THE CHANGING CONCEPT OF THE STUDY OF LITERATURE FROM INCEPTION TO THE AGE OF DIGITALIZATION

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Abstract-The relationship of human beings to literature started long before people learnt to read and write in the form of oral literature, or perhaps since the Palaeolithic era of cave paintings when people did drawings to express their feelings. Since then, some 40,000 years ago to the twenty-first century of digitalization, literature has traversed a long way. As science, so is literature a necessary part of human existence. But of late, many have started to question the importance of the studies of literature in the technocratic modern world. Generally literature is associated with something that has a text, comprising a certain number of pages (may be in print or as in digital format), conveying a certain idea, mostly philosophical, presented in a specific form, at the end well accepted by society. For the majority, this is the accepted definition of literature. If such is the case, Bob Dylan the American singer, would not have received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2016 nor would have Rabindranath Tagore in 1913. Literature today is a very broad term, the realms of which we are not aware of. In this paper I shall try to explore the periphery of literature and hence, chalk out its course from the earliest days of human existence to the present. I shall also try figure out the meaning of literature as understood by the people at present. I want to show how the concept of literature has broadened over the years keeping pace with the ever growing technology. Inspite of these changes, literature still needs a big leap to create more employment opportunities. In my paper I have tried to throw some light on this issue as well.
Key words: Literature, Change, Society, Digitalization, Employment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Terry Eagleton in his essay, "What is Literature?" has tried to define literature by projecting the idea that "Perhaps literature is definable not according to whether it is fictional or 'imaginative', but because it uses language in peculiar ways. On this theory, literature is a kind of writing which, in the words of the Russian critic Roman Jacobson, represents an 'organized violence committed on ordinary speech'" But then he again contradicts the prevalent concept. Somewhere later in the essay he has tried to elaborate the concept in a different way, "There is no 'essence' of literature whatsoever. Any bit of writing may be read 'non-pragmatically', if that is what reading a text as literature means, just as any writing may be read 'poetically'. If I pore over the railway timetable not to discover a train connection but to stimulate in myself general reflections on the speed and complexity of modern existence, then I might be said to be reading it as literature." Defining literature therefore becomes very difficult.

A glance at the history of literature provides the detailed record of the emergence of literature from oral to the written form, centuries before the birth of Christ, in different parts of the world, and then again to the print version and now to the digital mode of writing and reading. But whatever be the means of presenting literature, the accepted form of it is through written work. Literature then is the means of communication in the form of novels, prose, poetry, short stories, epic, drama and may be some new genres, yet to be known.

So long as literature used the print version the boundaries of literature were limited to all that was written and read by the educated class of the society, (for books had to be purchased) but the ushering in of the cyber technology has brought about a sea change in the prevalent concepts of literature. In this paper I shall throw light at the present form of literature, which may not be considered as literature as those studied at the colleges and the universities, but are slowly gaining prominence among the tech savvy generation. There is a need to bring about a change in the scholastic study of literature, bearing in mind that latest development in technology has given birth to a new kind of writer. The other point that I would like to take into consideration is to bring about some changes in the coursework of literature so as to open up new frontiers for the tech savvy young generation.

2. LITERATURE FROM PAST TO THE PRESENT

Literature (something that expresses human feelings and emotions and finds joy in sharing) began as a part of human existence centuries ago in different parts of the world such as Egypt, Mesopotamia, India, long before the works of Aeschylus, Euripides gained prominence. But during those days, the form of literature practised varied from the present. Over the centuries literature has undergone changes and is likely to change even more. The changing concepts have made place for the songs of Rabindranath Tagore and Bob Dylan in literature. A significant development in the field of literature is

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the ongoing study of the graphic novels, where not only written words but pictures too form part of the text. But literature has yet to grow and develop in the areas that lie at the crossroads of science and technology.

For several centuries literature was written by hand. As long as it was hand written its output remained very meagre and also circulated within a narrow circumference. The use of print technology brought about a big change in the people's reading and writing capabilities. Technology gave people the opportunity to read and write more. The more the people read, the more they knew and the more they wrote. Along with education, literature too, percolated deeper into the society. This resulted in a cultural change, for literary works which had earlier remained an asset for the royals and elites now reproduced and disseminated at a much faster rate. Walter Benjamin postulated the same in The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction "We define aura of the latter as a unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, while resting in a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch. This image makes it easy to comprehend the social bases of the contemporary decay of the aura."

