

Cyber-Fiction: The Digital Revival of the Lost Art of Epistolary Novel

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Abstract:

Literature has had its fair share of ups and down throughout history. Even now, the literary world faces many threats and obstacles which makes its future rather uncertain. The developments in technology poses a threat to the traditional form of literature as there is an increasing penchant for cyber-literature. Much like the literary world, the epistolary form is a genre that has been facing numerous hindrances in its path over the ages. Despite the doubts and altercations amidst the writers, readers and critics, there are various digital literary revolutions underway that aim to bring harmony between the past, the present and the future of literature and technology. The paper is a case study on the digital rebirth of the epistolary format, the influence of social media in reviving the old formats and the public opinion regarding the new changes that are ongoing. Micro-fiction sites that excel in bridging the old with the new, such as Terribly Tiny Tales, are major influencers within the circles of the young adults. It seems that the new age literature is here to stay for a long time.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Commencing from the Stone Age, traversing through the Dark Ages and presently exploring the Modern Age, the world has transformed into a digitalized globe. The days of barter system and coffee house meetings are no longer retained. Similarly, the days of lengthy letters and long waits are a thing of a bygone era. Technology has been a gamechanger as its advancements has put an end to the waiting game of life with the inventions of telecommunication. Just like the real world, the literary sphere has also undergone some massive changes through the eons. Literature has always been a part of human civilization since time immemorial with the world always bearing witness to the constant love-hate relationship that science

and arts share. It is an age-old tug-of-war, which is still on, but it has also given rise to various trailblazing movements and avant-garde creations.

Human beings are known to be social creatures, with a very small percentage being the exceptions. The gregariousness of humans made them search for ways to remain connected to one another, no matter the distance. This had led to the founding of the postal system. Once upon a time, the arrival of a letter was as exciting as discovering a freshwater spring in a vast desert. From official letters to letters of love, the world has seen a myriad of letters being sent, received, opened, left unopened or undiscovered or lost along the way.

The art of letter writing eventually gave rise to a new genre of literature – the epistolary novel. It is widely believed that the epistolary novel made its

first appearance in the 15th century with *Prison of Love (Cárcel de amor)* (c.1485) by Diego de San Pedro. James Howell is considered to be the founder of the epistolary novel in English with *Familiar Letters* (1645-50). The new genre soon began to gain momentum through novels like *Love-Letters between a Nobleman and His Sister, Pamela, Clarissa, Dracula, Frankenstein, Carrie, The Color Purple* etc. The epistolary form went through many fluctuations. It was subjected to much ridicule during the onset and various parodies and satires were produced. But despite the obstacles, the epistolary form has persisted. Although handwritten letters are a thing of the past now, as the world has given way to the faster networks of the modern technology.

From every day gadgets to anomalous futuristic creations, the sphere of technology is striving forward by leaps and bounds. The fast-paced strides that technology has been making, has diminished the intimate and emotional aspect of letters. The changes in the practice of exchanging messages reflects in the genre of epistolary novel as well. Although letters are on the brink of extinction, technology is reviving it in different ways. The modern world is brisk on an everyday basis and time is of utmost importance. Easy and quick connectivity through electronic messaging platforms has popularized the art of writing letters once again, although in slightly varying styles and formats.

The paper traces how technology has become instrumental in reviving and reinventing the epistolary form of storytelling. The format of epistolary novel has undergone several changes as letter writing gave way to instant messaging. The efficiency of the messaging system has undoubtedly made communication easier. The impact of the machinated messages can be seen in the literary circles as the epistolary format of letters soon changed to e-mails, IMs, online chat forums etc. There is an already existing debate regarding whether the concoction of literature and technological advancements helps in the revival or degradation literature. The aspect of *cyber-*

epistolary is another layer that has been added to this decades-old inextricable argument. The technologically advanced generation is bringing in a new world order in literature as well.

