

First and Second Waves of Indian Electronic Literature

T. SHANMUGAPRIYA & NIRMALA MENON

Introduction

In her seminal book *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (2008), Katherine Hayles historicizes electronic literary works as first generation and second generation published before and after the advent of Web respectively. In addition to this, Leonardo Flores, in his essay “Third Generation Electronic Literature” (2019), defines three waves of electronic literature. He discusses the electronic literary works, which are mostly hypertext, kinetic and text-based, published between 1952 and 1995 as first generation, the multifaceted features of second generation works started after the rise of Web in 1995 and continues to the present. Third generation works encompass of social media networks, apps, mobile and Web API services began around 2005. These works have made important contributions to understanding the field of Western electronic literature. On the other hand, scholars have discoursed about the non-western electronic literary works and emphasised about their generations. Sandy Baldwin, Reham Hosny and Kwabena Opoku-Agyemang in their “Introduction” to the special issue of *Hyperrhiz: New Media Cultures*, point out the canonisation of Hayles as it “suggests other works, from other languages and regions are non-classical and outside of the family” (Introduction). In other words, the non-western electronic literary works might have different periods of genesis and generations which might not fit in the categorization of western digital literature. However, the discourses on the canonisation of the western electronic literature open up some important questions to the realm of Indian electronic literature: can we apply the same conceptualisation of three waves to the Indian electronic literature? If not, how do we define the waves of Indian electronic literature? First what is electronic literature in India and is it recognised by mainstream public, academia and research? In this essay, we will try to answer these questions.

Defining Indian Electronic Literature

In our paper “Locating New Literary Practices in Indian Digital Spaces” published in *MATLIT* journal in 2018, we attempted to trace the creative tradition of electronic literature from the ancient Indian literary practices such as *Gita Govinda*, *Patta Chitra* and *Chitra Kavi* (Shanmugapriya and Menon 161-165). These ancient creative works have intrigue interfaces, sounds and images. They were produced through various materials such as palm leaves, cloth and print. These literary arts have confirmed that the creative tradition of Indian literary landscape invariably adopt the new forms and materiality according to the sociocultural transformations in every era. In such case, the new materiality (electronic form) of literature is not new to the Indian literary tradition. Notwithstanding, unlike western electronic literature¹, the historicity of Indian electronic literature has begun with advancement of communication device and adopted the sophisticated facilities and interfaces of communication technologies and networks. The main aim of these Indian electronic literature wants to attract massive readers and followers which in fact, after certain period of experimentation with computing technologies, it has tremendously captivated millions of people. Nevertheless, the readers/followers of these works or even the creators are not aware that they are reading/viewing/creating electronic literature. What it shows us that literary forms and arts are attuned to the new digital culture. The creators also use the latest digital apparatuses and platforms to produce and disseminate the creative works which can be viewed/read/played only on the computers and other smart electronic systems. We define the digital literary creative works in India “also take advantage of the capabilities, facets and virtual spaces provided by computers and other digital communication technologies” (Shanmugapriya and Menon 166). The history of Indian electronic literary works goes to two decades back and improvised certain waves of which we will discuss in the following section.

First Wave of Indian Electronic Literature

As we mentioned in the introduction, the western electronic literature is divided into three waves. However, the similar conceptualisation methods cannot be applied to the waves of Indian electronic literature for the following reasons: 1. The origin of Indian electronic literature is different from the genesis of western electronic literature (see Note 1) 2. The period of origin and the growth are varied between these digital literary realms. 3. The material and materiality of the origin are also dissimilar between them. Hence, it is imperative to define the waves of Indian electronic literature and distinct their features. To define the first wave of Indian electronic literature, we have to go to two decades back and locate the inception and generation of Indian electronic literature. In 2004, the first Short Message Service (SMS) novel *Cloak Room* is launched by Ro Gue, published by 3825media and

supported by SMS junction (see Fig. 1). It has fourteen chapters which are well archived online.

Cloak Room presumably marked the birth of Indian digital literature. Subsequently, few SMS novels such as *Neelakannukal* (2006) and *Deaf Heaven* (2009) are also published. We couldn't trace any statistical data of the followers of these SMS novels. All these SMS novels are neither received much public attention nor academic and research stakeholders. A handful of newspaper articles and very few research papers have discussed the induction of this new literary cultural products. We call the short period between 2004 and 2009 as the first wave of Indian electronic literature. According to Flores:

Christopher Funkhouser, with *Prehistoric Digital Poetry* (2007), elaborated and reaffirmed Hayles' generational formulation, especially of first generation electronic literature, showing that it wasn't as text-driven as initially understood and that it had a variety of multimedia and kinetic works. ("Third Generation Electronic Literature")

CLOAK ROOM

INDIA'S FIRST SMS NOVEL. WRITTEN BY RO GUE, PUBLISHED BY 3825MEDIA & SUPPORTED BY SMSJUNCTION.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2005

SystemAnnouncement (English)

Hey Everyone! As you know, we had to stop the game last year (see Chapter 16 comments) due to a player going forwards of the story (to be honest, because I needed to go earn my rent) but we should be restarting in some time. Uptil Chapter 16 will be called Round I of the game.

