

## **Literary Classics in the Age of 280 Characters: A Shift from the Age of Typography to TV and Twitter**

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### **Abstract**

From the orally transmitted folktales to the typographical world made possible by the invention of printing press, to the emergence of modern technocratic world dominated by the social media giants like Twitter, there have been some major paradigm shifts that have redirected the course of human thinking. The advent of writing receded the orality to the background, the advent of typography diminished the writing culture, the arrival of T.V, Telegraph, Internet, social media has rendered the centuries old print culture irrelevant by creating a new epistemology. By using the theoretical framework of 'media ecology theory', this paper argues that the latest medium of production of knowledge, dominated by social media, is accompanied by an unprecedented superficiality, 'information glut 'and attention-deficit which has significantly affected the physical and psychological wellbeing of people. It seeks to analyse and reinforce the significance of literary classics as an alternative source/medium, repository of age-old wisdom which inculcates the habit of thinking among people in an otherwise consumer-oriented capitalist world deprived of freedom to think.

**Key Words:** Literary Classics, Typography, Twitter, Social Media, Canon Formation

"We are in a great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas, but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate... We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the old world some weeks nearer to the new: but perchance the first news that will leak through into the broad flapping American ear will be that princess Adelaide has the whooping cough" (Thoreau 50).

In his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Marshal McLuhan while stressing over the importance of medium in which a message is incorporated, coined the phrase: "Medium is the message", which implies that a medium does not simply transmit a message, but rather creates an epistemology, clothes it, shapes it (McLuhan 7). Therefore, the modes of

human understanding of the world, were, are, will always be shaped by the character/medium that enables the human perception, which is another way of saying that an unbiased view of the world is very unlikely. Before arriving at the present stage of multimodal, technocratic culture wherein man simultaneously dwells in parallel spaces of (mostly) virtual and real, there have been great changes in the mediums of perception of the world, from orality to writing to printing to Television to Internet/social media: around which cultures were/are shaped from time to time. The advent of writing receded orality to the background, the advent of typography diminished the writing culture, the advent of Television, Telegraph, Internet, social media has rendered centuries old dominant print culture irrelevant to a good extent. Albeit, there is more printed matter available today than ever, but the image-dominated, hypertextual internet-world has colonized people's time so that they spend little offline reading something of value, and on reflection. Therefore, this shift from offline written/printed word to the online world of context-free image and endless hypertext has momentarily impacted the readership of literary classics that were once celebrated as the cornerstones of intellectualism. The present research does not contend the assertions made by different theoretical movements which Harold Bloom called together as the "School of resentment", against literary canons as the 'state ideological apparatuses' perpetuating the colonial agendas, rather it engages with the role and impact of social media giants like Twitter on literary classics and their importance in our time. Moreover, it argues about the unconditional reliance of people on social media, the rise of Nanofiction, Twitterature, and its accompanying disadvantages of fragmentation, attention-deficit, irrelevance, 'information glut', which have affected human memory, and heralded into the period of 'post-truth'.

In his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman argues about the dangers of the changing epistemology due to a paradigm shift taking place from Typography to Television, which may help in explaining the premise of present research that the literary classics retain a higher place among the intellectual, artistic exercises of Man. He unequivocally calls for an immediate attention towards the displacement taking place of rationality, formed by the print culture, by the superficiality surrounding the Television—which he believes not only stunts the intellect of Man, but also invents the truth, and the ways of processing it. While believing an image to be inferior to a written word, he writes that "In a print culture we are apt to say of people who are not intelligent that we must 'draw them pictures' so that they may understand. Intelligence implies that one can dwell comfortably without pictures in a field of concepts and generalizations (Postman 26)." Which implies that language enriches imagination and

encourages one to think in abstractions, unlike images which limit ones understanding to 'here and now 'only.

The shift in focus from literary classics, which were once considered to be the culmination of maturity of civilizations by great thinkers, towards the 'world of endless scroll 'has a great impact on their readership. It is not that they have stopped to exist but the user-friendly social media has offered people fiction they exactly want, between the cracks of their otherwise busy days, in a new format, at a new place, unlike literary classics which offer people what they need, thereby having a monopoly on both their attention and intellect (Postman 121).

### **Literary Classics & the Canon Formation**

The word 'classic 'has several meanings in several contexts, therefore it is not bound to any one particular definition. But to come closer to its intended meaning here, T.S Eliot's words in his essay "What is a Classic?" can serve as an explanation. Eliot writes, "If there be one word on which we can fix, which will suggest the maximum of what I mean by the term 'a classic', it is the word *maturity*" (Eliot 54). What Eliot proposes is that literary classics reflect the culmination of a civilization and its values, they subsume what has preceded them, and fashion what follows them, thereby withstanding the onslaughts of time. However, there is a difference between a literary classic and a literary canon. Unlike literary classics, literary canon often refers to the western canon, which in the words of M. H Abrams, "designates[...] those authors, who by a cumulative consensus of critics, scholars, and teachers, have come to be widely recognized as 'major'[...] and most likely to be included in anthologies, and in the syllabi of college courses[...]. (Abrams 43)."

