

RESURRECTING LITERATURE BY STRATEGIZING AND INNOVATING ITS FORM

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Abstract

This paper tries to posit that literature in its rigid form would have receded into a far corner exclusive only to some elite circles. In order to resurrect literature and make it relevant in the present scenario, it needs the element of reinvention. It explores new avenues such as the graphic novel, films, and literature festivals. This paper establishes the various processes through which literature has been commodified. It investigates the modern phenomenon of literature festivals, which are putting places like Jaipur, Kota and Kashmir on the international map. This joining of hands between the corporate world of publishing houses and writers as it happens in literature festivals is innovative, and the alchemy has proved to be extremely potent. Mainstream literature, unlike its traditional form, has a better reach in its modern avatar of magazines and films. This paper, in order to substantiate the above claim, shall use various instances.

This paper tends to negotiate along the need for resurrecting literature by employing innovative methods. In order to substantiate this claim, it shall work upon the relatively popular formats endorsed in the previous century to determine how mainstream literature has morphed in order to ensure durability. If we were to trace the history of English literature, we identify Sir Geoffrey Chaucer with his *Canterbury Tales* as far back as the 14th Century. Literature peaked in terms of popularity in the 16th Century with writers like William Shakespeare under the patronage of the then monarch, Queen Elizabeth. The 17th and 18th Centuries furthered the cause of literature by giving it the nuance of politics and propaganda. The likes of John Dryden and Alexander Pope were renowned for their satirical works. Literature had become an instrument in these times of both attacking a government and promoting one's interests and had served such a purpose that popular media does today. This was a phase when the Great Britain saw the rise of the Commonwealth and the establishment of the Parliament. The French Revolution and the Russian Revolution paved the way for the 19th Century, where the common man had suddenly been hoisted at the helm of affairs. The king and the monarch were no longer relevant thus making way for the common man, who was all agog with existential ideas and the exploration of tenets such as Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. The 19th Century Victorian England further expanded the cause of literature by bringing into motion the "Victorian compromise" and enunciation of the "Victorian dilemma." These were the features that were in the foreground because in those days of yore, literature was the common mode of entertainment, information, and if one were to take the liberty of a euphemism, a popular way of life. The written word, be it poetry, drama, the much-later Victorian novel, was in currency primarily because of a readership and the lack of any other enchanting mode of entertainment. But with the rapid leaps in technology, the 1880s oversaw the invention of the first movie camera. Motion pictures had a carnival novelty and were being developed as a more important tool of communication and entertainment. In the 20th and 21st Centuries, cinema rose to the status of mass media. Movies became the most popular visual art form of the late Victorian Age. The developing formats in technology thus rendered mainstream literature as an endangered species. Mainstream literature was thus being fast replaced by cinema, television and newspapers. The two World Wars had established the need for

popular media as opposed to literature which was considered elitist. In this paper we shall try to identify the various strategies that have been adopted to further the cause of literature, which has been abandoned both as a serious discipline and a meaningful mode of entertainment. Reading is a dying art and if literature is to resurrect itself from its own ashes, phoenix-like, it shall have to innovate and upgrade its format in order to make itself more relevant. This paper shall navigate itself across the lines of such strategies that have been endorsed in order to make literature relevant in the present day. The paper shall discuss the following as variant manifestations of mainstream literature in order to customize it for the masses. The popular forms adopted for the study are:

- Graphic novel in comparison with traditional forms of a novel
- Adaptations of a novel into cinema
- Organizing literature festivals and tracing the emergence of literary agencies.

The first case in point brings into the picture the idea of a graphic novel. A graphic novel is basically a narrative form in which a story is told by employing sequential art, or in a layperson's terms, the comics' format. Within the Victorian period novels were published in a serialized form. Now, the graphic novels could be compared to the cave paintings of the prehistoric times. Cave paintings also told stories, and so did the tapestries and illuminated manuscripts of the Medieval Ages. The 1920s and 1960s are considered popularly the time when book creators were becoming more adventurous and were experimenting with this form. For instance, in 1968 Marvel Comics published two issues of *The Spectacular Spiderman*. Simultaneously, in continental Europe *The Adventures of Tintin and Asterix* were becoming popular as long-form narratives published in the form of serials. This shift in preference from an extended wordy format to a more visual form of the graphic novel established itself as a genre in the 1970s, which allowed its creators to become marketable in their own right. In 1969, the author John Updike, for the first time, addressed the Bristol Literary Society on "The Death of the Novel" as an idea which spurred the theoretical discussion on the declining importance of the novel as a literary form. In the 20th Century, many writers had begun to rebel against the traditional structures imposed by the written form. This reaction against the novel had raised a pertinent question amongst literary theorists about the relevance of the novel and even predicted its death. As an article in *Wikipedia* "Death of the novel" observes:

Some of the earliest proponents of this death theory were Jose Ortega, y Gasset, who wrote his *Decline of the Novel* in 1925, and Walter Benjamin, who, in 1930 reviewed *Krisis des Romans (Crisis of the Novel)*."