By the beginning of 20th century the world of literature saw several changes, the arrival of computers being the primary and then internet connecting people through World Wide Web. People from various fields were quick enough to produce a new literature through the use of computer and internet and hence, the new technology found its application in the world of literature too. The new invention ushered in a new type of fiction called the hyper-text fiction, Michael Joyce's afternoon a story (1987) being the first. The text was delivered in the disk and the plot changed every time according to the path selected by the reader, thus giving way to multiple narratives and plots. Shelley Jackson's Patchwork Girl (1995) is based on Marry Shelley's novel Frankenstein and The Patchwork Girl of Oz by L. Frank. Baum. The story is an example where the narrative is divided into five segments, which when stitched together becomes a complete whole. 253 or Tube Theatre by Canadian novelist Geoff Ryman is an example of a novel initially created on a website in 1996 and later reprinted in 1998 as 253: The Print Remix. The new form of Literature transcended beyond the expected definition and also made itself accessible to more people. Literature slowly moved beyond the print and took an entry into the digital world. The study of literature through the use of computer and internet called the Digital Humanities came into existence.

2.1 The Digital Humanities

Digital Humanities is an interdisciplinary field developed by the convergence of digital technology and literature and arts. Though in its infancy stage, the future holds unprecedented possibilities for it to grow and develop. Conferences such as Digital Humanities organised by Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations annually since 1989 support the claim for the growth of digital humanities. Books like the Blackwell's Companion to Digital Humanities, and the book series Topics in the Digital Humanities, from the University of Illinois Press were books at the initial phase of implementing the new technique, trying to make new concepts clear to the researchers and Professors dealing in this field. The list goes on increasing as Professor Matthew G. Kirschenbaum of Maryland Institute of Technology at the MLA conference of 2010 cited the example of a number of journals as well as gave an update of the several new ventures in Digital Humanities project by universities world-wide.

Along with the growth and proliferation of digital humanities, there is yet another field developing side by side. It is the impact of Information and Communication Technology on literature and arts. The use of ICT has brought about a very rapid change in the literature and culture.

2.2 Information and Communication Technology, Literature and Society

Technology has given reading and writing a new look in the form of Kindle, iPod, Nook and the large scale digitalization process like the Google Books, but it is the development in Information and Communication Technology that has brought literature and common people together. It has also given the common people the platform to express and share their feelings and ideas through blogs and the various sites in the social media. Masses in general who never have had the opportunity to expresses themselves, or else remain connected to people separated by distance can use the social media effectively. The spread of technology: first the computers, then the internet and then the advancement in the information and communication technology have opened a plethora of opportunity for all those wishing to grasp it.

That a blog, which is a regularly updated webpage by an individual or a group of people, could have ever received so much popularity, becomes first evident in the blog of Brian Croxall. Brian Croxall an Emroy University PhD, was unable to make it up to the MLA conference at Philadelphia to present his paper "The Absent Presence: Today's Faculty," His paper was read by Professor Cavanagh at the conference, while he published the same on his blog. The paper was blogged and twitted to such an extent that it received coverage under both Chronicle and Inside Higher Ed, as the most widely seen and read topic of 2009 MLA convention. What can be derived from the entire scenario is the importance of the social media in the world of today and the way it is affecting literature.

The importance of social media in disseminating literature is felt strongly whenever one comes across small poetic pieces in the social media sites. Let's take for instance the Instagram, a very popular social media used by numerous people world-wide. It is also a site used by many young poets around the world. To name a few – Rupi Kaur, Mustafa The Poet, Adrian Hendryx, Nikita Gill, Samantha Jayne, Tyler Knott Gregson, Lang Leav. The sale of poetry books which had gone down over the years suddenly went up with more and more people taking interest in poetry. Rupi Kaur, the Canadian poet is a much

sought after among the insta-poets (a new phrase for the instragram poets) whose self-published debut collection "Milk and Honey'' poem sold over 15,000 copies making it the New York Times best-seller. "More than a million poetry books were sold in the last year, the highest number on record, as the popularity of social media sensations such as Rupi Kaur continues to reinvigorate the art form. Sales are up 13%, to £10.5m, according to figures from Nielsen Book Research"(Walker, R). It was again followed by her second book titled 'The Sun and Her Flowers'. Her poetry generally centres on the various issues of relationship, gender and the on- going wars and conflicts around the world. She posts verses from these texts on her Instagram, to remain connected to her fans and also add to the list her followers.