II. THE ART OF LETTER WRITING AND THE RISE OF THE EPISTOLARY NOVEL

Letter writing is nothing short of an art. The process of writing a letter, formal or informal, requires a certain flair and way with words that takes much practice to attain. Letters, in the days gone by, were synonymous to love, relief, assurance and a mélange of other emotions. The beauty of hand written letters remains not just in the calligraphy or letter structure, but also in the stories they tell, the feelings they convey and the eventual spirits they raise in the receiver. Communication has always been an essential element in the lives of human beings since humans crave attention and interaction on a daily basis. While all the living beings in this world has a manner of communicating with their fellow creatures, the ability to truly converse in a proper language is a unique acquisition that seems to be possessed by the human race alone.

Letters made their first appearance in Mesopotamia in the form of certain symbols. The method was devised to relay information in the form of symbols. Letters were introduced later on and symbols got substituted with the alphabetic letters thus branding the system as letter writing. Initially concerned with confidential purposes, letters eventually became a commonly available system of communication. A powerful method of communication, letter writing also holds a sentimental side. Letters and letter writers leave behind captivating, soul-stirring and reliable evidences of close correspondence. Apart from the nostalgia that is sure to make an appearance, letters hold that personal and physical feel to it that trumps almost everything else.

The popularity of letter writing was at an all-time high during the 18th century. The age saw the emergence of the epistolary novel as a trending

genre. Prominent authors such as Joseph Addison, Richard Steele and Alexander Pope began to endorse and propound this form of self-expression. The collection of letters published in his lifetime, by the popular poet Alexander Pope, is said to have set the model for the future epistolary enthusiasts to follow. Although, just as there is two sides to a coin, the collections of letters were met with eager as well as skeptical reviews. While Frances Burney praised the attempt made by Pope, Samuel Johnson was on the skeptical side as he blamed Pope's collection to have been instrumental in shaping the English tradition of letter writing. In his work, *Life of Pope* (1781), Johnson wrote, "no transaction which offers stronger temptations to fallacy and sophistication than epistolary intercourse."

Despite the negative reviews that the epistolary etiquette seemed to be gathering, there was much influence on the authors of the age to pen new works in an innovative narrative form. Epistolary novel is one of the avenues of literature that was a phase which popped up and out during many time periods. The epistolary fiction can be seen as a branch that remained latent, but of late has seen a significant growth. Through *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684-87) by AphraBehn, epistolary fiction began its literary journey through the exploratory world that English literature is. With Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), the style of writing reached its peak of popularity. This sparked a kind of chain reaction as more epistolary novels began to come out such as *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African* (1766), *The Life and Opinions of TristramShandy*(1759-67), *Evelina*(1778), *Frankenstein* (1818) etc.

The fortunes of this genre though, has never been stable. There have been and there still are many attempts to innovate or recreate the epistolary form and also, to bring it back to its previous glory days. Just as the etiquette of letter writing is being forgotten, the epistolary fiction too seems to be heading to an obscure demise from the world of literature. The times of personal letters, letters

seeking help from the anonymous adviser in newspapers and magazines, complaint letters etc. are gone to be replaced with WhatsApp chats, emails and other forms of IMs.

III. THE PAST, THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

The world is quick to judge anything and everything to ever have existed. The current generation is now under scrutiny for having forgotten their roots and also, for being obsessed with the technological gizmos of the modern world. Yet, an interesting fact is often ignored by the daily critics. The trend that social media and technology has stirred up is no different from the popularity that letters and newspapers brought forth during their inception. The main difference is that the present world is much more technology-oriented than the past. Interest in technology and its development can be observed amidst all age groups. While the world has come a long way from the Dark Ages, the IMs are going through various phases through which it is evolving.

The past of IMs lies in emails and SMSes - the precursors or rather the first of their line. The world was instantly smitten by the forward technology that the system of emails signified. It was a leap in history when the first ever email and SMS were sent. The world has not looked back since. The internet has taken the entire world up by a storm with various online messaging platforms and content sharing sites. Even letters of love have become lost in the chaos of the digital revolution of the modern times. Instant messaging has made communication unimaginably easier, even for long-distance correspondence. From personal to the formal conversations, instant messaging apps are available for each and every occasion. The video call and group chat options have made these applications all the more marketable.

