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## Reimagining Literature in the Digital Age: Implications for Pedagogy in Indian Higher Education

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With the evolution of technology and digital platforms, literature too has evolved. From the oral narratives of yore, it evolved into a written record of creative minds preserved on papyrus, vellum or paper. However, with the advent of science and technology, literature has begun to leave the pages of the physical text. It now exists in audio and visual forms as well, challenging the very popular definitions of literature. The new forms of digital literature, by virtue of being learner-friendly, has a significant impact on pedagogy. Using engaging media like songs, films, and animations; learners can be made better receptors of knowledge by fuelling their intrinsic motivation. This will in turn prove beneficial to their holistic development in general and subject knowledge in particular. Acknowledging this fact, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has suggested the designing of technology-integrated curricula and the same can be seen in the syllabi of the Four Year Under Graduate Programme (FYUGP) of the Indian universities. By factoring in the learners' preference for learning in the multi-sensory mode, the recent UG curriculum designs have taken a commendable step towards inclusive learning. The current paper is an overview of the evolution of literature from paper to online platforms

and the latter versions' impact on learner-centred pedagogy; especially in the Indian higher education scenario.

**Keywords:** digital literature, technology, pedagogy, intrinsic motivation, NEP, higher education

## **Introduction**

The Indian education system is being revamped with the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 commissioned by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. While its fine print remains a bone of contention, its focus on advancing holistic and multidisciplinary education and emphasis on digital resources have drastically changed the topography of literary studies. This situation necessitates an analysis of the evolution of literature from text to digital versions and the significance of the same to the transaction of literary discourses. The current paper is a qualitative study on digital literature, its reception, and pedagogical implications for higher education. It essays to answer the research question whether digital literature can contribute to a better learning curve among the Indian learners pursuing higher education.

Though many scholars have contributed to the analysis of digital literature and its significance and hurdles in the language classroom, its relevance in the Indian higher education scenario; especially with the implementation of the NEP and the resultant change in curriculum and syllabi have not been widely studied. The current paper attempts to bridge this gap by discussing the inclusion of digital versions of literature in the Four Year Under Graduate Programme (FYUGP) syllabus of the University of Kerala. To this end, it discusses the evolution of digital literature, attempts an overview of select relevant studies, evaluates its appeal to learners with multiple intelligences, and highlights its contribution to constructivist learning by enhancing intrinsic motivation and learner engagement.

## **Review of Literature**

Commonly defined as “digitally born literary objects meant to be experienced within networked and programmable media environments” (Gattass, 2018, p. 323), digital literature and its impact on pedagogy have been actively discussed since the dawn of the digital age and rise in digital literacy. Many authors like Hammond,

Bouchardon, Hayles, and Simanowski have debated on the impact of digital media and the twin concepts of literature and literacy. Though most studies have countered the popular belief that digital literature poses a threat to traditional literature, advocates of traditional literature still remain unconvinced. As Fraenkel and Mbodj (2010), cited in Bouchardon (2019), point out, this might be due to the fact that the term literacy commonly relates to the ability to read and write; and as such, literature has always been associated with the written or printed word.

Hence, in the words of Hammond (2016), the readers of literature are sensitive to the changes inherent in the shift to digital forms as the digital age has defamiliarized the act of reading. The direct outcome of such defamiliarization is the fear that people will shy away from extensive reading and the skill as such will wane. However, countering the popular belief that digital literature poses a threat to traditional literature, Fülöp (2018) argues that digital literature preserves the traces of pre-digital cultures. This prompts her to regard electronic literature as an international or even post-national phenomenon that furthers the established literary tradition.

Apparently, such engaging deliberations on digital literature also probed into the realm of mastering language skills. Commenting on the possibilities of electronic literature in education, Hayles (2008) states that electronic literature has become a key asset in language classrooms. According to her, it not only draws on the print tradition but also calls for new reading and interpretive strategies that contribute to constructive learning. Nevertheless, this is not an easy task. Digital literature requires new pedagogical content and tools to teach language skills through literary texts. With the advent of technology our language and literature classrooms are metamorphosing into digital hubs that double as storehouses of knowledge.