"CloakRoom-II" will begin in the early part of 2006, if not sooner. I'm hoping that a book deal or some other thing will help me resume this baby. A TV reporter from Times Now just covered this, as it remains the only SMS novel from India even after an year! Ha!

- RoGue

PS: I'm pretty sure our friends at SMS junction have forgotten me by now, so we'll just wing this by ourselves. Use Yahoo IM or something to send out the future chapters to your FRENZ!

ABOUT ME
3825MEDIA
VIEW MY COMPLETE PROFILE

WHAT IS CLOAKROOM?

This is the story of Rita, who carries a vital piece of information on which depends the future of India. It is written by RoGue, but controlled by you. The author keeps landing her in trouble and only you can save her. After each chapter, predict what RoGue's going to do next and upset his plans. Suggest an alternate course for the story, via comments, and fight the author.

Download Chapters 1-15 and start playing.

RULES 1. You get points for helping Rita (BlowKizz), and negative score

Fig. 1: Ro Gue's Cloak Room (cloakroom.blogspot.com/)

On the contrary, the inception of Indian digital literature is mostly text-driven and later, it adopted the multimodal behaviours of digital technologies. Nonetheless, the first wave of Indian electronic literature failed to create substantial stakeholders of creators, readers and researchers. Another important note is that the first wave was not depend on the Internet/web, it was mainly circulated through the service of SMS which was relied on the

phone service companies. Such mobile communication technologies have faced tremendous changes in the recent past which with other new information communication technologies brought transformation in the literary production and expression. These new advanced technologies have remarked a paradigm shift in the next generation of Indian electronic literature.

Second Wave of Indian Electronic Literature

The tradition of writing and reading SMS novels have vanished quickly as the new android/smart mobile replaced the small handy basic mobile in 2009. Additionally, social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are launched after 2005 in India. Though social media applications are introduced in the earlier of 21st century, they began to get receive much attention towards the end of 2010 due to mass spread of smart phone as it has compatibility of having many software applications and produce the aesthetics to the users regardless of the place and time. The increment in the Internet facility also boosts the widespread of the use of digital technologies. The Internet users in India are expected to reach 627 million in 2019. In addition to this, social media network sites Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Youtube are top operated sites on the Internet in India. Hence, the induction of new android, web 2.0, social media networks and advanced computer technologies brought many changes not only in communication but also in the literary field. The transformation occurred in the production, consumption and circulation of the electronic literature after the induction of these advanced digital communication technologies. Social media literature such as flash fiction and poetry, video poetry and fiction, twitterfiction and Instagram poetry etc. are emerged and currently followed by millions of people. For example, the *terrible tiny tales (ttt)*, *Postcard* and *Indian English Poetry* on Facebook platform have millions of readers/followers (see fig.2). Similarly, Twitter also attracted many creators and readers – Chindu Sreedharan's *Epic retold: #Mahabharata #twitterFiction #Bhima #140* characterises a serialized form of twitterfiction which exemplifies the influence of Twitter network on the publication. Sreedharan began his twitterfiction in 19th July 2009 and continued to tweet the story for 1605 days. His twitterfiction has "the digital literary devices such as readers' comments or feedbacks to change the narration of the story as the epic well-known in the Indian subcontinent" (Shanmugapriya and Menon 171).

Instagram poets have become famous in India. Sara Hussain in her article, "12 Female Instagram Poets From India That Are Telling Important Stories" collects twelve famous Indian Instagram poets and discusses about their unique skills of employing social media for creative expression. In Hussain words:

With new platforms and collective now available to showcase writers talents, such as the ever-popular *Terribly Tiny Tales*, young poets have found an outlet for creative expression as well as a like-minded audience to share their views. In today's age of fast living where we communicate through GIF's, emoji's and LOL's, chancing upon these social media writers among the overflow of perfect selfies, memes and cute animal pictures is like a breath of fresh, inspirational air. Social media has transformed into a treasure trove of talent and now it's all just a click away. ("12 Female Instagram Poets")

As she says, the social media platforms also offer various opportunities to the creator to select the form of their creative expression. For instance, recently, "Slum Poetry" on YouTube platform becomes infamous among online community. It is just poetry recitation video of the poet; however, it receives much accolades on the digital platform as the YouTube allows the viewers to express their comments how they feel about the poem and share the link of the video with others. This also encourages many people to watch and comment and even discuss about the poem and poet. Such kind of potential in the digital forum makes the readers to feel closer to the poem and poet which cannot be possible in traditional literature. Consequently, these social media enterprises and online magazines have introduced applications (apps) for flash fiction and poetry through which people can create and share the literary works with their readers.

