

**SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS IMPACT ON CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE****Dr. Jagdish Batra**

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[drjagdishbatra@gmail.com](mailto:drjagdishbatra@gmail.com)**Abstract**

The electronic media which was developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a fast means of communication and entertainment has spawned in our times many social platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Whatsapp, Instagram, etc. which, like rebellious children, are challenging the parent. Propelled by artificial intelligence, these platforms now seek to mould human mind and perception. Literature, which was so far considered an innocuous means to provide aesthetic pleasure and fulfil man's search for truth is now threatened in many ways by social media. While the speed, spread and accessibility of social media is a matter of envy for literature, its trivialization of lofty ideals and pursuits, along with usurpation of the time available to man is a matter of grave concern. The social media's claim of giving a fillip to creativity is open to question. In the process, conflict affects not only human mind and body, but also values which have been held in esteem through the ages. What kind of future of mankind is being shaped is the issue explored in this paper.

**Keywords:** Creative process, individual values, social concern, Instantism, Twitterature

**Introduction**

It goes without saying that the digital technology has revolutionized media in our times and social media, which is a segmentation of media, has impacted our lives in a big way. In this paper, however, our concern is to focus on its impact on literature. What developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a fast means of communication from the earlier mode of sending mail through pigeons or ships has metamorphosed in our times into print and electronic media. So, we have the print media like the newspapers and journals; electronic media like radio, television, and internet-based platforms. Various electronic media have helped the transmission of messages and information at a very fast pace. Web-linked resources provide a huge library which everyone situated anywhere in the world can access, for information and knowledge. While Marx talked about religion holding sway over masses and Foucault talked about the discourse created by the state that controls our thinking, media is now the enviable controller which is getting more and more powerful with the ever-increasing aid from artificial intelligence. (Malik & Batra 47-61).

Social Media makes use of the digital platforms to create a two-way communication channel. In our times, it is identified with platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, What'sApp, etc. New platforms with newer features are being developed every other day. Social Media targets people all around and positions itself as an innocent platform fulfilling modern man's yearning to stay connected with friends even as he is pressed for time and cannot physically meet them.

Its power has grown manifold so that like Frankenstein's monster depicted in Mary Shelley's eponymous novel, it is now challenging its human creators. It makes or mars many a career, particularly of public figures since data mining does not spare anyone now. Human ingenuity combined with artificial intelligence has gone overboard and is set to develop into political and hegemonic agency.

### **Social Media Functions**

The first and foremost feature of social media in our times is its great power that it has come to possess over our lives. Hardly there would be those who do not make use of any social media platform like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. Among the many positives of social media, one can also begin with its role as a communicator, and a fast one at that. There are positive implications, in case of, say a storm or deluge warning. Social media, as the name indicates, has hogged the social space and one cannot think of any social activity without the use of social media. It is best at entertaining people – a joke in written or video form will get circulated in an entire society in a jiffy.

Social media can likewise educate people and impart skills. Many of us have learnt new things through material available on the Web or through YouTube videos. It does offer “innovative and attractive possibilities for people in terms of expression, creativity, collaboration and participation” (Nair), says a researcher. One can always leave a comment or get an instant response from the other party with whom communication has been initiated. Besides, it is a democratic domain with unlimited space to host content. The king and the commoner jostle without any reservation or restraint in this greatest of carnivals which Mikhail Bakhtin once proposed in literature. One can write to the President of the country as easily as to his/her friend.

Coming to the negative side, we find that the speed of digital social media harms the social set-up when rumours spread at the speed of light (read Net). Many an instance can be quoted where riots spread in a city simply because of rumour-mongering. The problem is that with the kind of information load that is out there and the speed with which it keeps on piling up, one cannot discriminate unless one is discerning enough to sift the chaff from grain. The posting of questionable content by anonymous or fake users is a real danger that is always present.

