

## **CANONISING DIGITAL LITERATURE IN INDIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

As rightly pointed out by Adam Hammond, literature has travelled through four different ages based on major medium shifts, in the course of its existence, namely the Oral Age, the Chirographic or Manuscript Age, the Print Age and the Digital Age. The shift from Gutenberg Press to Project Gutenberg has taken almost five hundred years. During every shift from one age to the other, there has been *literary* tensions, questioning the quality and canon of literature. However, at some point or the other, the literature in that particular *medium* of the age has been canonised and qualified. It is understood and proved that the medium plays a vital role in the dissemination of meaning from the text. The internet and the social media have already changed the way we think and work. Multitasking has become the order of the day. In such a situation, the multimodal born-digital texts have become all the more common. However, in India, reading digital literature and interpreting and analysing it have taken a back stage in India, especially in the academic forums. This study raises a few questions with reference to canonising digital literature, such as When memes are considered literature, with its textual and visual modalities, which are read and enjoyed by people of all strata, why should not the literature departments consider digital literature as part of the syllabus? What are the challenges faced by the readers while reading a digital text and what are the possible ways of addressing the challenges? Can the existing theories of literature be applied for studying digital literature? If not, how does the study of digital text remain different from the print literature? This is an attempt to canonise the digital literature for study in the Indian literature classrooms.

Keywords: Digital literature, Canonical literature, theorising digital literature, born-digital narrative, studying digital text

## **INTRODUCTION**

This study is based on the student perspective on Digital Literature and its reading. On conducting a survey with the postgraduate students of an English Department, it is observed that, in the entire class, only 30% of the students showed keen interest and passion in reading Literature; 50% of the students read literature, mostly in the form of summary and thematic studies, for the sake of clearing the degree examinations; and the remaining 20% read the summaries or hear the summaries from their peers purely for exams. The question arose on thinking why this difference exists among the students. Leaving aside the other external factors, the study focuses on the psychological approach of the literature students towards literature. In an era filled with digital narratives and social media, where the students are more used to scrolling than reading, holding a book or a digital device and focusing on reading the lengthy texts are found to be too much of a challenge to the multitasking digital natives of the present era. As Katherine N. Hayles states, "Modern humans are capable of more sophisticated cognition than cavemen not because moderns are smarter . . . but because they have constructed smarter environments in which to work" (289). The students are grown in an environment that demands more smart work than hard work. Life in the present era depends more on digital devices than the conventional aids that man was using in the previous ages. A famous saying goes, "students love *Facebook* more than facing the book." In such a situation, considering the reading habits of the students and the challenges of the present age towards the print medium as a source of motivating the students to read more, this research has made an attempt to help understand Digital Literature and the importance of encouraging the learners towards reading Digital Literature to stay updated in the literary studies.

## **AGE BASED SHIFTS FROM ORAL TO DIGITAL**

Adam Hammonds, in his *Literature in the Digital Age: An Introduction*, describes the ages through which language and literature have travelled. Literature began with its oral tradition, known as orature or oral literature, where the communication happened from one to many. This is the age when poetry was sung and stories were narrated with its fullest vigour. In the course of time, the written language was introduced and literature was found in the form of manuscripts. This is the time when literature has been converted into a communication between one and one. The meaning was created by the

individual reader based on his exposure and experience with the given situation in the work of art. Most often these understandings and interpretations remain subjective. Then, with the arrival of the printing press came the mass production and reproduction of the literary works, which paved the way for the wide reach of written literature to different parts of the world. This simultaneous reading of a piece of work from different parts of the world led to varied discussions and multiplied perspectives on the work. Literature was studied more objectively, with the introduction of theories and criticisms. The present age, witnessing the mammoth growth of internet and social media, has given a wider scope for the shift of literature from the analog to the digital. This shift is happening now with the usual challenges. One common factor that has been experienced with every shift in the medium is that there prevailed a literary tension. This tension made the literary readers and critics be aware of the role of the medium in the meaning making process. Based on this understanding, it is important to be aware of the changes and the challenges that the new digital medium is bringing in the reading and understanding of literature in the digital platforms.