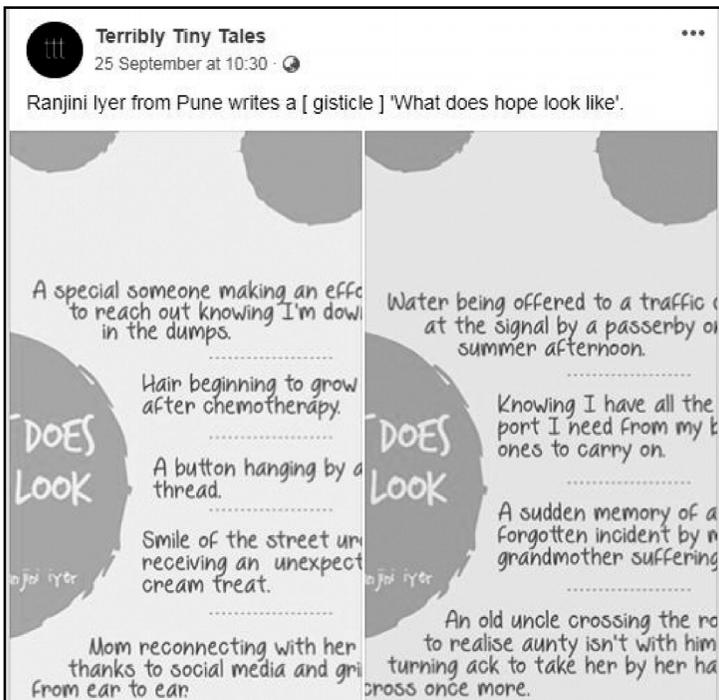


Fig. 2: Flash Poetry published in ttt.

Concurrently, most of the creative applications of the second wave digital literature do not have sophisticated interactive interfaces. However, the writers infuse elements: hypertext, video clips, graphics and kinetic images. We defined such kinds of digital literary elements as “technoeikon” in our paper “An introduction to the functioning process of embedded paratext of digital literature: Technoeikon of digital poetry”. The technoeikon is indispensable entities in any electronic literary works. (Shanmugapriya, Menon and Campbell 647)

The readers have to immerse with these elements to comprehend the meaning of the works. Together with these technoeikons, digital literary works offer space for comments, likes and sharing with others. These digital platforms provide a space for the readers to take part in the creative production. These post 2009 electronic works are mainly created and disseminated through digital communication platforms. These electronic works publishing from post 2009 to present belong to second wave Indian electronic literature. We recently located few hypertext poems and proses online². Despite the fact that they emulate the print forms in terms of linearity and designs, the creators begin infusing the hyperlinks/hypertexts of the poems/texts with other graphic designs, videos and images in the work³. Therefore, unlike western digital literature, Indian electronic literature has had only two generations and the second generation continues to present. We also believe to see more interactive and non-linear electronic literary works in the third generation in near future.

The first wave Indian electronic literature SMS novels have interfaces—mainly space and language oriented. The writers experimented in using less electronic space and introduced the SMS language which comprises of day today language and emoticons such as “:-) (smiling or agreeing), :-D (laughing), :-((sad or unhappy), :-@ (screaming), :-& (tonguetied), :*(kisses)” (Roy 87). On the other hand, the second wave Indian electronic literature has various heterogeneous elements: animated images and texts, video clips, hypertext, graphics and sounds etc. Besides these interfaces, the first and second waves of Indian electronic literature had a unique feature: readers’ participation and collaboration. The digital platforms allow the viewer and creator to connect instantly and to share their perspectives. In the first wave SMS novel, the writer of *Cloakroom*⁴ invited his readers to take part in the plot and asked them to share what they would expect in the next series. He would select the best plot shared by his readers and twined with his own ideas. In his blog, Gue writes about the readers’ participation in the story:

[t]his is the story of Rita, who carries a vital piece of information on which depends the future of India. It is written by Ro Gue but controlled by you. The author keeps landing her in trouble and only you can save her. After each chapter, predict what Ro Gue’s going to do next and upset his plans. Suggest an alternate course for the story, via comments, and fight the author. (Gue, *Cloak Room*)

Similarly, the second wave literary app HaikuJAM allows the creator to collaborate with some random creator which gives some thrill to the creators and readers as well (haikujam.com). As the past of Indian electronic literature is oriented with communication technology, most of the creative works are produced and circulated on digital communication platforms. This could be another reason for social media literature attracting millions of people on the social media network. Hence, the second wave has received mainstream attention of public. Nonetheless, both first and second generation of Indian electronic literature have not obtained much attention of academic and research firms.