Instant messaging and email, both came to existence around the 1960s, although the term 'instant messaging' emerged in the 1990s. With the

human race eager to catch up to the new cutting-edge technology and also to have better communication alternatives, the popularity of these recent inventions skyrocketed within a short span of time. Emails and IMs have replaced even the pen pal practice as youngsters nowadays find friends from each and every corner in the world through their phone or computer screen. People find the postal form of communication or as it is known in today's scenario, "snail mail", to be quite tiresome and inconvenient. Yet, the attraction to technology is becoming deadly as it is now borderline addictive. While there are frequent news articles and online posts about the future prospects of the technological advancements in the communication sector, there are also many doubts being raised regarding the safety of one's mental and physical health.

IV. THE EPISTOLARY FORM IN THE DIGITAL AGE – CYBEREPISTOLARY WORKS

The epistolary novel is a genre that has been experiencing many ups and downs throughout the centuries. The twenty-first century seems to have found a way to keep the form alive. Many authors have started to write their works in the modern formats of emails, SMSes, instant messages, twitter feeds etc. These novels that are being written in these formats seem to be just as, if not more, engaging for the readers. The epistolary form of using handwritten letters are now scarcely used while writing novels. Novels like *e* (2000), *The Boy Next Door* (2002), *ttyl*(2004), *Where Rainbows End* (2004) etc. are some works written in the modern epistolary style that is, through emails, IMs etc. This style of writing the makes it much more appealing to the young readers as they find it be more relatable than letters. From novels such as *Where Rainbows End* to the new style of writing short-stories and micro-fiction tales, the cyber-epistolary form has broadened its horizons. In the online article, 'Instant Message Novels: The Prose of the Future?', the

author and professor Cynthia Leitich Smith has been quoted:

Instant message novels reflect the way of thinking of future readers, writers, and thinkers. "Integrating new technologies into youth literature is both a storytelling device and a way of doing what art always does, which is reflecting reality," says Smith. "Young adult authors can't ignore technological developments in communication when plotting or framing stories any more than our predecessors could ignore the invention of the telegraph or telephone."

Even though it was technology that brought an end to the letter writing tradition, it seems technology is also bringing the epistolary back to life. While new age epistolary novels are using the format of modern communication methods, the online platforms can be seen employing the old forms of letter writing and its different forms to write micro-tales, open letters, short stories etc. Story-telling is constantly evolving and the netizens have found various means to share or enjoy stories in innovative writing styles. The online content sharing sites have risen as the modern storytellers of the contemporary age. The revolution of cyber literature has transcended beyond the isolated zone of novels and expanded to include almost all forms of literature while also, creating new forms of literature. The rise of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter etc. as platforms for cyberliterature was path-breaking for many budding writers such as Rupi Kaur, who is now a world-renowned published poet. Social media's impact is undoubtedly large as people feel connected to a bigger world through these apps.

Terribly Tiny Tales is a prominent micro-fiction platform that has pages on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube etc. The writers featured in this page are mostly ordinary people who express their literary and emotional stories by writing them out in their

preferred format of writing. The Terribly Tiny Tales offers various formats of writing for instance, open letter, rant, chat stories, diary, short story, musing etc. for the users and readers. Micro-fiction through online platforms is playing a major role in keeping the literary spirit alive in an otherwise deteriorating generation. From short stories to poems and open letters, the online world has a mélange of choices to appease the hunger of literature lovers. The ease of access and availability make these platforms even more popular amidst the masses.

The Terribly Tiny Tales page features many writings in the format of open letters and chat stories. This approach towards story-telling can be seen as a modern take on epistolary form of story-telling. While the open letter format is a tribute towards the much beloved tradition of communication of the past, the chat stories format is a nod towards the present generation's means of communication. The open letter section of the page displays various letters written by readers or writers of the page, addressed to movie characters, famous celebrities or even an everyday person who goes unnoticed. The chat story format is another popular story-telling format that portrays everything from an everyday online conversation to a spooky horror story. It also makes it believable as it feels like prying into another person's private phone conversations. Perhaps these are the winning formulae of such platforms. The following excerpt is an open letter published in Terribly Tiny Tales, addressed to the character of Hassan from *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini.

Dear Hassan,

I see the sky in you. I find a thousand splendid suns in your sky lighting up my face with a smile every time you talk. So many kites of all colors making a million little rainbows. That's you for me, Hassan.

