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FROM SMS TO INSTAGRAM: EVOLUTION OF DIGITAL INTIMACY IN INDIAN POPULAR FICTION

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Abstract:

This paper discusses how digital intimacy is reflected in the development of Indian English popular fiction and how both the narrative structure and the cultural message have been influenced by changes in technology. Starting with SMS being the first platform of mediated affection, it will be followed by the evolution of blogs, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and short-video platforms to show how each phase in the communication process has changed how love and desire are represented in literature. SMS made conversations short and more prone to misunderstanding, blogs provided somewhat anonymous ways to confess to something, Facebook turned romance into a show in front of the audience, WhatsApp made the communication of a personal conversation immediate and Instagram brought intimacy to the scope of aesthetic visibility and curated selfhood. The recent emergence of TikTok and Reels underlines the growing tendency of intimacy that is more related to speed, virality and spectacle. This paper is based on close readings of three chosen novels by Ravinder Singh, Durjoy Datta and Nikita Singh with an analysis of how these authors use these digital structures to negotiate love and war in their novels. Cultural and media studies bring diverse insights into the analysis and place the stories in a broader discussion of technology and narration. Throughout its focus on form and reception, the article demonstrates that these works are not only entertainment, but also cultural records, which retain the anxieties and aspirations of a city generation formed by the ubiquitous connectivity. By so doing, it makes Indian English popular fiction an indispensable prism in which to perceive the co-evolutionary histories of communication, youth culture and literary expression in the digital era.

Keywords: *Digital Intimacy, Indian English Fiction, Social Media, SMS, Facebook, Whatsapp, Instagram, Youth Culture*

Introduction:

The first half of the twenty-first century has been characterised by an incredible boom of Indian English popular fiction, especially in the romance genre. A new team of writers have addressed young urban readers directly and have captured their experiences within the rapidly transforming society. The peculiarity of this wave of fiction is that it is not only focused on the issues of modern young people but also directly intertwines with the technologies that define the daily communication. Text messaging, mobile phones and subsequent social networking sites have ceased to be periphery and have now become a core aspect of intimate relationships and fiction has captured this shift with the precision.



The theme of this article is the role played by digital platforms in representing romance in the Indian English fiction. A love story built with the help of SMS messages or characterised by the presence of Facebook posts does not just reiterate older themes in a new environment. It introduces new forms of expressing intimacy, new grounds of misinterpretations and new patterns in the development of relationships. Every platform, SMS, blogs, WhatsApp or Instagram, comes along with its own opportunities and constraints. The impact of these is deep-rooted on the tone, pace and emotional depth in narrative.

The need to concentrate on these novels is based on the fact that they mirror the culture change as much as the individual feeling. They introduce the fears of being visible, the allure of immediate connexion and the instability of the digital love. The present article relies on the literary analysis and the cultural and media studies to suggest that Indian English popular fiction provides a valuable repository of the role of digital communication in transforming the experience of love. It demonstrates that these are not only works of romance, but also the social reality of a connected generation.

Early Digital Intimacy: SMS and Blogs:

The first stage of digital romance in the Indian English fiction is strictly connected with the popularisation of SMS. Text messages enabled characters to speak in bits and this influenced the rhythm of the conversation as well as the speed of the story telling. Ravinder Singh used SMS to emphasise the excitement of the present moment and the fear of time lapse in *I Too Had a Love Story*. The messages were tender, at least they were not rude, but made silences when unanswered. As Singh's narrator recalls,

That was 20-July-2006 18:58:19. My cellphone's inbox still shows the date and time.

When I got this SMS, I was in a conference call with a client in the US. ...

The very next minute, my cell flashed the arrival of a new message: 'I too hv cmplt'd my conf cal few min bck. U complete urs and I can wait till then (Singh, 18).

It was the location where love was to blossom and misconception was encouraged the bare exchange of words on a computer screen through phone. As demonstrated in the novel, brevity was not only a kind of intimacy with a generation in which a beep of a new message can cause both elation and aggravation. Blogs as well were part of the development of digital intimacy in addition to the SMS. Blogs were semi-open where anonymity or semi anonymity could release its emotions and elaborate its experiences or be authenticated unlike in a personal text. This is one of the aspects that Durjoy Datta developed in *Wish I Could Tell You* that the characters express a side that they did not expose on the net. One of the main characters believes,

The more I wrote, the more I read what I wrote, the more I wanted to write.

Gautam was a wholesome character; there was so much to bite into, so much to explore, so much to dive into (Datta, 177).

This case fills the difference between the desire and the expression with a narrative tool and a psychological zone of the blog. It demonstrates the use of online anonymity as a source of emotional frankness and how in the process, trust and good faith are lost in relationships. It is a



mixture of these basic forms of digital communications that emphasises this clash between intimacy and distance. SMS is quick and faces possibility of misunderstanding as compared to blogs which are highly endearing where the issue is that there is no strict line between the personal and the public. These spaces in both novels are not just the frames of the discourse, but are part of the experience of love and we cannot talk of technology independent of the narrative design. Singh and Datta explain the touch of early digital romance, as sensitive and orgasmic and clumsily bound up with the rhythm of a networked generation.