From the 1970s there has been an intense debate going on about the canon formation. The standard western canon is charged of being ideologically driven and preserving only the "values of a dominant class that was white, male, and European (Abramas 44,45)." The opponents of western canon, including Post-colonialists, Feminists, Marxists, New Historicists, Cultural Materialists etc. call for the 'opening up of canon', and its replacement with multicultural, diverse, and marginalized literatures. However, its defenders believe that "whatever the western canon is, it is not the programme for social salvation" the artistic criteria for its selection is based on "a strong originality" and an "aesthetic dignity, which is not to be hired (Bloom 29-37)."

However, the ongoing dispute around the canon formation is debatable but the present study deals with the role played by the social media in the displacement of once 'timeless' literary classics catching dust in libraries today, and its impact on or pollution of the present social discourse. Because, in an age driven by giant 300 million plus active user social networking sites like Twitter, people can barely manage the time to read the fat old classics in their extremely busy lives. And the reason may be well as pointed out by Alexander Aciman and Emmet Rensin in an introduction to their book *Twitterature: The World's Greatest Books in Twenty Tweets or Less* that "[...] these great texts- timeless as they may be- are, in their present form outdated." Outdated, apparently because they demand a lot of time, a complete attention, and an incisive reflection, which quite unfortunately modern man, who is conscious of 280-character count (including spaces), cannot manage. And above all, these classics are thought to be outdated because they lack a multimedia format, therefore, they may have the potential of provoking ones thinking, but they lack an emotive appeal to the modern man who believes in seeing, rather than reading.

### **Twitter and its Impact**

Twitter is an American social networking site with 321 million active users worldwide as of Feb 2019. Launched in July 2006, its users interact with one another in 280-character messages called "tweets". Earlier the "tweet" character limit was 140, it was doubled in 2017. In order to share, re-tweet, or like tweets, post links, or videos on Twitter, with others, a Twitter user has to either follow other users or be followed by them. Within a span of fourteen years Twitter has risen to a level where it has dangerously impacted almost every socio-political, cultural, religious aspect of human lives, by its partnership with other medias, especially press. It has created a social discourse, an international irrelevant conversation among strangers, wherein everything has become everybody's business. A research conducted by Pew Research Centre has found that the 80% of tweets are posted by the top 10% of its users, while as the 20% of tweets are posted by the bottom 90% of users, which shows its inbuilt elitism and hierarchy. (FT)

Although in literature, the emergence of Twitter/social media has given rise to Twitterature, Nanofiction, Crowd-sourced narratives, and Infographics, but it has seriously impacted "book[s] and novel[s]—the written word itself—[which] fight to maintain a foothold against the sexier mediums swirling all around them (Rudin)." As a result, not only has this emergence of new media rendered literary classics impotent by creating a trivial social discourse, but it is found that social media in general, and Twitter in particular, has seriously affected the physical

and psychological wellbeing of people, which in the words of Francesca Baker is: “reducing of attention spans, obesity, causing violence, disintegrating family connections [etc] (Baker).” A reputed novelist Mark Haddon wrote in a newspaper article about the negative effects of Twitter on him:

I’m reasonably certain that my ability to focus on one task for a sustained period has deteriorated since I became addicted to that repeated swipe from one vaguely interesting thing to what promises to be, but rarely is, a slightly more interesting thing [...]. What persuaded me to retreat from the Twitter, however, was something less distinct, and more sinisterly pervasive, a growing sense that it was detrimentally the way I both looked at and thought about the world about me, even when I was away from screen.  
(FT)

Besides determining human choices, and curbing freedom, the other grave threats that accompany Twitter include: information diffusion through ceaseless retweeting which results in the ambiguous authorship and decontextualization of information (Boyd, Golder & Lotan 5-6). Topics which are most retweeted around hashtags feature on Twitter’s trending list, thereby giving rise to easy ‘connective politics’, which can spread violence in and around both virtual and real spaces. (Philip & Lewis 213-231)

Karsten Muller and Carlo Schwarz in their case study research on Donald J. Trump’s anti-Muslim tweets found a direct correlation between his tweets and the spike in hate-crimes committed against Muslims in counties with most Twitter users in America. The study found that “Trump’s negative tweets about Muslims are not only widely shared by his followers over the next days, but also systematically followed by a spike in new content about Muslims. [...] They are also followed by 58 percent increase in use of the hashtags #BanIslam (Muler & Schwarz 29).” The study mentions that according to some estimates up to a quarter of Twitter users may be working with different media outlets therefore affecting people offline by disseminating the potential violent content through print and other medias (29-30). The partnership between social networking sites, mass media, and print, has formed a giant corporate information grid, which works like a modern panopticon controlling people’s freedom, determining their behaviour, their choices, stealing their privacy and selling it in the form of data to firms, conducting surveys, knowing human sentiments: everything.

