

LITERATURE IN THE CHANGING SOCIO-CULTURAL MILIEU: FROM DIGITAL HUMANITIES TO DIGITAL MEDIA

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Abstract: Since the time of the conquest of England by the Christian missionaries, almost a thousand years ago, upto the present era, English both as language and literature has been through innumerable changes. This paper will trace all those changes and draw the reader's attention to an emerging field of study in the world of Digital Media. The specified field is that of Animation. The field of Animation has evolved very fast since the last century, creating a rich field for the researchers to analyse and develop further. My paper will try to establish this new field of animation as a part of the larger literary studies.

Keywords: Changes, Literature, Animation.

English Literature today is one of the major streams of study and research in the educational curriculum. Though Literature continued to be in the lives and household of the people, the study of Literature at the university could not be started before 1894 at Oxford, and 1911 at Cambridge. At its inception, English Literature was studied with Language, taught by I.A. Richards, William Empson, and F.R. Leavis. With time, the changing scenario gave Literature a firm position in the Universities. The study of Literature that began a century ago has undergone changes time and again to keep pace with the changing world. In this paper I shall show how changing times have changed the track of Literature and I shall trace it to the present times.

Keeping aside the study of Literature as a subject for course work at the university levels, a prior knowledge of its origin is essential. A glance at world literature will help in understanding the views. In India, during the Vedic period, reading/listening to the couplets of *Ayurveda* (the Indian Science of Medicine) could clear the air and heal the sick. Confucius in China insisted the youth to read poetry. Aristotle, too, advised people to watch drama for catharsis (purification). The literary taste originated in order to bring some relief from the diurnal chores or to celebrate some occasion.

Though the vast literary resources are still accessible through the print media with some changing to the digital mode, centuries ago it started as an ontological discourse. It developed from the linguistic activity within the masses. In India, the pundits chanted the Holy Scriptures and epics, rendering people aesthetic pleasure as well as imparting valuable knowledge required for psychological and spiritual

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uplift of human beings. Before the practice of writing, in the 4th century B.C., oral discourse was the most prevalent mode of literary culture world-wide. Literature as folklore (generally oral stories and songs practised by the people/folk) was for centuries a part of human societies and hence its relevance to mankind.

CHANGE IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE AGE

Change has been of vital importance in all the strata of existence. It is inevitable and the nature of human character is to mould this process. The process is a continuous and likewise is human adaptation to it. The socio-political-economic upheavals have time and again introduced as well as deleted many practises. English Literature which reflects the changing scenario too has changed over the time. Consequently, various shifts and changes in English literature from inception to the present have marked its trajectory.

Coming to English Literature, the revival of learning during the Renaissance period brought scholars under the influence of the ancient Greek and Roman texts. At that point, the work of the ancients comprised mostly of the Tragedies and Comedies: Tragedies dealing with the lives of the Kings and Princes, while Comedies took up trivial matters. Added to it were the famous critical works by Plato, Aristotle, Longinus, etc. Scholars under the influence of the classical writers either developed new techniques of writing, or else directed themselves in the mode of the classics. The 16th century, therefore, saw a plethora of dramatic works by Christopher Marlow, Thomas Kyd, William Shakespeare, and Ben Jonson, drama being the most popular form of art practised in the contemporary society. As people had no other media for viewing art, live performances of dramatic works saw a huge inflow of crowd. The popularity of various performing arts (music and dance along with drama) from the historical period proves people's affinity to a particular thing that gave them relief from the daily chores of life, by portraying situations with which even being familiar made one feel different. The performances of the dramas comprising songs, dance, and various dramatic skills of the artists stand evidence to human beings' attachment towards the lighter side of life, better known as "entertainment" to the masses.

Drama, an important field of study in Literature, and also a live art form, has been making its place in the lives of people from a period before the birth of Christ to the present era. Numerous changes have taken place in the field of this art form only to suit the aesthetic sense of human beings in the changing times. There were Romantic Comedies, Comedy of Manners, Sentimental Comedy, Expressionist Drama, and then the Absurd Drama to suit the void and bareness brought in the lives of the people by the two World Wars.

With the advent of the printing press in the year 1476, literary texts came in the hands of the common masses. Readable texts, which had only been the privilege

of the higher class of society, now spread everywhere. Earlier dramas, which were acted in the theatre halls, were the only literary source for the common citizens. Printing press slowly broke this barrier. It made Literature accessible to one and all. Thus, the new media of publishing literature gained popularity.