Facebook and Orkut Phase:

The advent of social networking sites like Orkut and Facebook was a severe change in how romance was written in Indian English fiction. These platforms brought love into semi-public spaces unlike SMS or blogs which focused on private communication where the visibility itself became a part of the relationship. New performative affection was formed through posts, likes and comments. The dynamics of attention and recognition determined the way in which the characters would express themselves and the way in which conflicts were resolved.

This transition is clearly shown in *Love @ Facebook* by Nikita Singh. The novel revolves around the protagonist Vatsala's fascination with Ronit Oberoi, a popular singer she admires online. Much of the narrative is woven through wall posts and status updates that blur the boundary between private longing and public performance. In one instance, Vatsala reflects,

The next one is indefinitely delayed," was Ronit's Status that day. I didn't have a clue what he was referring to, but as I read the comments people had posted on the Status, I deduced he was referring to the next episodes of his TV show (Singh, 114).

The line captures the paradox of Facebook intimacy; a deeply personal thrill that is simultaneously exposed to an entire network. Here, desire is experienced not in secrecy but in the heightened awareness of constant spectatorship.

This public dimension of digital romance introduces themes of jealousy and competition. The presence of other admirers, the comparison of who receives attention and the insecurity bred by online visibility become central to the emotional fabric of the story. Orkut, which preceded Facebook, played a similar role in its testimonial culture, where affection was measured through public notes and visible endorsements. Both platforms highlight how digital romance thrives on recognition and yet remains vulnerable to rivalry. Scholars have noted this performative nature of online intimacy. Singh's narrative demonstrates with immediacy, situating youthful love within the structures of digital display.

Through such representations, Indian popular fiction captures not only the story of individual romance but also the cultural moment when relationships migrated from private messages to visible performances. The phase of love is no longer a solitary act, but it is acted on a timeline and a wall, where the glance of other people influences desire and confrontation.

WhatsApp Culture:

When the wave of popularising smartphones started, WhatsApp became one of the most significant places of online intimacy; the focus on semi-public presentation in Facebook was switched to the urgency of personal communication. Unlike blogs or wall posts where viewers are compelled to give their comments, the WhatsApp was a promise of a closed and flowing



environment where the discussions can be conducted without interruption. Even its internal design with two ticks, typing cues, emojis and voice recording provided proximity to another beat that was saturated with presence and pressure.

The fiction describing this phase of communication is generally more dedicated to the comfort and the sensitivity that such phase of communication provides. Even the blue tick that indicates that one has read a message is an emotional charge. The blue tick silence may be more anxiety-generating than the rejection, and the emojis may be utilised to substitute the long sentences and summarise the emotions with the symbols. It is a beauty that is fast and yet at the same time it is a curse because it is misinterpretative as well. Depending on the circumstance, the heart emoji can either represent love or non-formal friendship and it is this type of ambiguity that generates a significant amount of narrative tension.

WhatsApp conversations have been used to exploit portrayed Indian popular fiction to convey the feeling of almost 24/7 connectedness that defined modern relationships. The characters have not only touched but will never forget the fact that they are all digital. The expectation in the immediate response creates precedence and procrastination is presumed to be an indication of feelings. These connotations are replicated into the digital culture struggles. Romance can never be postponed by either distance or time, but the instantaneousness that WhatsApp enables is the one that is posing a threat to it.

They are light and informal descriptions. The dialogues seem to be light and full of jokes and emojis, but behind everything, there is the dependence weight. Such humour-vulnerability is a combination that is seen in the daily use of WhatsApp in the youth culture. Indian fiction can show how a media that promises intimacy can make people feel more insecure and is an important move in the bigger picture of digital intimacy.

Instagram and Aesthetics of Visibility:

Facebook was a gesture of romance to semi-publics, Instagram moved intimacy to entirely visual culture. Love in this case is not only discussed but also presented in edited photos, labelled stories and reels. Instagram is also romanticising a gesture as opposed to SMS or WhatsApp where words are the main elements. A picture of a couple with the right philtre and a hashtag printed on it is a representation of a gift to the couple, as well as a statement to the world. The fiction that is playing with such degree of digital culture explains the contradiction of intimacy becoming spectacle.

In *Love @ Facebook* by Nikita Singh, which prefigures the world of the curated selfhood of Instagram, the main character notes,

Ronit: Hey! Was travelling man!

I hope you had a great day. Upload pictures :)

Yeah, whatever, I thought. Who calls a girl 'man' anyway? And he really thinks I'll upload my photos on FB just because he asked me to? Huh! Keep dreaming! (Singh, 21)

The observation highlights the dissonance between lived reality and its stylised online projection, a theme that resonates even more strongly in today's Instagram-driven narratives. The romance in such spaces is not merely about affection but keeping an image which supports identity and creates an appeal.