### **Evolution of Digital Literature**

Literature is mostly defined as a culturally valid form of artistic expression that consists of written texts. Thematically, it has been a repertoire of philosophies like classicism, romanticism, modernism, and hardcore resistance. However, gone are the days when literature designated only those discourses that were orthographically

represented by written or printed words. Though the *Britannica*'s definition of literature still categorizes it as "a body of written works" (Rexroth, 2024), with the advent of science and technology and its inevitable corollary – cultural evolution – this definition has begun to sound very archaic and rigid.

If we analyse the history of written narratives, there was a time when stories were depicted using pictograms, then they came to be recorded on clay or stone tablets, and still later they came to life on parchment and papyrus. Then came the printing press transferring the written text from cumbersome manuscripts to sleek and accessible books. This, combined with an uptick in the popularity of education, took the written word to the masses. However, thankfully, technology did not stop there. Today we have audio books and visual narratives of the written word that offer a multi-sensory literary experience.

Hence, the current popular definition of literature is a much more accommodating one. As observed by Marcus and Sollors (2012) in *A New Literary History of America*, literature encompasses anything and everything that is voiced, expressed, and invented in whatever form; including not only written or printed works but also oral and visual narratives. This however is not an entirely modern concept. Even before the birth of written literature in the form of manuscripts, there were oral songs and stories. The tales of the wandering minstrels keeping alive the tales of yore are a significant aspect of almost every culture. Most of the traditional epics are a compilation of such stories and songs.

As for the visual aspect of literature, we have long had plays that are primarily meant to be staged and not read. As Taylor (1999) points out, the structure of the Greek and Roman amphitheatres, buskins, and masks all highlight the visual aspect of drama since its early days. In England, the wandering minstrels enacting small scenes to amuse the crowd, the clergy staging the biblical stories, and the guildsmen presenting more secular narratives in cycles were all visual representations of the written or spoken word. The arrival of painted scenery, movable props, light and sound, and elaborate stage setting further contributed to the visual experience; yet drama remained a part of literature.

With the advent of technology in the form of computers, the Internet, online platforms, and artificial intelligence (AI); literature has taken on a whole new avatar. First came the online books which gave everyone with a PC access to literature in the comfort of their personal space. This in turn gave birth to electronic books or eBooks with device-specific editions like the kindle edition. In an era of handheld devices, reading became more comfortable. Entire libraries could be made available in a single device with the option to bookmark, zoom, and even look up the meaning of an unfamiliar word using tools like the Google eBooks' define option, Kindle's X-ray or even the simple built-in dictionary of the humble PDF Viewer.

Online libraries and eBooks also boast of an added advantage: they offer a paperless reading experience thus contributing to environment sustainability as well. Further, platforms like online journals and blogs provide many authors with a convenient space to share their thoughts and experiences mostly without any publication cost. This has prompted many budding authors to flock to online platforms. Since the readers can also enjoy free access, this has contributed to the burgeoning of literature online. Factor in people's lack of time and attention span, online literature is perhaps the most rapidly evolving branch of literature today. Extremely short pieces that are boiled down to the bare essentials to outrageously elaborate plots; all can be found on online literary platforms.

Next came the audio version of the written word which read out the text and was easily accessible thanks to the digital revolution. Now one could simply plug in an earphone and listen to the narrative even while doing some other task. To a student of literature, it is an invigorating experience to listen to poems either in the author's own voice or rendered by someone else. Of course, the poet who perhaps most deserves to be heard rather than read is Robert Burns. Though there are many renderings of his poetry available online, his poem "My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose" sung by Kevin McKidd in the 2008 movie *Made of Honor* is a world apart. It enchants the listeners into the magical wonderlands of Scottish music. For those who would rather hear the poet himself read his work, there are many YouTube videos like "Seamus Heaney Reads His Poem, 'Digging'" (The Wall

Street Journal, 2013) providing the learners with an opportunity to listen to the poem as the poet styled it.

In contrast, the audiobooks are more committed to the text. They simply convert the stories and novels into audio narratives. Though the audiobooks were primarily a boon to those visually challenged, the rest of the population also welcomed the audio versions. Today, audio books exist on multiple digital and online platforms including Audible.in, Audiobooks.com, and even YouTube which offer them not only in English, but also in multiple languages. To make things better, like eBooks, most audio books offer free access. Even if that is not the case, there are now many text to speech apps that will read out any text for you.

