



A SHIFT IN READING HABITS IN DIGITAL AGE: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT



A look at the current scenario, so far as the bulk of literary productivity is concerned, that includes both digital and print forms is quite disheartening because of the depleting readership of texts. This brings to mind a few compelling considerations to ponder over the matter that- somewhere, things have gone wrong. The missing enthusiasm and interest in reading books particularly of Novels in the Indian context as well as the world over have certainly added to draw the impression that, maybe, the threshold of keeping the readers within its orbit, somehow have been compromised for commercial needs, resulting in the shift in response towards any piece of literary work. It is painstaking to note that the novelists and other literary scholars of different forms once enjoyed a considerable influence on the psyche of the readers and played a critical role in shaping the overall transactions of the society. A book of fiction once formed the prime of every speech, yet in recent times, the same forms of literary productivity are fast losing their grip to draw the attention of readership. However, the authenticity of such claims is questionable to a certain extent. The present paper tries to analyze certain vital aspects in this regard to find answers for i.e. Are we really losing readership of fiction/ novels and other literary forms? Can the shift in choice be attributed to the qualitative aspects of the literature? Or, are the questions that are sometimes being raised are mere apprehensions?

Keywords: *Reading, Fictions, Digital Media, Culture, A Shift in Choice*

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One of the most remarkable gifts of English education in India could be none other than the growth of prose fiction as a literary form. Although India remains since long, as the fountain-head of storytelling; it never remained averse to the new form of literature and soon could adapt itself to the growing needs of readership. Today' Novel/ fictional writings have occupied an important position; As we find 'Novel' as a form of literary pursuit are published in many Indian languages and also in English. A novel in the English language and in regional languages has been of intense influence than the fields of Poetry and Drama. A large number of Indians were greatly moved by the genuine desire to present before the western reader's an authentic picture of life in India through their numerous writings. The growing readership of the then society contributed to the zeal and enthusiasm of writers and novelists to incorporate every minute aspect of life and living to make it a sole representative of the social fabric. In course of time the sphere of influence grew larger in synchrony with reading habits to act as a guide, and as torchbearers of customs and traditions, ethos and values, and as a custodian of unity across diversity.

A change in taste, socio-economic conditions, regulatory bottlenecks, and a host of other factors have considerably contributed to bring in a change in the form and content of literary productivity, to suit the contemporary needs of readership. A Novel as an image of reality adheres to interpret a complex society by means of a careful understanding of the social structure in its intricacy, and the patterns woven around it. The novelists too take care to depict man's relationship with society and environment, while cautiously following the changing emotions at stake. Hence the question is- when the literary productivity heavily depends on outside dominant factors of influence, and vice-versa, the rise and fall in the ratio or proportion of either of the two, can't be accepted as a standalone event. It is therefore pertinent to mention *Aldous Huxley*, who once said in an essay entitled "*Writers and Readers.*" that- "*A hungry activity of the writers and an equally hungry passivity of the readers.*" In the statement, he was ostensibly referring to the prospects of writing and reading as an act of creativity, communication,

and consumption, which assiduously underscores his apprehension that the modern consumer culture that arose in the twentieth century worldwide and the subsequent shift in behavior and appetite for sensations, gratifications and quick fixes, may result in a situation, wherein writers and readers shall be put into mutually exclusive guilds of being producers and consumers.

At the outset of the stated proposition, this may be argued that – can an attitude of consumerism be held accountable for the success or failure of earlier/ present Novels? Can any piece of literary text be evaluated on the ground of acceptability or non-acceptability? If so, then the primary motif of literature ought to be to entertain and be a good fiddle to the readership; in such a case the yardsticks of evaluation has to be changed, which may result in a situation when the purgative appetite of writers to reform shall have to script their own moratorium. Because it requires courage to be harsh on the vices around and highlight the hard realities of utter injustice, by a handful few crippling the masses, irrespective of the concerns of success or failure of the text, it is obligatory on the part of a writer to be tough and sharp in dealing with the content and the theme, as seen in the writings of *Mulkraj Anand* Rk Narayan, Raja Rao. A judicious look into their works reveals that- they were the voices of the common mass and were never afraid of their choices of content and the tone it carried along with it.

While *Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936) depict the social slurs of a rigid caste system in India. R.K. Narayan's writings focused on the myriad problems of India and its people. Some of his works like *Swami and Friends* (1935), *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937) and *The Dark Room* (1938), Or of Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965) draw attention explicitly towards the social structure of India. They were never the critics only to find faults, but at the same time, they could uphold the cultural heritage, faith and beliefs, its folk culture, tenets of religious explicitness, and above all the uniqueness of India as a nation, guiding, correcting, inspiring and imbibing the spirit of unity in diversity



as the hallmark of India and Indianness. Prof. V. K. Gokak rightly observes that: "An Indian... therefore is a person who owns up the entire Indian heritage and not merely a portion of it." [lunar-2014] This cultural awareness is an indispensable feature of Indianness" Now, the primary question regarding the success or failure of any novel or literary text can be accrued as of the level of Indian content in it and to what extent it reflects the very Indianness and its unique or typical features.