In the 1950s and 1960s, contributors to the discussion have included Gore Vidal, Roland Barthes, and John Barth. Ronald Sukenick wrote the story *The Death of the Novel* in 1969.

Tom Wolfe in the 1970s predicted that "New Journalism" would displace the novel.

The various causes that can be traced for such a sudden death would be the rise of "Nihilism" in European culture. According to Saul Bellow, there were no significant people to write about. On the other hand, David Foster Wallace connected the death of the novel with the mortality of the post-war generation of American novelists.

Contemporary scholars such as Kathleen Fitz Patrick argued that claims of the novel's death were highly exaggerated, and that such claims often reflected an anxiety about changes in the 20th Century media landscape. Novelist-critic, Robert Clark Young argues, in his essay "The Death of the Death of the Novel," originally

published in the *Southern Review* in 2008, that "all arguments postulating the death of the novel are fallacious" ("Death of the Novel"). Now, we could surmise out of the entire dialectic that new technologies such as radio, silent movies, talking movies, television, internet, are not aimed at destroying the novel even though they enjoy higher subscription.

This brings us back to the previous idea of the graphic novel being the evolved form of the almost-extinct novel. Just as all other popular media formats, the graphic novel is a marketing term which has at its core the same self-interest as that of a novel, that is, to tell a story and according to Jeff Smith, as a novel, "a graphic novel has a beginning, a middle and an end" (qtd. in "Graphic Novel").

In order to substantiate our claim, we could quote the example of the popular Twilight series which has also been published in the form of a graphic novel by Young Kim. Twilight is a popular contemporary novel series by Stephanie Meyer, and has not only been published in the novel form, but has also been adapted as a film. This goes on to prove the hypothesis that in the present age of divergent tastes, media constantly reinvents itself and so should literature.

This brings us to the second part of our dialogue, that is, the popularity of cinema. Theatre had always been more popular than its written sister, drama. Now, that which makes theatre more popular is the magic ingredient of *spectacle* as coined by Aristotle in *Poetics*. Movies, in an audio-visual format, tell stories, which are not a very different prospect from literature. Viewing, as opposed to reading, is a far more gratifying experience. For all the narrative part of the written word, words can perhaps never achieve a visual clarity as in cinema. As American writer Dennis Lehane says, "Literature and film, movies and books, compare like apples and giraffes" (qtd. in Dean); but John Dean in his essay "Adapting History and Literature into Movies," claims that they do interbreed. The recent internet vernacular for such an adaptation is "litflicks" – literature adapted into flicks. Although literature, history and movies are distant forms of communication, they share a symbiotic relationship. Stories need to evolve in order to adjust themselves to the needs of the generations and the present times. Cinema is a malleable form of literature as opposed to its protean form of the novel. The protean form, however, is not irrelevant, because it is an important link. A movie gets to places and is far more widespread as opposed to literature. Just as print had advanced literature beyond the spoken word and was by far the most popular of entertainment right up to the 19th century, technology has midwived movies into their very existence. Technological determinism has played a great part in the creation of movies. Novel is a far more formal genre and is a more creative medium than film, but one has to bear in mind that both novel and literature are preindustrial arts and after the Industrial Revolution, we have the movies that are an industrial art. Also, the novel has a lengthy record as a class-oriented medium. Describing the transition from novel to movies John Dean writes:

For centuries, the novel has relied on the upper and middle class elitism of literacy. Cinema was born as mass and popular cultures bloomed in urban civilizations in modern times. As critics have noted about cinema, since its pre-World War One days of Nickelodeon entertainment, it is the most popular and democratic of art forms....

Movies feed on the placenta of the popular, the common coin and not on the support of a superior class. Movies were ushered into existence by the common, human hunger for stories.... In its relatively short run compared to literature; the movie business has democratically catered to wider audience needs and market demands.