The surge in dramatic works reflected in the authors of the Elizabethan era, continuing to some decades after that, somehow showed decline in the Romantic era, an era marked by the predominant lyrical output of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats. The changing scenario was able to bring a change in the genres used by the authors. The French revolution of 1789, gave prominence to the voice and emotions of the commoners, previously unheard. Wordsworth chose to write things close to the hearts of the common people. He used the simplified language of the masses. Regarding the language used, Wordsworth wrote in the 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1789)

“The principal object, then, proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement. Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings, and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended, and are more durable; and, lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.” (Prefaces and Prologues)

Most of the poems of the Romantic era dealt with emotions close to the hearts of the people as compared to the poems of poets like Milton, Dryden, and Pope whose poetry dealt with the courtly lives of the elite or else catered to the interests of the intelligent and educated masses. The reason for this alteration in the themes of poetry from the elitist to the common people was the French Revolution that affected the political, economic, and social set-up of Europe. After the political upheavals, came Industrial Revolution in England, a great tremor that shook the centre of Victorian society. A reflection of this saga of loss in religion and faith is well depicted in

the poem *Dover Beach* by Matthew Arnold. Again, T.S Elliot's famous poem *The Waste Land* bears evidence of the social and emotional degradation of the society after the ravages of World War I.

Another major genre is the Novel, which became a prevalent mode of literary study in eighteenth century England. The Industrial England saw the rise of a number of famous novelists starting with Scott and Austen and extending to Dickens, Thackeray, the Bronte sisters; and the list goes on. Though the study of novels was rampant in the contemporary society, it was limited only to the upper strata: the educated elite. Due to its vastness of size there has been a decrease in its popularity and of late the novel has been replaced by its smaller versions, such as novella, short story, and flash fiction. Among the novels of the early era, the Gothic Novels enjoyed a wide popularity. *The Mysteries of Udolpho* by Mrs Anne Radcliffe and *The Monk* by Matthew Lewis became highly popular in 18th and 19th century England and received much critical acclaim. People got an escape from the harsh realities through the sensational elements of the Gothics; hence it became one of the popular fictions of the day. The readership of the Gothic novels due to its supernatural contents and mysterious elements became huge. The popular fiction took a hold over the market as compared to that of the canonical literature of the contemporary society.

Scanning the period of some 600-700 years, a clear picture of the changes both in the genre and the media becomes evident. Numerous societal changes are still in the process leaving its imprints on the contemporary literature. As I proceed, I shall be bringing to light all such changes and shifts in the popular literature of the period which many a times has gone unnoticed.

PRESENT STATE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

English as language, which started centuries ago, is now not confined merely to the geographical boundaries of England; it is at present a global language. People of various countries, whose mother tongue is not English, are of late writing in English. English Literature has become the conclave of numerous ideas and experiences. This expansion started centuries ago through the process of colonisation. Today almost all the countries previously ruled by England have mastered English; others are picking it up now as a global language. The Digital Revolution has furthered this process of Anglicisation. The new revolution has made it possible for the companies to escalate beyond the confines of country of origin; hence the existence of multinational companies, and the need for a common language of communication. The latest development has thus, accelerated the proliferation of English.

The improvisation of English in the different regions of the world as added much to its vocabulary, and many a times words have changed their meanings to suit the situation. Along with the alteration of the English language, there has also

come a noticeable change in the strict confines of literature. Literature, too, is not the same as it was in the times of Aristotle or Renaissance or during the Industrial Revolution; now it encompasses a much wider area. Earlier it was the Agricultural Revolution, and then the Industrial Revolution, and now the Digital Revolution, all of which has time and again been the pivotal point of changing the literary tastes of the people. The Agricultural period differed from the Industrial, and the Industrial differed from the Digital. The Industrial Revolution laid a perceivable impact on the socio-political, economic, and cultural spheres of life, the signs of which got imprinted and recorded in the literature and art of that era. A study of the three revolutions will show how Digital Revolution is directly influencing Literature, while the other two remained indirect in their effects.

EFFECTS OF DIGITAL REVOLUTION

The first digital electronic calculating machine was developed and used during World War II. Since then it has continuously increased in speed, power, and versatility. But its affectivity increased with the invention of World Wide Web, by Sir Tim Burners Lee in 1989. Now with the more advanced technology, people can have access to the worldwide web with a speed of more than 4Mbit/s. This means more knowledge, more social connections, and more entertainment. Digital revolution has brought everything under one umbrella. Its spread has revolutionised the way we gain knowledge, communicate, entertain and think in the same environment.

