different from the cyborg author. Actually, from Aarseth's idea, it can be seen that his biggest hope is that when cyborg authors are involved in a cyber literary work, works that Aarseth calls cyborg literary works will be born. According to Aarseth, the real pleasure in this mode of cyber literature is participatory pleasure (1997, p. 142). As a cyborg author who is outside the system or machine can run the story and plot as he pleases, although actually in cyber literature the one who inputs the data in the computer program is a human.

In the case of The Water Seller, these participatory experiences are very limited. Hypertextuality, which is supposed to make a work of cyber literature fun, in this prose only makes participatory experiences monotonous. This would have been less noticeable if Bassey and Larsen had not provided a storyline option like the one in **Figure 2** and focused on developing hypertextuality in the hypertexts available in the paintings/images in **Figure 1**. Issues and problems like this according to Nelson are actually the main issues of *literary machine* aesthetics (Nelson, 1987). Other discoveries are as shown in the figure below:
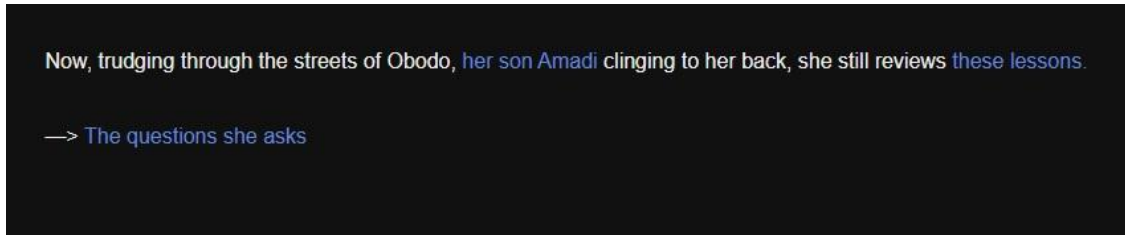
Figure 3. *Hypertext Form (accessible at https://thenewriver.us/)*

This is also a significant discovery, because when a work of cyber literature gives directions to continue the story to the next story, it will certainly be the same as the experience of reading a non-cyber literary work. Bassey and Larsen's work tends to be more static, in contrast to other works featured on The New River, such as Terhi Marttila's *Gray Hairs* or Jon Stone's *I Could Kiss, Say*. The same applies to several works found in journals or websites that provide cyber literature, such as Jim Rosenberg's Diagrams Series 6: 6.4 and 6.10, which can be found on the website https://collection.eliterature.org/1/. These works provide a great experience for the users to become cyborg authors, as they are free to play with all aspects provided by the 'machine' in their work. The cyborg author's limitation in the experience of exploring *The Water Seller* cannot be separated from the author's fear of leaving the 'poeticism' of narrative literature and fear of over-improvising in his work. To quote Aarseth, what is actually needed today in the development of cyborg authors is not an automatic scriptwriter or narrator, but a simulated world with emergent *intrigants*, which is interesting enough to make real people (not machines) want to spend time and creative energy there (cyber literature) (Aarseth, 1997, p. 141). This should also be the main concern of cyber literature activists, especially these two prose authors, Bassey and Larsen.

CONCLUSIONS

One of the many reasons cyber literature is popular is because of the freedom that allows readers (users) to be involved in shaping and changing stories and storylines. Readers, on the one hand, can become authors in works of cyber literature. Aarseth refers to these authors as *Cyborg* Authors. The cyborg

author has the capacity and experience of authoring his or her own story. Even though the *hyperlinks* and hypertexts in cyber literature are actually written by the author of the work. The possibility for the reader to become the author is possible because cyber literature provides hypertext aspects in its work. But this freedom is very limited, especially in Faith Samuel Bassey and Deena Larsen's prose *The Water Seller* (Mai Ruwa). This phenomenal work, considered one of the most important in African electronic literature, appears to be a mere transfer of a conventional literary work into electronic form. The hypertext, *hyperlinks* and multimedia in the work only appear as a form of 'patchwork'. Because the experience of a cyborg author who should be able to feel the ability to create his own plot and story is not fully found in Bassey and Larsen's work.

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