Yet another windfall of the digital age is the availability of quite a few texts in the visual format; either enacted or animated. First, there were the animations and TV movies; crude but engaging visual representations of popular works of literature. While the animations primarily targeted a younger audience and focused on the enchanting stories like the fairy tales of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm popularly known as the Brothers Grimm; the TV movies catered mostly to an adult and more erudite audience. Perhaps the most famous among them was the *BBC Television Shakespeare* by Messina, Miller, and Sutton (1978-1985) which was a series of British television adaptations of William Shakespeare's plays. While some episodes remained true to the original work, others were mostly creative adaptations.

Then came the silver screen era wherein the Hollywood, Bollywood, and every other film industry around the world converted literary classics into visual feasts like *The Great Gatsby*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Lolita*, and the *Harry Potter* franchise to name a few. When the COVID-19 global pandemic struck, the world witnessed the evolution of the online streaming platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime that made available not just the movie versions of literary texts but also their series versions spanning multiple seasons. A perfect case in point is the *Game of Thrones*, which was originally aired as an HBO television drama series but was later streamed on platforms like Max, Prime Video, and Apple TV.

Not to be left behind, YouTube also has channels that offer brief animated versions of iconic literary works like *Doctor Faustus*, *Macbeth*, and *The Scarlet Letter*. They offer an introduction to such literary classics in an engaging and endearing manner that appeals to people of all age groups. Today, with the advent of AI, anyone can convert texts to visual narratives. One can create entire videos from scratch by just providing a few precise parameters. In short, in this era of technology-aided and altered living, literature like everything else has changed. It is no more just a collection of written narratives but an artistic representation of culture in myriad formats and platforms, be it aural or visual.

### **Pedagogic Implication**

What this signifies to pedagogy is that access to such various forms and versions of literature has never been easier. Since pedagogy concerns itself with the method and practice of teaching, the technological advancement including the development of artificial intelligence had already been reckoned as a great succour. The earlier behaviourist classrooms that focussed on stimulus-response interplays, rewards, punishments, and reinforcements changed for the better. Rote learning was no more the norm. As pointed out by McLeod (2024), cognitive theorists like Piaget revolutionized education with his theories of adaptation, assimilation, and accommodation whereby learners came to be regarded as individuals capable of cognitive changes by assimilating and accommodating new schemas of knowledge into the already existing structures.

This is the phase wherein the learners' potential of self-learning became acknowledged and learner-centred classrooms were born. When the learner manipulates the learning process, the availability of resources especially those curated to individual preferences becomes significant in ensuring a continued interest in the subject. It is a fact that except for extensive reading, literature is not everyone's cup of tea. However, many a time learners find themselves enrolled in literature programmes for quite prosaic and non-academic reasons. The state of affairs might reach an impasse where the learning curve flattens out into a plateau threatening to fossilize or stagnate the learners' academic advancement.

To overcome the threat, the education system and all its stakeholders have to come together to create not only an atmosphere conducive to learning but also strategies to pique the interest of the learner. The stage is already set; we live in an age of technology where every piece of information is available at our fingertips and social networking comes instinctively to people. This is a fabulous combination as a result of which learners constantly adapt their cognitive structure to the evolving learning environment. To ease the burden of information overload, the learner can reach out to friends, fellow learners, and even experts via social networking platforms.

Here, what we witness is the actualization of the basic premise of constructivism; that learning is the construction of knowledge. Technology and access to media aid the learners in discovery learning. It sustains learning as an active mental process as information keeps constantly pouring in necessitating a continuous assimilation and accommodation of schemas. Social networking promotes collaborative and cooperative learning as well as learning through discussions and problem solving. All these can invariably help the learners to cross the zone of proximal development (ZPD) and reach their potential level. The advantage here is that the learners need not solely depend on the teacher for scaffolding. The digital revolution has created multiple support systems to help the learners propel themselves across the ZPD. Now all that is required is to identify how to spark the learners' enthusiasm or internal motivation.