The use of Social Media for writing poetry became famous in the west through the poetry of Lang Leav of New Zealand. Her poetry based on love and heartbreak started being noticed since 2012. "Leav (275k Instagram followers) launched her first poetry collection, Love & Misadventure, in 2013, and is slated to launch her fourth collection, "The Universe of Us", this month. According to The New York Times, Leav's three collections have collectively sold more than 300,000 copies so far. (Shah.M))

The advantages of getting published in the social media are many. People not only in the urban areas can utilize this, but people in the remotest corner having access to the internet too can get themselves published as well as be a follower. Social Media sites do not choose their writers, which is generally the case with the publishers who rarely publish the works of the blooming authors. Before publishing any work, an author gets the option to count on the number of followers and then act accordingly. Present day poets like Lang Leav, Rupi Kaur, Tyler Knott Gregson, Atticus, have all followed the same course; they first studied their success through the Instagram and then published it in the book form. Another added advantage of being an instagram poet is that one can freely choose any back-ground, one can also draw figures or use colours to make the themes more expressive. But whatever done, it should fit inside the cropped square, i.e. it should be precise at the same time appeal to the emotions and aesthetics of the readers. These new poets have brought poetry close to the hearts of the young generation. The trend of reading poetry as something that expresses emotions had shown a sharp decrease over the years. A decade ago the art of writing and reading poetry seemed to be an old art for the tech savvy new generation because whenever talked of poetry, old names such as Milton, Blake, Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson, Browning and so on reverberated in one's mind. True, these are all classical poets taught in the schools, colleges and universities, but the present generation at times fail to find their emotions being reflected through the poetry of the classical poets. Very few readers are able to link themselves up with Milton's Paradise Lost or T. S. Elliot's Wasteland .Added to it the difficulty of the text doesn't allow one to read only the text, one has to take the help of the notes adjoined to these poems. Such a scholarly reading of the poems even after demanding a considerable amount of time and attention at times is not able to give the emotional satisfaction that a modern day reader craves. Isn't it quiet difficult for an amateur reader while travelling in a bus or a metro to extract the complete meaning of Keats' Ode to Grecian Urn or Tennyson's famous poem Ulysses. On the contrary, these short modern day poetries dealing in the contemporary context and themes of love and separation come much closer to the hearts of the readers. These poems though hardly a few lines, are somewhere able to bridge the gap of feelings between the writers and readers. Readers feel a sense of some connection with the writers and also with other readers. A communication goes on within, something that is not seen, but deeply felt.

With the society changing every moment, a change in the concept of reading stories and novels is also slowly discernible. Youtube, one of the most common sites on the internet, has a number of posts where short stories and pieces are narrated by the narrator with all the positive energy and expression to reach to the hearts of the people directly. The art of story-telling which was being lost some-where has again found opening through the Youtube, this time reaching out to all those people who are interested in it. In the case of novels one can buy the audio format of the book in which the story is read out by someone.

Society is changing and keeping pace with that change literature too is changing. Literature cannot stick to the olden days of Shakespeare, Thomas Hardy and even James Joyce. Literature should be contextual and only then can it satiate the emotional appetite of the readers. With the daily increase in the number of followers on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Youtube one cannot claim that there has been a decline in the general taste for literature, though a sharp decline for classical literature is noticed.

2.3 The Future of Literature Studies

The present situation of literature in the colleges and the universities calls for an altogether new way of looking into the field of academics. Education in the colleges and the universities are set up strictly keeping in mind the study of the classical, the modern and the post-modern literature leaving a very narrow margin to proliferate beyond the established domains. Digital Humanities has geared up the entire process of looking at literature in a new way, but it hasn't added vastly to the new concepts of literature. It is rather making the works of the authors accessible by one and all, bringing knowledge within an easy grip of everyone and in the process of upgradation at times adding something new. But this hasn't much improved the condition of literature in the colleges and the universities. Universities and colleges are facing a dearth in the amount of grants received from the higher authorities, curbing its development and research. This condition has been experienced more in the English speaking western countries than in the non- English speaking countries. "For the past several years, stories about declining funding, poor job prospects, and sagging enrolments have dominated the public conversation. These stories are so prevalent, in fact, that it has become rather trite to publicly wring one's hands over the decline of the humanities. The

New Republic even features the macabre article tag "Humanities Death watch." In truth, the existence of the crisis is so solidly established that complaining about the hand-wringing over the crisis has itself become a cliché"(Winterhalter). Terry Eagleton on the contrary justified the claims of Humanities putting forth his logic that "In the end, the humanities can only be defended by stressing how indispensable they are; and this means insisting on their vital role in the whole business of academic learning, rather than protesting that, like some poor relation, they don't cost much to be housed.''