Knowledge is no more limited to the matters of the book. Book as the text material remains, but, the knowledge provided through the access of the internet is vast. The launch of Wikipedia at the dawn of the millennium proved to be a huge benefit for numerous students worldwide. Knowledge seekers now have access to the wealth of knowledge, and in case of problems the hypertexts are sufficient to find a solution. The following data points to its popularity of Wikipedia (an online encyclopaedia), "It is the world's fifth popular website, with editions in 287 languages. (The English one is the biggest, with 4.4m articles.) On any given day 15% of all internet users visit it, amounting to 495m readers a month". (The Future of Wikipedia).

The transition from the analogue to the digital form of computing has brought in unprecedented changes in the world of communication. Communication between two people or a group of people is possible today even without their physical presence. Virtual communication has now displaced the real meetings to a great extent. Philosophers have both positive and negative views on such an aspect.

The world of entertainment too has undergone changes. Cinema, soaps, and serials have now a major role to play in the lives of the masses instead of the short stories, novels, and dramas. Their impact is huge on the common people. They can cater to the changing tastes of the people; all due to digitalisation. The mere

human frame movies nowadays have a few animated slots tied to them, or else have the CGI along with the real human frames. These animated slots and Computer Generated Images have enhanced the movies and have taken it to new heights previously not thought of.

Digital Technology has blurred the boundaries of states, and business has now turned multi-national; even physical movement from one place to another is not always required.

These were some of the major effects of the Digital Revolution on the society. Literature, too, being a part of the society brought about its own changes in the name of Digital Humanities.

THE DIGITAL HUMANITIES

Digital Humanities is a hybrid term formed by the juxtaposition of apparently opposite words—Digital and Humanities. It is the latest development of Humanities in the era of the Digital Revolution bringing together the broad and diverse areas of Humanities under one umbrella.

The computing of Humanities and especially literature started as early as the 1940s by Roberto Busa. He pioneered the use of computers for linguistics and literature. *Index Thomisticus*, a complete lemmatisation of the work of Saint Thomas Aquinas and a few related authors, was the first complete work under him. The coming years saw the use of technology in presenting the works of various authors. Earlier, the media used for reaching out to the public was the print and now it is the digital mode. The new media of learning has not only extended the readership, but, has also appealed to the imagination and intellect of the audiences. The audio-visual effects are able to create a deeper mark on the audience than the print can do.

The IRIS Intermedia Project on hypertext at Brown University was one of the early initiatives in such a direction, the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) being the other one. Digital texts and image archives such as *Women Writers Project*, *The Rossetti Archive*, and *The William Blake Archive* all emerged in the Humanities computing centre in the US in the nineties. These archives promote learning by generating high quality digital copies of facsimiles, providing students with an opportunity to view the original copy not available in the print. These are also supplanted with the required notes and annotations by scholars and professors. Some of the recent websites have also added animated videos to the texts making studies all the more interesting. The accessibility of literature of various texts in this new format has made it more appealing to the students. Gaining knowledge has become all the more enjoyable and interesting through these development.

Digital Humanities has a very broad domain, and maybe, more technological upgradation will bring in more things in the way of the Humanities. But it is those same literary texts or songs that are being digitalised and, in the process of this

alteration, some minor changes do take place at times, ushering in a new thing. Even then, the basic thing remains the same. If a poem of Wordsworth, say, “The Solitary Reaper” is digitalised, the structure, the language, and more than everything the meaning remains the same; only some flavours are added through the different presentation skills.

The latest version of literature in the digital form has once again brought science and literature together. The two branches of education, generally considered distinct from one another, have now come closer. Visual and acoustic elements are being re-introduced into literature, while media, genres, texts types, and discourses are being mixed. With all the latest technical developments going hand in hand with literature, a new area of study and research can be a part of the literary world. At this juncture when Humanities and Science are bridging their gap, a critical and analytical study of the digital media or, to be more precise, the animated world would brighten the future prospects of the study of literature. As Judith Halberstam has said, “I am not arguing for new orderly designations for fields of expertise but propose instead that we abandon our disciplinary identities and try to approach knowledge in ways that encourage wandering, meandering, getting lost, and falling short”(44).