This differs from learner to learner. While some learners are inherently studious, most need some external stimulation. However, there is no arguing the point that intrinsic motivation is evidently better than extrinsic motivation; the latter mostly putting the learner under significant pressure. Intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, fuels the learner to advance in studies as the process itself becomes pleasurable and gratifying. To get the learner to consider learning as a rewarding experience is not an easy task. Our very concept of education has to change for the learner to consider learning as a pleasant process. Thankfully, great efforts are being put in to make this game plan work.

Howard Gardner's (2006) theory of multiple intelligence states that there is not one but many intelligences like linguistic intelligence,



visual intelligence, logical intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, intrapersonal intelligence, naturalistic intelligence, musical intelligence, and body-kinaesthetic intelligence. This in turn signifies that different learners learn differently. One cannot make a visual learner take a shining to learning by giving him or her unrestricted access to physical or electronic books. Such learners need to see to remember and understand. Similarly, learners with musical intelligence or body-kinaesthetic intelligence also will only suffer from an overexposure to the printed word.

Reading literary works might appeal to a learner whose intelligence is primarily linguistic. But a visual representation of the content (either animated or enacted) will be more acceptable to a learner with visual intelligence. The figures, colour schemes, character placement, and setting help to furnish their memory palace with familiar cognitive elements. Similarly, for someone with musical intelligence, hearing texts read with the proper voice modulation might be the chosen fare. They are the robust supporters of the oral tradition. Their imagination is highly resourceful and helps them to visualize the narratives more effectively than if they are forced to read the actual texts.

Thanks to technology, we are at an advantage here. Almost all books are available online to be read in various digital formats if one favours linguistic intelligence. If not, audio books and text to speech apps are there to aid the learner. This has an added advantage as the learners can listen to the text read out by a native speaker with the proper accent or someone who renders it in the learner's mother tongue. For all visual learners, the Internet and various streaming platforms are overflowing with visual adaptations of literary works. From classics to popular fiction, literature remains a perennial source to visual content creators. To a literature aficionado this age is akin to that of the French Revolution as expressed by the renowned English poet William Wordsworth (2024): "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very heaven!"

### **Impact on Higher Education in India**

In the Indian context, aiming to transform the nation into a knowledge society, the NEP 2020 strives to make education more

inclusive, flexible, and holistic. Among its strategies; skill training, self-learning, integration of technology, and experiential learning occupy the pride of place. When it comes to UG and PG programmes, particularly those in English literature, the easy access to literary works on various online platforms can evidently contribute to the success of the endeavour. For instance, language is a skill subject comprising listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Literature is mostly considered as falling exclusively under reading as down the ages books were meant to be read. But the technological revolution has liberated literature from the confines of reading corners and transformed it into a vehicle for all aspects of language education in general.

Now, with the help of numerous eBooks the learners can fine-tune their reading skill. The availability of online textual content is impressive, with some literary texts being exclusively available online. Even blogs that cater to travel, fashion or food enthusiasts are narrative platforms of culture. Of late, anyone who can access the Internet is constantly in the middle of a myriad cultural discourse. By listening to audio books and visual adaptations of works, the learners can hone their listening skill. The different media help the learner to navigate the uneven terrains of unfamiliar accents and to internalize certain stylistic features and formulaic expressions. Armed with the knowledge amassed from the technology assisted platforms, the learners can practise their active language skills like speaking and writing in real-time. This, to a common learner, might be a way more acceptable method than being exposed to monotonous and bulky texts.

With the integration of technology, the learners can accelerate the progress of their self-learning in literature programmes. For example, visual learners desirous of understanding Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* need only go to YouTube and in 6 minutes 12 seconds, the GradeSaver (2023) video "The Scarlet Letter – Book Summary" will inform them on the finer points of the novel with a well-crafted animation. The visual aspects of the narration not only furnish the readers with details of the plot but also help them to understand the psychological turmoil of the characters and the Puritan lifestyle of the times. To facilitate inclusive learning, which is also a

key focus of the NEP, YouTube also has videos that offer summary and explanation of literary works in vernacular languages.