Lack of Attention by Academic and Research Firms

The main cause for the lack of attention on the impact of digital technologies on literature by academic and research firms is that “computing proficiency in India...is merely seen as a functionalist tool toward a secure career and not as an avenue to explore how digitality can be an enabler for taking forward humanistic values” (Menon and Roy, forthcoming). Furthermore, what is frustrating and exhausting is that country like India which “supplies millions of software engineers to the world” (Mukherjee) is not giving importance to the Humanities in terms of digital technologies. Souvik Mukherjee rightly points out,

Also, as the Indian computing initiatives were mainly based out of places such as TIFR (Tata Institute of Fundamental Research), DoE (Department of Electronics), CDAC (Centre for Advanced Computing) and other similar organisations, the Humanities faculty, the writers and creative artists were latecomers to the technological possibilities available in the digital medium. The university system still seems largely unaware of electronic literature and their syllabi do not feature any e-lit texts. (“Ludus Ex Machine”)

Correspondingly, Indian academic system rigidly follows the traditional mode of courses for Humanities studies. At the same time, many initiatives and policies are implemented to integrate digital and pedagogy into teaching. For instance, there are many government initiatives such as National Mission in Education and Information and Communication Technologies (NMEICT), National Commission for Higher Education and Research (NCHER), National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL) and National Knowledge Network (NKN) confirm the access of higher education to the “last-mile” through digital infrastructure leveraging the ICT for teaching and learning processes (Sneha 7-8). These initiatives indeed show the evidence of engagement with digital technologies for higher education and digital pedagogy, however, both teaching and researching electronic literature, or in other words topics related to digital culture are overlooked/unwilling to extend into the Indian academic syllabi and curriculum. Only few universities

such as Indian Institute of Technology Indore, Jadavpur University, Presidency University Srishti Institute of Art, Design and Technology and Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar, etc., who initiated research in Digital Humanities spur student community to explore and investigate the consequence of digital technologies in literature. Though the second wave of Indian electronic literature has gained much public attention which could be observed through the millions of followers of the social media network literature, it is sad that still Indian academic curriculum is not updated this social change in its syllabi. We believe that it will soon change, and we can see the digital culture and digital literature courses, programmes and researches in our Indian academic institutes.

Conclusion

The Digital Humanities and Publishing Studies Research Group (DHPSR) at Indian Institute of Technology Indore recently called for submission on “Indian Electronic Literature Volume 1” through our open access platform KSHIP (Knowledge Sharing in Publishing) in partnership with Ubiquity Press, UK. We were expecting a maximum number of works; however, we received only a handful of responses. While we can see many creators publish their work both online and social media network everyday, they are not aware that they can publish it as traditional literary publications. Also, we received few interactive narratives and GIFs and the remaining works are imbued with images. Nevertheless, as the first and second waves have recently evolved—it gives us the hope to see more Indian electronic literature including interactive narratives in near future.

Indian Institute of Technology Indore, India

Notes

¹ For instance, the western machine creative works are launched by digital writers who began to experiment with computer machine in the late 1950s (Funkhouser 1). Christopher Strachey’s love letter generator in 1951 and the first machine poetry “Stochastische Texte” by Theo Lutz in 1959 exemplify the machine literary works of the mid-twentieth century² (Roberts; Funkhouser 37). Since then, electronic literary works have risen with the computing technology.

² Souvik Mukherjee’s “No Country for E-Lit? —India and Electronic Literature” and our paper “Locating New Literary Practices in Indian Digital Spaces” mentioned the absence hypertext works in India. Nonetheless, we recently found some

hypertext poems and proses on the website of Postcard. Although these works somehow still represent the traditional literary devices, they offer the evidence of existing hypertext works in Indian digital spaces. We keep searching on the online and hoping to find some more works.

³ Hypertext poems/fiction have arisen in western electronic literature in the period of first generation, but it is a recent development in Indian electronic literature.

⁴ This novel is a series of chapters and each chapter published every week..

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