There are some other negatives too like the impact on body and mind through overuse of screen. It saves paper alright, but strains eyes, befuddles mind, as it is always engaged and is hardly at peace. Everyone everywhere can be seen busy with the mobile phone scouring the social media stuff. It leads often to psychic anxiety. Rising anger and violence are also linked to it. In a scholarly study, researchers point out that “excessive information on social networking platforms leads to a usage related behavior termed as “social networking fatigue” (Adhikari and Panda 125). Add to it all, the real world problems of breach of privacy and theft of data.

### **Impact on literature**

Coming to the impact of media, particularly social media, on literature, we begin with multiplicity of platforms to disseminate and discuss literature. Besides, the social media has also intruded into the field of literary production and transmission. As submitted earlier, social media provides for a two-way communication. One can learn from mentors here and also indulge in collaborative projects like writing poems or fiction. One need not hanker after publishers for publishing one's creative writing. It's done in a jiffy on the Web. That indeed is a great boost to budding talent. We have seen even rural women giving tips on You Tube about traditional ways of preparing dishes or sustaining ecology.

The democratic credentials of social media are reflected in the composition of collaborative creative work in the form of a long poem or story or a novel by multiple hands in which everybody can contribute. It has been hailed as the true democratic form of literature and anybody or everybody can write a sentence or two. So, we have long poems being composed by people sitting as far apart as the two corners of the world.

However, the media also impacts literature in another way. "The growing consensus among literary scholars," say Eggington and Wegenstein, "is that the meaning of literature cannot be properly studied or understood outside of the specific medium of its transmission and archival." Referring to the theories of media studies, they aver that

The media through which literature is communicated is no longer considered secondary to the literary content or form, but deserving attention in its own right. Moreover, literary content and form can and often are deeply influenced by the media of their transmission, as well as by the particular forms of media prevalent at the time and place of their production. The reception of literature can also be swayed by dominant media forms" (Egginton).

Thus, the use of social media for literary creativity comes with its own baggage of skewed form and captivating, even if corrupt, content. A researcher has rightly observed about the writings on social media, which he says, "are a sudden reaction to something that they have seen or read or heard and writing comes as a tool of catharsis" (Nair 111). The cathartic function is fine but what would one say to the kind of rage that is reflected in the use of whatever offensive words come to one's mind in that instant reaction? Do they also not create heartburn elsewhere from which may erupt abusive interaction ending in a conflagration of sorts?

Instant literature has become the staple of our times like instant noodles. The Gen-Z does not have time to spend time studying in an engaged manner, to enjoy conventional literature and come up with deep ruminations of a lasting value. All that they want is instant likes, instant share, instant subscribe regimen. A user immersed in the game of 'share, like, subscribe' is always worried about another 'like' just as a greedy person is always thinking of getting another dollar. The current craze for social media status and the role of the influencers who jack up

viewership and count of 'likes' are taken up in the story "Follow me on Instagram" by a contemporary writer Richa Dhawan. In this touching story, the protagonist Maya is seen fed up with life because of her fleshy physique and wishes to end it but a friend comes to her rescue and shows her the way to make her picture attractive with the help of filters. In order to distract her from suicidal thoughts, he also motivates her to post these on Instagram and enjoy the appreciation of others. The trick works and she becomes the darling of media crazy youth.

"Now Maya had a well-planned social media rigmarole which she had inculcated in her life. Her strategies to fake her life were thoroughly organized and aptly executed. She would wake up early in the morning and go to the terrace and get clicked with a yoga pose or with dumbbells, and water droplets on her face pretending it as sweat. She would post this with captions about working out. And after this, she would go back to bed." (Dhawan 32).

She would even advise others about staying fit! But this fakery comes at the cost of losing touch with the real world and she becomes delusional believing herself to be a real celebrity. She values the 'love' of her followers more than the love of her mother, who meets with an accident and dies. It is later found that the driver who hit the car was busy sending message to Maya about her looks when his car hit Maya's mother! So, the same addiction to social media by one of her followers had become the cause of her mother's death!