It is perhaps in recognition of this avenue that the new Four Year Under Graduate Programme (FYUGP) offered by universities across the nation has included much technology mediated content in its curriculum. The syllabi of the Ability Enhancement Courses (AEC) of the University of Kerala (2024) are cases in point. Compared to the text-heavy syllabi of yore, the FYUGP's AEC syllabus in the discipline of English leans more towards online content; that too non-textual resources like YouTube videos, documentaries, and even pop music. For instance, the module one of the AEC UK1AECENG106 'English for Social Sciences – I' suggests the YouTube video "German Coast Guard Trainee" (Grapjager, 2006) that effectively uses black humour to make the learner understand the concept of linguistic barrier. The second part of the same AEC in the second semester introduces the learners to the Taylor Swift song "Tied Together with a Smile." By freeing them from the shackles of cumbersome texts and prolonged lectures, such radical moves anticipate the learners to become more receptive to learning.

However, the integration of digital versions of literature in the higher education pedagogy does not come without drawbacks. Concerns like loss of reading skills, threat to continuity, digital addiction, and translation issues are being constantly raised by concerned stakeholders. Focusing exclusively on the textuality of texts, some critics argue that the inclusion of digital literature in the form of audio and video lessons in the syllabi has led to the loss of reading skill. It is a common argument that extensive reading of literary texts is losing popularity with both young and adult learners living in a fast-paced world. Hence the texts erstwhile prescribed for intensive reading are considered by many as the last relics of traditional literature in the higher education syllabi. Yet another drawback of digital literature is that the learners get easily distracted and lose continuity. Even with digitized texts that offer hypertext links, it is possible that the learner could lose track of the original text and get digressed into multiple others resulting in the fragmentation of ideas.

Though digital addiction has constantly been raised as a serious concern, since the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been branded as the bane of education. As digital literature exists in devices that house other distractors like games and online streaming platforms, the learners of digital literature are more at risk of losing focus on learning. Issues in translation are also invariably tied with the wide accessibility of digital literature. When a text is translated, there also occurs the translation of one culture into another. As Venuti (2008) observes, in translation, there exists a tension between ‘foreignization’ and ‘domestication.’ The translator either approximates the cultural elements of the source text to that of the readers while retaining some of its otherness or translates everything into the cultural discourse of the reader to engage him/her more with the text. With the advent of digital literature, the literary texts have lost their location-specificity resulting in the translators’ inability to identify a target reader culture. Hence, learners perusing digital literature in translation might miss out on significant cultural cues which in turn will adversely affect learning.

## **Conclusion**

As opposed to the traditional system where the learners were prescribed printed texts and were sternly asked to keep away from all forms of distractions like the Internet, television, and the mobile phone; the current education policies acknowledge the potential of these erstwhile ‘distractors.’ This nevertheless has not been an easy transition; especially for those who hold fast to tradition. There is the genuine fear of traditional literature going extinct. But, as already seen in the evolution of digital literature, literature has a great capacity to evolve and in spite of all concerns, it has not just survived but bloomed. As Simanowski (2010) observes, despite severe censure, literature is extensively produced, circulated, consumed, and discussed online. Many studies have tackled the evolution, scope and implication of digital literature in language education but much more in-depth research is required to probe into its impact on the design of literature pedagogy especially in the context of the NEP-driven higher education scenario in India. Both qualitative and quantitative studies should be conducted to ensure a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the changing syllabi from the perspective of all stakeholders.

With time and technological advancement, digital literature has adapted itself to survive in multiple media where it can be heard, viewed, and vicariously lived in vivid detail. The introduction of literature in its digital versions including audio and video texts in the pedagogy of higher education in universities across India is a welcome change from the learners' perspective. Despite its drawbacks, digital literature contributes to inclusive education by catering to learners with multiple intelligences. Though it is not a panacea to the issues plaguing India's higher education system, its role in enhancing the internal motivation of the learners cannot be overlooked. Hence, it may safely be concluded that digital literature can contribute to a better learning curve among the Indian learners pursuing higher education. Moreover, the revival of interest in literature hoped for by educators and literature aficionados alike might actually become possible if the audio and video versions of literary texts function as teasers inviting learners back into the folds of reading.

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