[open letter] (*Terribly Tiny Tales*,
Utsav Raj)

A survey was conducted to determine the status of the revival of the epistolary form as well as to estimate the popularity of the form. A Google form questionnaire was created containing thirteen questions regarding the art of letter writing, digital age trends, social media influence, cyber-literature etc. The age groups of under 18, 18 to 24 years old and 25 to 34 years old were taken into consideration to get the perspective of people who are not familiar with letters, individuals who are familiar with both letters and instant messaging and finally, people who are most familiar with the use of letters from their younger years. A total of 87 responses were recorded from individuals belonging to one of these age groups participating in the survey. Majority of the people who undertook the survey were not familiar with the epistolary novel. Around 40% of the respondents were unfamiliar with the form and around 58% were familiar with the particular format of novels. This fact alone depicts the waning state of the epistolary novel.

A percentage of around 28% individuals still partake in the old form of snail mail while almost 71% do not have any connection to the postal system of communication. Nevertheless, only 2% of the respondents found IMs as personal. Although, 53% of the people who underwent the survey chose to be on the fence between IMs and handwritten letters, 45% found letters to be a more personal form to communicate. Handwritten letters are perhaps favored for their intimate and tangible experience. 54% of the respondents admitted to finding the handwritten form to be more intimate due to the personal touch it offers and 30% found it to be the emotional experience it provided to be the most attractive quality. Fig.1 given below depicts the data regarding the affinity towards handwritten letters.

- The personal touch or the intimacy. - 47
- The tangibility (smell, feel, sight) - 7
- The emotional experience. - 26
- Other - 7

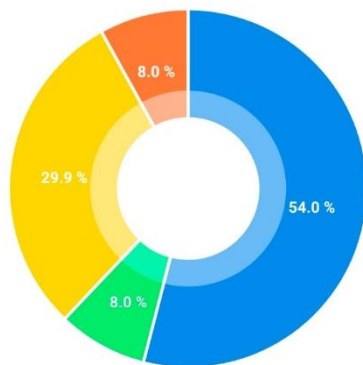


Fig. 1

The changing literary scenes can be observed through the number of our survey respondents who follow the Terribly Tiny Tales page through the various social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. 55% of the respondents follows the Terribly Tiny Tales page while the remaining do not. Of the 55%, 15% follows the page regularly, 8% on every other day of a week, 25% on the weekends and the remaining 52% occasionally. The most loved format on the platform is the short story format with 23.08% of the respondents finding it to be the most enjoyable format. The conversation or chat story format is the next most beloved format with 20.51% of the respondents giving their verdict in its favor and the open letter format is favored by 16.03% of the respondents. The other formats such as poem, gistic, rant, musing etc. have fewer supporters. The interesting factor is that the most attractive trait of the Terribly Tiny Tales platform, according to the survey respondents, is that they propound modern adaptations of the old formats of story-telling such as the chat stories, open letter etc. Relatable content, micro-fiction and time saving are the other motivating elements of the page and its content.

A majority of the respondents agree or strongly agree to the statement that letters have been replaced by IMs. As shown in Fig. 2 below, while 48.28% of the respondents agree to the statement, 28.89%

strongly agree to the same statement. Only 5.75% have disagreements to this statement and 1.15% strongly disagrees. 14.94% remain neutral towards the statement.

- Agree - 42
- Strongly agree - 26
- Disagree - 5
- Strongly disagree - 1
- Neutral - 13

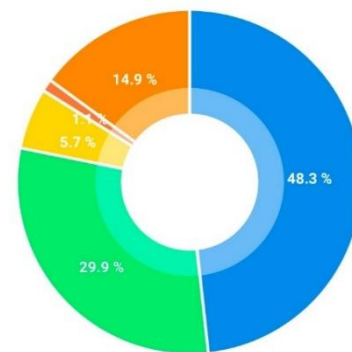


Fig. 2

On approaching a more literary perspective, 36.78% agrees that cyber-literature is reviving literature along with cyber-epistolary works reviving the epistolary form. 2.3% strongly agrees to the same statement with only 11.49% disagreeing and 4.6% strongly expressing disagreement. The majority of the respondents though, remain neutral with 44.83% taking the rigid stance. Fig. 3, as shown below, offers evidence to the above stated data.