The craze for instant appreciation or condemnation on the social media is leading to a mindset that disdains spending time to work hard for results. Wait for the result breeds frustration that leads to anger and violence, distorting personality. Research carried out at the Jindal School of Behavioural Sciences into the social media addiction as part of internet addiction clearly points out the co-relation between this 'instantism' or 'I-Want-Everything-at-a-Tap phenomenon' and violent behavior. The researcher points out that it leads to high incidence of personality disorders specifically, borderline personality disorder, narcissistic personality disorder, avoidant personality disorder, dependent personality disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. In some cases, it has led to antisocial, borderline, and histrionic personality. (Karishma 38). Literature, on the other hand, inculcates patience, as it dwells on longish descriptions of landscape, ambience, personality, etc. and narrates the action over pages in order for the reader to empathize with the character or to indulge in thought process about the issues thrown up in the narrative.

Shortage of time coupled with the easy access to social media has also led us to see the rise of abbreviated forms of literature. From 140-character fiction on the microblogging site Twitter to the 6-word story, creativity is being tamed to churn out what is called Twitterature. Sometimes, there is a good specimen like this 6-word story: "Baby shoes, giving free, hardly used," but it is like watching a horrendous site for a second or two and then moving on. This tendency has also affected the style of light fiction, also called popular fiction. We have seen novels like *Londonstani* written in SMS lingo. In this, there is hardly any concern for

grammatical norms, be it punctuation, spelling or syntax. It is pointed out that even James Joyce or Virginia Woolf did not care about these when they were writing their respective magnum opuses *Ulysses* or *Mrs. Dalloway*, but then they meant to capture the goings-on in the mind at the subconscious level where conscious grammatical patterns do not operate. Besides, such a strategy is not evidenced throughout their novels, but at particular spots where there is deep probing of the subconscious mind.

As mentioned before, the democratic credentials of the social media enable now the formation of collaborative creativity in the form of writing a long poem or a story or a novel in which everybody can contribute. But it also gives the creative work, multiple twists and turns like an ever-expanding maze or riddle that does not end with a conclusive viewpoint. In our own times, we have seen television serials inviting suggestions from viewers about the next episode. These are meant to generate interest among viewers. It is true that in the hands of a master craftsman like Charles Dickens, the novel based on public response like *The Pickwick Papers* will still come out as a masterpiece, (Baugh 1346), but mostly, in such a collaborative venture in our times, with wide access to the content on the web by all sorts of people, there is no guarantee of quality, originality of thought or substance at the core. Generally, it comes out as a very mediocre and transient type of literature. The only satisfaction for the contributors is that they have also howled or shrieked in the pandemonium!

Our aesthetics are now sought to be based on voting through likes, shares, subscriptions, etc. and we have seen that instant appreciation is managed; it is short-lived and soon passes into oblivion. It would be pertinent to recall how the popular writer Amish Tripathi, who is a trained management professional, shared publicly the detail of his strategy to promote his then upcoming book by releasing video trailers on YouTube and adopting different promotional activities. The book *The Immortals of Meluha* did well in the market but it still remains a piece of light fiction that can hardly ever achieve the status of a classic. The production and consumption of trivia certainly affects true aesthetics.

Another point to be noted here is that the literary content on the social media uses the language that is the day-to-day mode of communication of a certain class of people having access to social media as a researcher points out: “The result is a lot of urban words, slang and colloquial language ...” (Nair 111). Another aspect of media impact is the use of translated messages. Now, the art of translation too has been trivialized with the advent of machine enabled translation. This kind of translation provided by digital platforms maybe workable or may prove to be spoilsport at times, but certainly, it is not perfect and cannot compete with humanly translated works.

### **Objectives of literature**

How far the revolution in the field of social media has helped or hindered the objective of literature is worth pondering here. For that, we must give a thought to what has been the

thinking of great scholars on literature. The fountainhead of critical thought and philosophy in the western world is Plato who considered poets (the ancient term for literary writer since poetry was the dominant genre) as divinely inspired humans even though he interpreted it as a sort of frenzy that was unfit for society. The poet, according to him, was not in control of himself and poetic creation was a spell of madness or at best, an imitation of an imitation with very low truth value. His illustrious disciple Aristotle, however, amended his master's view to aver that what the poet gave us was 'poetic truth', superior to both historical and philosophical truths.