ANIMATION

One of the major fields where digitalisation has made a deep impact is the world of animation. Animation as a popular form of entertainment has become very common among children. In almost every household children are glued to the television, being busy watching these animated programmes. The animated movies often use the comic books as the main story material and develop it further into an episode on television. Doraemon, a popular animated cartoon in India originated in Japan from the Japanese manga series written and illustrated by Fujiko. F. Fujio. The manga series first came into publication in the year 1969, comprising of 1,345 stories. It was only in the year 1973 that Doraemon was first produced by Nippon TV Video. Though comic books and stories serve as the main framework for the animated series, there are places where animation or computer generated images have been used in the mainstream story, only to make things effective. One such example is the documentary film named *He named me Malala* by Davis Guggenheim, where the attack on Malala (the Nobel peace prize winner of 2014) back in home town of Afghanistan is portrayed through animation. The movie was nominated at the 43rd Annie Awards in the Best Animated Special Production Category.

By the use of the latest technology and audio-visual aids animated cartoons have taken control over the minds of the children. Reading habits among children have shown a sharp decline in this century. Gone are those days when children used to listen to the bed-time stories. Kids are now more into the virtual world of video games and animated cartoons than entertaining themselves by reading

books. Centuries ago children heard stories from their grandparents, then with the huge number of books in the print and publication they developed reading habits, and now under the effect of digitalisation they have grown out of the reading habit. Parents and teachers are deeply concerned with this change of habit, but developing reading habits in the digital world is a very difficult task to be mastered.

While children are easily taken into the habit of accepting whatever is lucrative, the adults are not far away from it. Most of the times the adults also watch the entire movies or episodes while accompanying their children. Not only the parents, but also several adults love watching animated movies, knowing fully well that whatever they are watching on screen is not possible in life. The human fascination for an imaginative world lures everyone irrespective of age, be it in written literature like the *Animal Farm* by George Orwell where all the farm animals speak or the latest *The Jungle Book* (2016) movie directed and co-produced by Jon Favreau.

Considering the above-mentioned book or the movie, in none of the cases does the adult reader or the audience read or watches the movie only to see the animals speaking, but comprehend the deeper meaning lying under the garb of these speaking animals. *Animal Farm* is an allegorical novella reflecting upon the events of Russian Revolution of 1917 and proceeding further to the Stalinist era of the Soviet Union. The movie *The Jungle Book* is about the survival of a man cub Mowgli raised by Seeonee Indian wolf Raksha and her pack in the jungles of India. Shere Khan, the scarred tiger has set Mowgli as his prey, while Bagheera, the Black Panther and Baloo, the sloth bear accompanied by several others of the jungle plan to bring an end to Shere Khan. *The Jungle Book* movie has made extensive use of the computer generated imagery to portray the animals and the jungle settings. The surreal effect of the ambience was only possible through the use of technology. Such an artificially generated atmosphere developed through calculations in computers could give the audience the much sought after pleasure. Such animated movies not only satisfy the levels of emotional containment of the audience, but also, teaches many things beyond it, if noticed carefully. To cite a few examples, the movie *The Jungle Book* teaches to adjust oneself in an altogether different setting as was done by Mowgli in the jungle. Further, towards the end when Mowgli tries to defeat Shere Khan using the skills learnt in the jungle, he is advised to use the human intelligence; thus, teaching us to nurture our own qualities rather than imitating others.

Let us heed to another film *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa* produced by Dream Works Animation. In the film the escapees of New York Zoo decide to escape from Madagascar to the New York City and to do it they board an airplane in Madagascar which crashes into the jungles of Africa reuniting them with families and loved ones. Halberstam questions “Why the animals want to get back to captivity is only the first of many existential questions raised by and smartly not answered by the

film (why the lemur wants to throw Melman into volcano is another puzzler)” (48). Halberstam further says, “What could have been a deeply annoying parable about family, sameness, and nature becomes a wacky shaggy lion tale about collectivity, species diversity, theatricality, and the discomfort of home” (48,49). Most of these movies create a world rich in political allegory, filled up to the brim with various peculiarity, and extensive likeness between human beings, animals and at times some created character. Almost all the movies are packed with some sort of messages like be yourself, follow your dreams, find your soul mate, care for your loved one, fight against exploitation, understand yourself, respect yourself develop patience etc. Animation thus, has created a new set of meaning by the mingling of science and humanities.