### **DIGITAL LITERATURE FOR DIGITAL LEARNERS**

The article of Nicholas Carr (2008), titled "Is Google Making us Stupid?" raised many pertinent questions to the users of the internet and the social media. It questioned the way the internet makes us think. The impact that the digital devices create in the lives of humans, irrespective of the age, is remarkable and demands a detailed study on it, which is carried out by Betsy Sparrow, Jenny Liu and Daniel M. Wegner in their "Google Effects on Memory: Cognitive Consequences of Having Information at our Fingertips." This study primarily presents the internet as the external or transactive memory. The study details how the human memory depends so much on the internet as a transactive memory. Furthermore, the study presents how the digital natives and their brain remember "the location of the information rather than remembering the information itself." As mentioned, this study analyses the challenges of the students in approaching digital literature. From close reading of the text in print medium, to distant reading in the digital medium, the students of literature face numerous challenges. These students of the digital space are known for multitasking, which does not encourage them to spend more hours on focused and closed reading of the literary text. The way the learners of the present age read is known as "interrupt driven info-snacking." They spend most of their time

on social media with the digital devices and their attention span and reading time are the scrolling time between a post and the other. As such, the bloggers or the web content creators have to make sure that they gain the attention of their readers within a fraction of a second. This situation explains that the readers of cyberspace are used to quick reading and reading with varied modalities. But the problem raised in this study is that there is a gap that needs to be bridged between the real reading interest of the students and the reading prescribed in the syllabus of the literature courses.

### **CHARACTERISTICS OF DIGITAL TEXT**

Adrian van der Weel, in *Changing our Textual Minds*, lists out seven salient features of digital narratives. All the seven features insist on the fact that the students of literature should be given this wonderful opportunity provided by digital literature to be part of the literary creation and meaning production. The salient features are:

1. Textual Instability
2. Ease and Low Cost of Copying
3. Speed
4. Two Way Traffic
5. Lack of Hierarchy
6. Convergence of Modalities
7. Access through Content

These features make us realise the fact that in the present era, any digital text with these features can easily engage the students in the reading and learning process. The textual instability allows the students to take the narratives to different pathways and bring varied closures to the narratives. Sharing the text and copying it with the lowest cost are the real blessings to the generation. Two way traffic allows the readers also to become contributors in the content creation and the meaning production. This will in turn enhance the creative thinking of the literature students and also will break the hierarchy and authoritarian notion of the author. As Hayles observes, the interactivity between the reader and the author will be at its best in all the three levels of interaction, such as Cognitive Level, Structural Level and Productive Level. In addition to the interaction that the text initiates between the readers and the author at the cognitive level where the personal experience and knowledge of the readers, digital literature provides more scope for the structural and productive levels, where the students

will 'create, comment and extend the text' and 'participate in the generation of the content.' The best part of digital literature is its multimodality. The finest blend of the modalities such as text, still images, moving images and sound, enriches the intrinsic motivation of the students to read more in the digital media. Digital narratives such as Interactive Fiction and Hypertext Fiction allow the readers to access through the content and explore further in the quest of knowledge.

### **TYPES OF DIGITAL LITERATURE**

As the day progresses, literature is experiencing and witnessing a lot of experiments in its form and creation. Fanfiction, with its forms such as Self-Insert Fanfiction, Cross-over or Mash Fiction, and Alternative Universe Fiction, gives the readers the best opportunity to recreate the existing narratives. Slash genre, such as Femslash and Chanslash, is another emerging arena where female and queer domination is seen. Interactive Fiction and Hypertext Fiction also provide a great opportunity for novel literary creations. Alternative Literature, otherwise known as Alt Lit, is created by young users of the internet and social media, centering on life in cyberspace and cyber culture. Influenced by the wide popularity of social media, literature is witnessing literatures such as Meme Literature, Twitlit and MoJo (Mobile Journalism). As language evolves with time, literature has also been evolving into different forms. However, Digital Literature has presented the literary readers with a lot of opportunities and challenges.

### **SUMMATION**

Technology is no longer an option. It is a critical enabler, playing a key role in driving optimisation, efficiency and competitiveness. This study calls for an action, where Digital Literature is included in the regular syllabus of literature students. The students should be encouraged to read, interpret and create digital texts. As digital literary studies demands the understanding of the data, such as words, images, and sounds; as well as the process of the content creation, such as designs, algorithms and calculations, there is a need for interdisciplinary studies that help to rethink literary theories in the light of digital narratives. This study reiterates the fact that for a better study of literature, human intelligence and artificial intelligence should be embraced together, resulting in a productive creation and utilisation of literary narratives.

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