Of course it would be naïve to argue that reading literary classics alone can counter so many complex challenges and rescue the modern societies from violence, insecurity and other threats

posed by social media as mentioned above, but their invocation against the vast sea of superficiality intrinsic to the social media can provide a space for reflection among people who are implicitly enslaved by the impositions of imperial culture via social networking.

### **Literary Classics and the Age of Superficiality**

As time passes, the modern mind is turning shallow, by constantly being fed with superficial information through new medias dominated by image which only titillates the amygdala at the cost of perspicacity cultivated by the print culture from centuries. As is immanent in an image, it inhibits ones thinking to what it shows thereby obstructing an imagination possible in an offline world of typography. Besides, the silicon memory has adversely affected the efficacy of human memory as modern people often tend to rely heavily on search engines like Google and social media to fetch them memories of past dates and events related to their lives, effortlessly. Researchers have called this “Google effect.” A study conducted by Tamir et al. found that externalizing of private moments via social media impairs user memory (Tamir et al. 161-168). Although, all this change in media and format has lost literary classics the traction and appeal they once held among their audiences, but it simultaneously summons their acute necessity at this moment to restore the peace and coherence of fragmented modern mind. Spencer Baum, in an article, gives three reasons for why people should read more literary classics at present: First, reading them enables “deep thinking and concentration”: second, they help people “turn away from toxic stew of rage, indulgence, and amusement that is mass media”: third, “the hive mind makes it too easy to share only the most superficial parts of ourselves with each other (Baum).” It is not only about the way social media moves information decontextualized, at an unprecedented speed, or the resultant violence of disinformation, but the way this new medium is controlled in few hands, its consumer-oriented information manufacturing process, the way it is used to drug the modern man by ceaseless amusement: all this monopoly of the medium necessitates a redirection from superficiality to the age-old wisdom contained in the literary classics. Although, this new medium has introduced millions of people, with mobile libraries, to reading at unprecedented scale, but it has simultaneously deprived them of their sense of past, their history, their memory by rendering it irrelevant. Quoting Henry Ford, Neil Postman writes, “History is bunk.”, “‘History’, the typographic plug replies, ‘does not exist’ (Postman 137).” Same holds true of the social media: ‘History’, Twitter replies, ‘does not exist’. But unlike social media, the literary classics endow people with a sense of proper historical and social context by following a literary tradition, and the footsteps of its antecedents.

One of the challenges faced by all literature is the test of time. Like human ‘psychological fear of mortality’, all great literature has this “literary anxiety” to strive for immortality. And according to Harold Bloom, the successful literary works that pass this test are the “achieved anxieties” (Bloom 38). Therefore, literary classics are time-tested, unlike social media which believes in the contrary. As Neil Postman speaks of the Telegraph, the content of social media is no different, which “is suited only to the flashing of messages, each to be quickly replaced by a more up-to-date message. Facts push other facts into and then out of consciousness at speeds that neither permit nor require evaluation (Postman 70).” As a result of this continuous flashing and flooding of information by social media on mobile and computer screens, the gravity of the matter loses its way to triviality. Its fundamental principle is to develop among people this sense of laughing everything out. Besides, it limits the expression of emotions to a few emojis and the like and share buttons thereby reducing a complex human being to a caricature only. In order to protest this absurd and dangerous epistemology created by social media, and its deprivation of freedom to think, it emerges that refuge in literary classics is a tenable option to relax down from this pointless pursuit. Which, besides testifying to this assumption that literary classics are time-tested, also proves the inferiority of social media to them.

The “peek-a-boo world” of social media falsely promises the modern man that it will give him *everything* that he needs to know about the world. As a result, modern man drowns in the sea of irrelevances, such as ‘princess Adelaide’s whooping cough’, which are dignified as important. Aciman and Rensin, in the introduction to their book *Twitterature*, promise their readers something similar regarding the great literatures, when they say, “We take these Great works and present their most essential elements, distilled into the voice of Twitter - [...] and give you *everything you need to master the literature* of the civilized world [emphasis added].” And their book does nothing except successfully dismembers the great literature with violence, cleanses its wisdom, its psychological complexities and social realities under the pretext of providing *everything to master the literature*, and its authors like bootleggers sell it as a searing product of amusement to its consumers, the end-result of which is a bout of amusement and money-making.

### **Conclusion**

As follows from the above argument, the image-centric electronic/social media has created a different epistemology which is inferior to the epistemology that was created by the print word through literary classics. It has enabled an absolute control of state-run corporates over people’s

lives, affected their ways of perception of the outer reality, violated their privacy by putting their sensitive data at the mercy of big companies, above all affected their physical and psychological wellbeing. Contrary to all these disadvantages of social media, reading literary classics, which are a repository of centuries-old wisdom, can save people from this technological intrusion. Besides being a fruitful exercise of cultivating comprehension skills, it can also work as an alternative space and direct people towards the shore from drowning into the sea of irrelevances, inhabited by strangers, and provide them time to think.

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