Amidst the logic and counter logic one thing is clear that the study of humanities at the professional level and especially literature is not much sort after in the university education system. Some changes should be brought in the syllabus so as to make it more lively and up dated. This being a capitalistic society investment in higher education demands economic returns or in other words employability of the students. Judith Halberstam, professor of English at the University of Southern California has articulated his voice in this direction saying "This is not a bad time to experiment with disciplinary transformation, because the fields that as Michel Foucault described, were assembled over one hundred years ago to respond to a new market economies are now loosing relevance and failing to respond either to the real world knowledge projects or to students interests. We might ask more broadly as the disciplines begin to crumble like banks that have invested in bad securities, Do we really want to shore up the ragged boundaries of our shared interests and intellectual commitments, or should we instead take this opportunity to think the project of disciplinary altogether". According to Foucault, this segregation into various Disciplines reveals of modern power, something that installs traditional, regular curriculum to produce government administrative officers. Standing at the intersection of technology and the pedagogic study of literature it is worth deciding the type of university education that should be framed to motivate the youth to develop an interest in Literature. Halberstam paves the way for a new field of study where technology and literature overlap each other as cited by him in the world of animation in his article named "Animation". He says, "I have been working on a book about alternative animated films for children, in which I argue that the new wave of computer generated animation brings to life alternative modes of society, futurity and embodiment. The animated films that make up the main part of the archive of my book project all draw on humorous and politically wild implication of species diversity." He further cites the example of Walter Benjamin (1892 – 1940) who in the essay The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction had shown a special concern for the works of Walt Disney. Esther Leslie writes: "For Walter Benjamin . . . the cartoons depict a realist--though not naturalist--expression of the circumstances of modern daily life; the cartoons make clear that even our bodies do not belong to us--we have alienated them in exchange for money, or have given parts of them up in war. The cartoons expose the fact that what parades as civilization is actually barbarism. And the animal-human beasts and spirited things insinuate that humanism is nothing more than an ideology…." (1)

Critics like Walter Benjamin, had shown interest in the early works of Walt Disney. Interests of the eminent critics of literature in the world of animation, pave the way of the future students of literature to carry on with their work in this field. Students may need to learn some new techniques along with their knowledge of literature but that will increase their rate of employability. At the end, the capitalistic society will invest in things that can earn profit.

3. ANIMATION

Animation, therefore is an interesting field to deal with even for the students of literature. Though considered a part of computer science, there is much that the knowledge of literature can add to it. The story, the characters, the dialogues, the settings and hence the plot can breathe in a new leash of life to the framework provided by the computer engineers. Animation or the technique of computer generated image (CGI) has brought with it an altogether new field, which is seen developing the field of education, the field of entertainment (both through the movies and the video games) advertisement, news channel etc. Some educational sites on the internet show short animated pieces of the plays of Shakespeare, making it easy to grasp the meaning. The spectrum of this field is very broad, for it calls in the study of people from a number of fields such as art, bioscience, sociology, literature, besides computers being the primary ones. The research and study in the field of animation will pave the way for further improvement giving an increase in the number of students employed.

Animation as a part of the study of literature may seem very awkward, but if the study of graphic novels can be a part of literature, then why not the study of animation. A number of animated movies have originated from the graphic novels. Doreamon a manga series from Japan, also famous among the children in India, has been illustrated from the books of Fujiko. F.Fujio. The example of Doreamon suggested proves the inter-relationship between the so called segregated fields of study.

Education at the college and the university impart specialised knowledge to the students. But still, knowledge of animation along with the field of specialisation will bring forth something new. Specialisation in one field does not mean lack of knowledge in the other, especially when it is relevant to the contemporary society. Children growing up with the use of computers, smart phones, video games will never be satisfied if they are to study only literature, without any application whatsoever. Application of everything is necessary, be it through the writing or narrating short stories, poems, or directing short pieces. Wherever there is application, imagination comes into the fore play and hence something new is created Literature should not only limit itself to the study of texts, but also try to find new fields of application. Application will bring in new things and thus enhance its study.

A country like India, which has a huge film industry called Bollywood and also a huge potential audience has to import animated movies annually. If the case is taken up for studies and the lacuna found out, then surely some solutions would come out of it. So the need of the hour is a serious study of the emerging field to enable it to compete with the world market.

4. NOTES.
1. Esther Leslie points out that there were several versions of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," but in the first version, written in 1935, there is a section titled "Mickey Mouse"(105)

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