Down the line, we come across Longinus who laid stress on spirit as opposed to form and felt that literature should instruct, delight, educate and elevate. In English literature that developed in England, we have several literary figures who expressed their views on poetry or literature. The 17<sup>th</sup> century Philip Sidney concurred with Longinus and found the impact of poetry on society as civilizing. In 18<sup>th</sup> century, John Dryden agreed that poetry and drama instruct and delight man. Wordsworth at the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century talks of the poet being a teacher and his work meant to instruct humans in simple language. We also have another great literary figure in that century -- Mathew Arnold -- who saw the poet as a critic of life. In time to come, he believed, religious would be replaced by poetry – so great was his faith in the power of literature. (Habib 19-526). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, T.S. Eliot who ushered in the modernist phase in English literature, talked about 'unification of sensibilities.'<sup>1</sup> He had seen the mind overtaking the heart and tried to strike a compromise by talking of unification of sensibilities by which he meant to feel as strongly as one thought even as he wanted personal emotions to be impersonalized and universalized.

In present times, poetry and literature have been hogged by intellectualism. Literature on the whole, has been impacted by the winds of various psychological, social and cultural theories. And yet poetry or literature are considered by thinkers and scholars as serious human endeavours with a lofty aim and capable of stirring human feelings and thoughts and even giving rise to social and political revolutions. For this kind of lofty literature, what is required is a calm and composed mind that delves deep into issues of human concern.

While the western scholars have viewed literature in terms of language and style, and on the basis of the contemporary politically tinged theories, the Indian viewpoint goes beyond it in certain aspects. It has an idealistic approach and there is a search for an ideal human being and society. The essential function of *kavya* (loosely translated as poetics) is, according to Indian scholars, "ethical and not aesthetic, decorative, or recreational. [...] Acharya-s of Indian *kavya* generally reject the Western doctrine of 'art for art's sake'." (Malhotra and Babaji 182). That, however, should not mean literature is sans pleasure. In fact, providing life-giving thoughts in a pleasant format is the basic function of *kavya*, according to Bharatmuni belonging to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BC who is the first thinker having codified the elements of drama, stage, acting, etc. in a very detailed manner. He called *natya* (dramatics) as the fifth Veda grounded deeply in

*loka* or this world and its multifarious concerns – joys, sorrows, sufferings etc. (Bhat's translation of Natyasastra Ch. 1.119).

Indian thinkers, called sages in ancient parlance, relate the element of delight that one gets from literature to, not only the use of prosody, metaphors, etc. on which a large corpus is still extant, but also to its meaning and objectives. Various terms like *riti*, *dhwani*, *alamkar*, etc. refer to style whereas *rasa*, *aucitya*, *guna-dosha*, etc. judge the content of literature. At the same time, the tradition that flows from the reflections of literary thinkers from Bharatmuni to Vaamana to Visvanatha lays stress on a holistic view of the objectives of life. Contemporary thinkers too have stressed the element of '*lok-mangal*' or general welfare in literature. Indologist Kapil Kapoor rightly comments, "In the Indian context, all worldly and spiritual pursuits are measured by their role/contribution in the attainment of *purusartha* the four ends of life – *dharma* (righteousness), *artha* (worldly prosperity), *kama* (satisfaction of desires) and *moksa* (liberation from sorrows)" (Kapoor 59).

### **The creative process:**

These ruminations on literature, whether by the western or the Indian scholars, demand serious engagement with literature. The work by a serious author requires patient reflection and perseverance. Renowned Indian poet Nissim Ezekiel's celebrated poem "Birdwatcher, Lover and Poet" lays stress on the patient wait for the proper word by the poet which is compared to a lover waiting for the beloved at a rendezvous, or of a birdwatcher looking for a rare bird:

The best poets wait for words.  
The hunt is not an exercise of will  
But patient love relaxing on a hill  
To note the movement of a timid wing;  
Until the one who knows that she is loved  
No longer waits but risks surrendering –  
In this the poet finds his moral proved  
Who never spoke before his spirit moved.