This form of intimacy is based on self-construction. Instagram forms a culture, as per which romance is connected to self-branding; the more attractive the post, the more the relationship is represented to be beautiful. This is a stark contrast of the text-based communication of SMS or blogs in which words had emotional undertones but were not so apparent. Instagram is overwhelmed by images and all the feelings are fitted in visual displays, which are transmitted everywhere. This stage of digital life is reflected in the Indian popular fiction which suggests intimacy as inevitably related to the visible world. Love is never the personal relationship only but also by the common sphere of the feed where it has to be liked, commented and liked aesthetically.

Short-Video Culture: TikTok and Reels:

The emergence of Tik Tok and Instagram Reels has come as a new trend in the digital intimacy of the Indian youth culture and in fictional portrayal. These videos have made it through on performance, speed and virality, unlike the text-driven or photograph-based modes of the earlier platforms. Romance in this case is subject to spectacle with affection being acted in front of the camera and shared to be blessed by the followers. In fiction where it is mentioned, intimacy is commonly quantified not by the intensity of personal interaction but by the scope and influence of Internet presence.

Short videos also highlight the ephemerality of affection. Posts vanish after twenty-four hours or are quickly replaced by fresh content, making love appear fleeting and unstable. The focus on filters, trending audio and rapid editing reduces the complexity of relationships to consumable fragments. As one character in Durjoy Datta's fiction observes,

With every music video, with every short film that I watch produced on crowdfunded money by WeDonate, it becomes clearer to me that this division should shut down. The money for these projects should be diverted to people who really need it; the entire team should be dissolved (Datta, 16).

This remark underlines the tension between the performance of closeness and its short-lived nature in a culture of endless scrolling.

Such portrayals point to a broader shift towards multimodal narration. The words, images, sound and movement are united and romance is a combination of the literary description and online performance. Popular fiction that incorporates the reason of the short-video culture in Indian popular fiction represents fear of young people who fall in love in a world of quick presentation and shallow focus. Exposing intimacy as hyper-visible and precarious, these stories show how romance in the digital age is becoming more and more influenced by spectacle and by the limitless needs of virality.

Parallelogram: Text to Multimodality:

The history of digital intimacy in Indian popular fiction can be traced as a gradual shift towards multimodal narratives of text-based interactions. SMS gave the initial perspective of mediated affection, brevity and anticipation were made narrative tools. Blogs soon came on to the scene, with more semi-anonymous areas of confessional length and introspective voice. Facebook made intimacy a semi-public space where posts, likes and comments turned affection into a show in front of friends.



The WhatsApp once again came to the rescue of the situation with the introduction of intimacy that was combined with the serenity of constantly being connected with the exposure of the instant anticipation. The emojis, ticks and voice notes reduced the emotional to symbols and signs and established new types of narrative tension. Then Instagram was in the aesthetic so that identity was created as an image and narrated as a story, and one could quantify love in likes and hashtags. Finally, love became an element of the virality economy where short videos sensationalise intimacy and where the multitude outweighs the minority.

This evolution has been marked with radical changes in the pace, reality and intensity of intimacy. What was an extension of anticipation in SMS has become the momentary yet tenuous visibility of Reels. Storytelling has adapted to these changes through condensing emotion, disaggregating the narrative, and prefiguring the performance. To the readers, the romance in fiction follows the same digital life that they are going through and these novels are cultural archives that trace not only the love stories but also the changing modes of being a young person and being connected in India.

Conclusion:

This paper has followed the development of digital intimacy in Indian English popular fiction and demonstrated that the development of platforms has influenced both the form and the culture of the meaning of romance. Starting with SMS, where conciseness and expectation organised the emotional communication, the discourse has followed the pattern of blogs, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and finally Tik Tok and Reels. All the phases have made a certain mark in the history of storytelling, changing the tone of the conversations, the way the relationships can be seen and the expectations of young readers.

The primary conclusion is that intimacy is no longer in the privacy of immediate as it was in the example of SMS but aesthetically visible in Instagram and Reels. This change is reflected in fiction very precisely: what previously was dependent on words is now in most instances dependent on pictures, symbols and acting. In their novels, Ravinder Singh, Durjoy Datta and Nikita Singh demonstrate how online platforms enable the possibility of connecting and creating new vulnerabilities. Through them, the Indian popular fiction comes into being as something beyond entertainment as a cultural document that captures the fears and desires of a generation of people who are on an ongoing basis occupied by digital devices.

These works should be placed in the background of the digital literature around the world. Just like email novels and online diaries have affected the West in fiction, SMS, Facebook and Instagram has been used as a writing tool in Indian fiction. The parallels are generally a larger re-conceptualization of the form of literature of the digital era. It is possible to expand on this direction in future research with the help of immersive stories, AI-inspired stories and interactions platforms that already define a new kind of intimacy and self-expression. The Indian English fiction therefore is a very important place where we might know the history of popular romance and what the digital storytelling in the world will be.

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