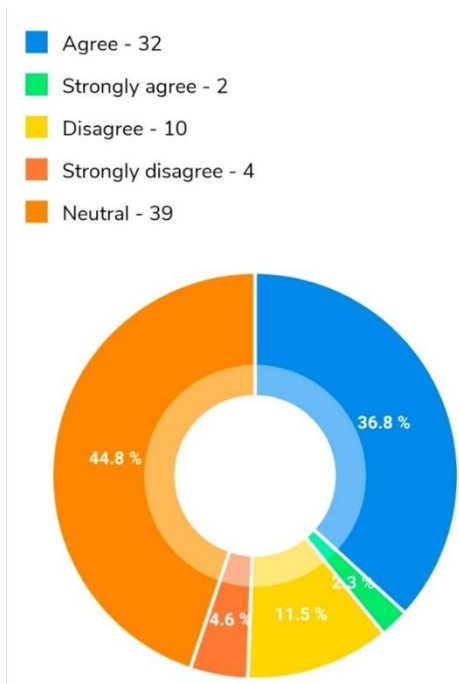


Fig. 3

V. CONCLUSION

The technological revolutions, that are raging in the digital age, are going to transform the world as we know it. Cyber-literature is one such genre that attains a wider spectrum of popularity in the present era as it offers the best of both the worlds – literature and technology. Results of the survey underscore this as the widely held preference amidst the respondents was both cyber-literature and paperback literature. As the world keeps on evolving with the technological advancements occurring every year, the literary world too has to adapt and raise itself to a new level. Although 52.87% prefers both the traditional and modern form of literature, 40.23% still prefers the enticing paperback literature.

The literary world is certainly evolving and the digitalization and adaptation of epistolary form in the new medium is a clear indication of this. Terribly Tiny Tales is just one of the platforms that propagates the epistolary format in a new avatar. The role of social media in keeping these old forms alive is undeniable and also praiseworthy. Even though there are noticeable changes in the new works, the essence remains the same as the words still hold the

same intensity of emotions and meaning. In a world that is obsessed with the movements of trans-fictionality and transmedia storytelling, literature still reigns as the supreme force. Mechanization or digitalization of the familiar, every day aspects of life keeps the populace more comfortable. It also revitalizes the virtually ancient systems of living and entertainment. From the survey that was conducted, it can be concluded that the epistolary form and the literary field in general, is on the mend. “While every ruler has to uncrown himself someday, literature is a czar who wouldn’t leave the throne.” (G, Amritha, et al. 1)

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APPENDIX

The following questions were used to conduct the epistolary etiquette survey:

- 1) What is your age?
 - Under 18
 - 18-24 years old
 - 25-34 years old
- 2) Do you know what is epistolary fiction?
 - Yes
 - No
- 3) Have you ever read an epistolary novel (novels written in the format of handwritten letters, emails etc.)?
 - Yes
 - No
- 4) Do you still write or receive personal letters in the handwritten form?
 - Yes
 - No
- 5) Do you think handwritten letters are more personal or the current system of IMs?
 - letters are more personal than IMs
 - Depends on the person or situation
 - Less personal than IMs
- 6) Do you follow Terribly Tiny Tales on the social media platforms?
 - Yes
 - No
- 7) How often do you go through the works in Terribly Tiny Tales?
 - Regularly
 - Sometimes in a week
 - On weekends
- 8) Which of the following formats in Terribly Tiny Tales do you love the most?
 - open letter
 - poem
 - gisticle
 - musing
 - rant
 - conversation
 - short story
- 9) What attracts you the most in a handwritten letter?
 - The personal touch
 - The tangibility
 - The emotional experience
 - Other
- 10) What attracts you the most in Terribly Tiny Tales and similar platforms?
 - Easy access to literature
 - Short fiction
 - Time saving
 - Relatability
 - Modern adaptations of old formats
- 11) Instant messages have replaced letters. Do you agree to this statement?
 - Agree
 - Strongly agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
- 12) Cyber-epistolary works or cyberliterature is reviving literature. Do you agree?
 - Agree
 - Strongly agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
- 13) Which do you prefer?
 - Cyberliterature
 - Paperback literature
 - Both