The poet or the literary writer, therefore, should never write until his spirit is moved for which he has to wait.

What appears on the social media is a momentary reaction to a stimulus. The urge to be visible on social media is not in sync with the solitary, hermit-like lifestyle of a true artist who needs deep meditation and a measure of detachment from mundane activities. Wordsworth's theory of poetic creation put it candidly as the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", but it is not the instant creation of a poem like that seen on social media. Rather, it "takes its origin from emotions recollected in tranquility."<sup>2</sup> There are two things to be noted here. One is tranquility – something hard to come by in a noisy city. Secondly, there is a gap between the observation of the inspiring scene and the writing of a poem. Explaining the gap, the poet observes that the

time gap is necessary so that the incidental, the irrelevant and the imminent can lapse into oblivion, and what re-surges, is the pure and the lasting experience.

T.S. Eliot, in his famous essay titled “Tradition and the Individual Talent” brought focus on to impersonal poetry which transcends to universal level through the extinction of poet’s own personality. In his poetic dramas, he aimed to assemble a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events that would create the emotion that the dramatist wanted to create in the audience. All that definitely requires time and immense effort. Compare this to the urge for instant creation now on the social media! It is, for sure, highly spontaneous, but does it provide time to let the dross settle down and the pure gold appear? Besides, will its narcissism allow it to be transcendental and universal? – are the questions that stare us in the face.

The Indian thought about the *kavi* or the author places him above the common folk. He is expected to have *pratibha* (natural talent), *vyutpatti* (acquired learning), *abhyas* (*practice*) and *samadhi* (focussed mind). (Kapoor 103-104). The last element is related to the poetic process when he is expected to rise to a transcendental level, think objectively and in the interest of individual and social well-being. This surely requires ample time and patience in addition to necessary knowledge and practice.

### **Cultural Impact**

These deliberations naturally lead us to the question what impact do the contemporary social media or the literature inspired by it have on the social process, set-up and value system. Does social media, true to its nomenclature, espouse social concerns or focus on fattening individual narcissism? This is a valid question because literature – whether of conventional type or born of social media – does not exist in vacuum. It is said that social media is social and so is literature. But social media is controlled by MNCs whose only goal is to mint money. Elon Musk’s observation, during his recent Twitter acquisition deal, that around half of Twitter accounts are fake is indeed shocking.

It has to be admitted that technological advancement and pervasiveness does not ensure cultural, moral and psychic refinement. If we do not work for the refinement of our sensibilities, be these individual, social, or aesthetic -- the social media might land us in psychic numbness. A scholar has succinctly summed up the approach: “...taking countless selfies through the fancy smartphone does by no means improve one’s photographic art; sending viral messages through Twitter for getting mindboggling viewership is not a literary act; and narrating day after day what one cooks, eats and buys on a YouTube channel does by no means come close to the art of story-telling.” (Pathak 6). Media sells sordid stories more than any other type of stories. So, stories of war, killings, rape, cruelty are the most in circulation. And these are the stories created by the back offices of MNCs controlling social media. These only impinge on sensitivity as against what literature seeks to do.



The ultimate motive behind such circulated messages is to increase the use of the particular platform and bring revenue to the company owning the platform. In other words, it is platforms' own agenda and rules, which, through manipulated algorithms at the back of artificial intelligence help monitor humanity. The hidden aim is to get as much data of the user as possible, and then cater to their interests. Most often, the messages capitalize on baser instinct of man and have nothing to do with any lofty values. They look at human beings as subjects to be subjugated and exploited, and for that sake, they treat them as homogenized conglomerates. That leads us to the project of homogenization of culture as per the norms set by big corporates which is going full steam at present. It happens in matters of choice of food, clothing, vehicles, etc.; appreciation of location, jobs, etc.; and formation of behavioral patterns, etc. In a way, these platforms seek to control humanity. For them, weak governments do not pose any challenge and they can carry on their activities freely across borders which have become penetrable, courtesy digital science. Where is the scope for imparting noble thoughts or giving space to the consumers to think at least? Giving fillip to creativity is limited to that which serves the purpose of the MNCs. Not only this, but there is also another serious fallout of this obsession with social media. Chetan Bhagat, a popular fiction writer notes in an article:

Perhaps due to the lulling of youth's brains because of cheap mobile data and non-stop stupid content on the phone, compounded with the lack of adequate opportunities and a pandemic-affected economy, there seems to be a sedation of the Indian aspiration and hunger to rise in life. [...] For now, it almost seems ok to have modest ambition, watch cheap mobile content and live a moderate life for the average Indian" (Bhagat).

While the 'compounding' factors like slowing down of economy is a temporary feature, the other factors remain valid in better times as well and most likely true of other societies too. The impact on young mind of lulling it and divesting it of urge to rise high in life could work in people with lesser self-motivation even if these may not operate in others. And the net gainers could be the companies and corporations which sell their goods through control of choices of the youth.

### **Conclusion**

Media, as we find it today, came later than literature, but the junior has stepped into the boots of the senior and is challenging literature. Human life is changing fast. With the rise of metaverse, humans are getting disconnected more and more from reality. In such a scenario, the need to engage with the real world will, of course, be felt at one stage. On the other hand, literature, as it has existed until now, and the canonical one at that, emphasizes serious engagement with issues of self, society, world, nature and supernatural.

As compared to social media, literature helps in giving a fillip to active and creative reading. When one spends time in reading certain number of words, one cannot get the image in all its contours or get absorbed in thinking which becomes a two-way phenomenon. Not for nothing

do we value the reader-response theory. Even though the writer is silent, and language is supposed to speak, as Roland Barthes famously argued in his essay “The Death of the Author”, the reader’s mind does converse with the writer’s words which create a mental conversation. The more a reader indulges in it, the more does he think and know of the writer’s mind or his own potential which helps him enjoy the *rasa* (literary pleasure) from this engagement with the literary work. The momentary fling which the Twitterati has with words and thoughts generates superficial ideas and shallow sentiments. Serious literature demands heart’s engagement more than of mind. For mind, other disciplines provide ample food for thought. We approach literature to get knowledge entwined with emotions. For poetry, particularly, emotions are the mainstay even if mind poetry has found a niche for the present. Writing poetry and enjoying it requires time. You cannot have poetry to order.

What comes next? – questions like this haunt the human mind at present. History repeats itself, though not in the same way. Looking at the early English literature of Britain, one finds the action-reaction pattern. Focus on sentiments reflected in the emotion-evoking songs and plays of the Elizabethan period is replaced by the focus on mental faculty reflected in Neo-classical literature (Donne, Pope, Johnson) which is again replaced by the focus on sentiments of social justice in Victorian literature; and now again we have the mind hogging the modern and postmodern literature. (Daiches). And yet these are pictures painted with broad strokes. There have always been counter-currents which have not found mention in the limited number of books and records.

The issue is how far man can put up with these fluctuating vibes of media. Man requires stability too. However, the tide of time will not turn back full 180-degree; history does repeat itself but always with some kind of difference. The technological advancement will not stop and will more and more impact social media but to say that literature will be totally eliminated would be wishful thinking, otherwise it would require man to be manufactured in the factories of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*!

### Notes

1. T. S. Eliot later maintained in his essay “The Metaphysical Poets (1921)” that, after John Donne in the seventeenth century, a ‘dissociation of sensibility’ set in among poets, so that poets were incapable of thinking as keenly as if they were sensing something or experiencing a deep emotion. Thought and feeling, Eliot argued, were as one in John Donne; in later poets, they became ‘dissociated’. (Eliot 281-291)

2. Wordsworth’s definition of poetic process states: “Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotions recollected in tranquility. The emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction, the tranquility gradually disappears and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced,

and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood, successful composition generally begins and in a mood similar to this, it is carried on.” (Wordsworth 13).

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