This book addresses the very essence of Indianness, by means of exploring Indian fictional writings and tries to locate the power of those texts and their far-reaching effects in providing shape and direction to the society as well as the modes of self-expression in the formative periods of fiction writing by revisiting the early Indian novels in general and from late 19th century to the early 20th century in particular. Apart from the elements of localization, What makes Indo-Anglican literature, in general, to stay afloat is not just as a ramshackle outhouse of English literature, rather it could build its qualitative foundation of its own, that is the 'Indianness' in the choice of its subjects, in the texture of thought and sentiment, in the organization of material and in the creative use of language. Needless to mention, the voices of those earlier novelists did carry the concerns of the local Quebec, a life, mired in superstitions and blocks of rank, caste, and gender, to find favors of sanguinity and readership in one go, with contents of their own. It too challenged the bastions of power and privileged few, who were agile enough to dissuade the readership, and Krupabai Sathianadhan's '*Saguna*' (1889) is one such example.

Fictions of late 19th and the early 20th century in Indian languages took center-stage and played a phenomenon role of an emancipator of the common mass, from the grinding social slurs that crippled the progress of the then society, to think beyond the shackles of depravity and denial. Besides some of the prominent novels like *Indulekha* by Chandu Menon, *Debi Choudhurani* by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, *Sevasadan* by Premchand, as well as the short fiction of Fakir Mohan Senapati, and Gopinath Mohanti's great tribal novel "*Chinua*

Achebe" which stands as a precursor of the translated English version as 'Basanti' to name only a few. Three Odia novels come to mind here. They are Fakir Mohan Senapati's '*Chha Mana Atha Guntha*' (1902), translated as *Six Acres and a Third* (2005), and Gopinath Mohanti's two novels, *Paraja* (1945), and translated as *Paraja* (1987), and *Amrutara Santana* (1949), rendered into English as '*The Dynasty of the Immortals*' (2016).

Reading of those novels/fictions/literary texts, as argued above were always engaging and encompassing in effect on the minds of the readers. As such, they were successful in keeping the folk together, where care was taken to maintain the depth of intellectual exercise, the richness of the content while being attainable, simple, and commonplace for the mediocre readers, as it reflected the day to day lives of their own. To say, this dynamism of textuality perhaps could be one of the vital reasons for widespread acceptability of readership in those periods, which is grossly missing in recent times, that is the age of digital media/new media one may choose to address.

Without a doubt, the "New Media" that individuals are employing is different from literary texts and the difference in genre makes a real difference. Besides, the above learners/consumers are employing a media that is different in style, texture, and novelty in the presentation of information. Since individuals employ this new media, they grow less oriented towards the more complex literary structure of books. With regard to the style, one is not better than the other; rather they are unique and different. This may be argued, however, that the new media is less oriented to the deeper and reflective aspects of our human condition and so also the content which appears to be more superficial in the new media. David Lodge (2014) in his essays about the evolution of the novel, for example, shows very effectively that this literary device developed quite unique ways to address and share consciousness across individuals that simply cannot be done in other verticals of expressions.

Another issue is the decreasing book reading habits which warrant careful consideration of how



audiobooks and electronic books have impacted the demand and supply of physical books and how they are shared across individuals. The data might be discouraging to note that economic considerations equally and to a larger extent influence the bulk of the reader's choices to opt for digital ones instead of the printed texts of the same.

The next important factor that comes to my mind is that how children are taught to read will impact whether they are good readers and whether - if they can read -- whether they want to do so. At least in recent times, there has been a huge rush willfully created by political and ideological motives under different administrations to employ fragmented and behaviorist approaches to reading pedagogy that produced a generation of poor readers or so to say readers who do not like to read. Worthwhile to mention here, that these three stated variables to the complex problem of depleting reading and writing habits in recent days are just the tip of the iceberg.

Now, a look at the other angle of the story could be a subject of serious introspection to ask- Are we sure that reading habits have decreased nowadays? Is it true in all societies? Can we talk about this as a universal problem? Did the parents or grandparents of today's youngsters read much more than their children or grandchildren? Has there ever been a culminating historical moment in which reading was the dominant and universal activity? Will, not this be one of the usual clichés about books, reading, and new technologies? We certainly don't have a definite answer to all the questions; since it involves a great complexity of an activity such as reading, which cannot be addressed in a simple way as we discuss. Indeed, the younger generation explores different reading habits, but they also love to read young adult dystopian literature and fantasy books with lots of sequels involved in the reading process.

It is also observed that while reading electronically has gone phenomenally higher, reading books holding a physical copy has considerably reduced. Yet Reading as a habit has neither diminished nor vanished, rather has changed its

approach much to the disbelief of older generations, who are still stuck in the past metrics of evaluation of reading habits and are still unable to cope with the fast-changing scenarios around. I would certainly argue that - feeling the book and the bond it creates is something that comes with age. The current younger generations do both. Not to deny the fact that early childhood reading habit can make a difference in the long run, and promoting such habits amongst the younger generations, imbibing their minds towards the rich cultural heritage of their past, a feeling of pride and belongingness becomes the sole responsibility of parents, teachers and the society at large. "*There is no Frigate like a book to take us Lands away,*" wrote Emily Dickinson. Reading still plays and, for the future, will continue to play, a crucial role in our society."(Mlinko-2014)

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