Though animation is a booming industry worldwide, there are severe criticisms against it especially when it comes to the children’s viewership. Children are the highly targeted audience of the animated world. The sole reason behind this success is that reading is a much difficult task for the children than viewing an episode. The same is the case with most of the adults for who after the day’s hard labour find reading a difficult task. Refreshment and pleasure is sort through the television, video games, and also social networking. Everyone takes resort to something that can affect their feelings, without inflicting hard labour on the brain. Media theorist Brian Ott elucidates, “affect” mainly comprises of the sensual modes of response through which we relate or communicate with the surrounding. It includes “direct sensory experiences (of colour, light, sound, movement, rhythm and texture), along with the feelings, moods, emotions, and/or passions they elicit”(Ott). The modern world of media makes use of these phenomena. The commercial world of animation thrives by satisfying the interest and intellect of the people who nurture fascination for the lived reality but not expressed directly. Under the garb of allegory children and adults alike, like to fly high on the wings of fantasy into the unknown world of imagination.

Animation that started its journey way back in the early twentieth century in the works of Winsor McCay is now a massive industry. It has famous names like Walt Disney, Pixar Dream Work films, along with the studios of Japan and numerous others world- wide. Animation does not only revolve around hand-drawn paintings or the inanimate objects; there are many movies and shorts where there is an amalgamation of live action and 3D animation. Disney has a long list of movies and short episodes: some of the famous ones being *Ratatouille*, *Tangled*, *Cars*, *Charlotte’s web*, *Toy Story* and the list go on.

The precision of Digital Technology used in Animation makes it difficult to distinguish the real from the animated. In films like *Life of Pi* by Ang Lee, it becomes difficult to accept the fact that the tiger Peter Parker is not real but a product of human imagination and intelligence. The lead visual effect company for the

film was Rhythm & Hues Studios (R&H). Thus Digitalisation, a purely scientific phenomenon, along with the detailed study of art, human character and psychology, story-telling tactics has created the popular field of animation. “Contemporary animations in CGI (computer-generated imagery) also contain disruptive narrative arcs, magical worlds of revolution and transformation, counterintuitive groupings of children, animals and dolls that rise up against adults and unprincipled machines” (Halberstam 47,48). The huge popularity of animation can be traced from the fact that *The Jungle Book* stories by Rudyard Kipling and *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel were not as much famous as has been the movie by the same name.

Literature that started as oral discourse centuries ago has expanded along with the print media, and has now reached the digital age under the banner of Digital Humanities. Keeping pace with the changing scenario, literary analysis and criticism should venture into the world beyond the strict canonical literature. If literature is something that gives pleasure as defined by Stanley Fish:

To the question “of what use are the humanities?”, the only honest answer is none whatsoever. And it is an answer that brings honor to its subject. Justification, after all, confers value on an activity from a perspective outside its performance. An activity that cannot be justified is an activity that refuses to regard itself as instrumental to some larger good. The humanities are their own good. There is nothing more to say, and anything that is said – even when it takes the form of Kronman’s inspiring cadences – diminishes the object of its supposed praise. (Fish, n.p.)

then why not usher in further changes. After all changing scenario demands a change in the ways we accept the world around. With the reading habits giving way to viewing, a study of the digital media can be an option for it too satisfies the pleasure index of the human brain.

Animation is the place where technology, popular culture and computer graphics all intermingle with one another. The present scenario demands some changes in the strict periphery of knowledge and for that some elimination or changes may be done accordingly. Rightly, has Jean Francois Lyotard said in *The Post modern Condition* (1979).

The nature of knowledge cannot survive unchanged within the context of general transformation. It can fit into the new channel and become operational, only if learning is translated into quantities of information. We can predict that anything in the constituted body of knowledge that is not translatable in this way will be abandoned and that the direction of new research will be dictated by the possibility of its eventual results being translatable into computer language. The “producers” and users of knowledge must now, and will have to, possess the means of translating

into these languages whatever they want to invent or learn. Research on translating machines is already well advanced. Along with the hegemony of computers comes a certain logic and therefore a certain set of prescriptions determining which statements are accepted as “knowledge.”(Lyotard4).

Humanities, (literature, music, art) has undergone a major transformation in the form of Digital Humanities. This alteration was a much awaited and a required one. Today, one can listen to songs and music on YouTube whenever desired, or else read a book in the mobile or laptops. Digitalization has made life interesting and easy at every point. When such is the scenario why not explore the world of Digital Media – the gift of digitalisation to the adventure seeking generation. The proposition may sound weird initially to anyone from the field of literary studies, but a thorough study and analysis can reveal those facts which are yet unknown.

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