Thus, one could, to a certain extent, conclude that literature would have more of a mass appeal if it was to be adapted into a film. The relationship, at most times, remains interdependent because it is always a classic or

a popular story that is being adapted, for the cinema. As Dean opines, "It is good, both because it is ready-made and market-tested. The characters and stories are already popular; all they await is mass production." That is why the *Harry Potter* movies or *3 Idiots* are instances of cinema that have raked in more moolah than the novels which they are based upon.

This brings us to the last part of our discussion, that is, literature festivals, which are gaining in huge popularity in the present day. A literature festival is basically a book festival or a writers' festival where writers and readers gather on an annual basis in a particular city. Reading indeed, is an individual activity but in the present day, people are keener on group activities. The shift of preference towards group entertainment modes such as social websites and multiplex cinemas go on to affirm the claim that group entertainment outranks individual leisure. Literature festivals in the same vein are a manifestation of a group activity. These festivals organize presentations and readings by authors which drive home the intention of the authors, their vision, the entire writing process, the major trends in writing and so on. This is an event which brings together authors and readers, and is financially supported by publishing houses. Literature festivals are organized all over Asia Pacific, Europe, Scandinavia, Middle East, North America, and South America. In India, we have the Bangalore Literature Festival and the Jaipur Literature Festival, and it is believed that soon we shall have literature festivals in Kashmir and Kota as well.

The literature festival is a magnum event that engages people in an activity which is otherwise considered high-brow. Let us take for instance, the popular writer Chetan Bhagat. Bhagat's books have remained bestsellers since their release. They have been later adapted into major Bollywood films. *The New York Times* called him "the biggest selling English Language novelist in India's History." *The Time* magazine named him among the "hundred most influential people in the world," and Fast Company, USA, listed him as one of the world's "hundred most creative people in business." Chetan Bhagat is a regular feature at such literature festivals, especially the Jaipur Literature Festival, and can be seen moving all over the world as a motivational speaker. The publisher of his popular novel *Two States* is Rupa & Co. The company had flagged off its humble journey at Kolkata's College Street with two slim volumes of Bengali poems. Today, Rupa is one of the largest publishers, distributors and importers of books in India. Rupa has been a launch pad for writers such as Chetan Bhagat and Anurag Mathur of the bestselling *The Inscrutable Americans*. These literature festivals combine the interests of the publishing houses of the authors and the readers.

We should also integrate at this point the idea of a literary agency, for instance, the Siyahi Foundation. "Siyahi in Urdu means 'ink.'" says their website. For the foundation, the Siyahi is representative of the dye that stains thoughts. Theirs is an endeavour to cherish and nurture the timeless magic of words. This foundation is spearheaded by Mita Kapoor who describes it as a literary consultancy. The organization is dedicated to find meaningful stories so that the voices telling these stories reach far and wide into the world. The very idea of a literary consultancy is new and innovative. The unusual idea of a literary agency setting a firm foothold in an extremely competitive market is noteworthy. The rise of literary agencies in India is a novelty. The literary agency such as the literature festival is an agent. What do these agents catalyze? It is believed that an industry professional writes what is considered 'raw', so that it reaches a publisher's evaluation desk and merits publication. It has to be 'agented' or 'solicited'. Thus, most writers these days contact a literary agency in order to make room for new professionals into the arena. Literary agencies serve a twofold purpose:

- They separate the wheat from the shaft (distinguish good writers from the bad)
- They edit, prune, and polish a selected manuscript so that it is ready for publishing, thus reducing the publisher's work and time investment considerably.

All these go on to establish that literature and writing are an industry in the present day and in order to be viable, literature will have to constantly upgrade its appeal as a commodity. This surely does not translate as a process that is taking away from mainstream literature, rather, the graphic novel, cinema, literature festival, literary agency are all innovative strategies that help diversify literature and help it sustain a larger loyalty in the market. Even cinema, which was pretty monolithic in its approach in the yesteryears, has exerted in order to maintain its relevance. We have both commercial cinema such as *Dabangg 2* and strictly multiplex films such as the *Life of Pi*. Books will have to reincarnate themselves in terms of language such as the everyday quotidian in Chetan Bhagat's best sellers or in the form of cinema such as *3 Idiots*. Literature needs to revitalize itself and be shape-shifting so that it does not fall out of favour. Today, a formal study in literature is not a well-observed phenomenon because it seldom fructifies in a well-paying job, nor is it a very favoured form of entertainment.

Products are modified and packaged differently over the years for better acceptance. Similarly, literature will have to modify and package itself differently for mass appeal.

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