

REIMAGINING NARRATIVES: THE ROLE OF DIGITAL STORYTELLING IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Abstract

The paper explores how digital storytelling is reshaping narrative practices in contemporary English literature, with particular attention to the representation of diaspora experiences. Digital storytelling presents a collaboration of traditional narrative forms with digital technology, providing a new mode of expression. Literature has expanded the scope of storytelling beyond the printed page to include images, audio, video, and interactive elements, allowing stories to be told in more dynamic and immersive ways. How online platforms like websites, social media, podcasts, and interactive stories are helping writers reach wider audiences and create more immersive storytelling experiences.

These formats are of special significance for the diaspora communities, as they offer flexible and accessible platforms to express the notion of identity, memory, migration and cultural belonging. The study argues that digital storytelling is more than a technological shift, a meaningful cultural development that enables diverse voices, particularly those shaped by displacement and transnational experiences.

Keywords: *Digital storytelling, diaspora, identity, multimedia narratives, cultural memory, online narratives, transnational storytelling.*

Storytelling a tradition has always been essential in our culture, serving as a tool to transmit memories, experiences and identities across time and space. Evolving from tales narrated orally to written manuscripts, from novels to digital forms. The urge to tell stories has also progressed as has our modes of

communication. In the 21st century there has been a critical shift in the way stories are read and shared through various digital platforms combining image, sound and text. This convergence of narrative and technology is recapitulated in the phenomenon of digital storytelling, which integrates words, images and sounds to construct multi-layered narratives (Alexander 3). This new form uses digital media to narrate stories of culture, history and tradition therefore literature that was so far confined to print now finds a new life. Through multimedia elements like sound, animation, and hypertext, digital narratives offer a dynamic reimagining of what it means to 'tell a story' in a networked world.

Emerged in the 1990s as a creative tool digital storytelling is defined as "the modern expression of the ancient art of storytelling" (Lambert 1). With the accessibility of computer, camera and internet it became easier for an individual to create stories that can now be disseminated to the audience globally. According to N. Katherine Hayles, works such as Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (1995), a hypertext rewriting of *Frankenstein* through a feminist lens, and Judy Malloy's *Uncle Roger* (1986) illustrate how digital formats decentralize linear storytelling (Hayles 47). Digital storytelling in English literature apart from presenting digital innovation also provided new avenues for exploring identity, culture and history. It encouraged cross cultural experiences, empowered the marginalised and fostered interactive dialogues.

The shift from print to digital media might be sudden but the emergence was gradual and through a series of technological experiments, innovations in literature itself and social transformation. The traditional way of oral storytelling combined with literary narrative and digital media developed a new literary form of digital storytelling. It also represented how literature has adapted to changing technology at the same time maintaining its human essence. Even before the written words the primary form of transmitting culture and history was through the oral form. Ancient folk tales, myths, legends and epics like The Mahabharata and The Odyssey etc were performed orally, occasionally accompanied with music. Such performances

as per Bryan Alexander were multimedia experiences—combining voice, sound, and audience participation—just as digital storytelling does today (Alexander 5). Walter J. Ong, in his work *Orality and Literacy* (1982), explains that oral cultures depend on performance and community participation rather than textual permanence. Thus, where digital storytelling is technologically new its norms echo the age-old culture of oral storytelling.

With the invention of writing, the oral form gained structure and permanence. The Gutenberg press democratized access to printed narratives and thereafter with each shift, the sensory and social dimensions of storytelling were altered. With the introduction of digital form this so far linear progression takes a paradigmatic turn where the text, image, sound and interactivity all come together. As Janet Murray opines in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, “we are now entering an era of cyberdrama, in which narrative art makes use of the participatory affordances of the digital medium” (Murray 27). This phenomenon transforms the solitary act of reading into an interactive experience thus reintroducing the performative element of the narrative. Unlike in print where text is fixed and author has the sole control, digital narrative is inconstant and dynamic that may evolve by incorporating contribution from the audience or may even generate algorithms to bring about change in the storyline. This, however marks a shift from the modernist novel towards what Espen Aarseth terms as ergodic literature, where “nontrivial effort is required to traverse the text” (Aarseth 1). Where the reader becomes a user who sets in the text through participation and navigation.

Scholars like Janet Murray in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* and Henry Jenkins in *Convergence Culture* opine that digital storytelling transforms narrative form by participation—where readers are no longer passive but are active co-creators of meaning. The linear structure of print storytelling gives way to branching pathways, interactive choices, and multimodal expression. The history of digital storytelling goes back to the 1960-70s when use of computer was for literary and creative experiments. During this phase the focus was on

electronic literature texts written on computer rather than paper. In the 1980s came the interactive fiction text-based interaction that allowed one to put commands to influence the story. Works like *Adventure* (1976) and *Zork* (1980) marked a shift from passive to active reading agency. During the same time scholars namely George Landow and Jay David Bolter started to develop a system of linking textual pieces through digital connections. Bolter's work *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext and the History of writing* (1991) brought forth that the computer was transforming writing into a visual act not merely restricted to linguistic.

Another major outcome of the digital platform was the rise of hypertext fiction that later became one of the first recognised form of digital writing. Using hyperlinks to connect multiple fragments of the text made the readers choose their path through a narrative. According to Hayles the digital era introduces a nonlinear, networked, and participatory dimension that resonates with contemporary literary theories, including postmodernism, hypertext theory, and reader-response criticism (Hayles 21). Major example of the same is Michael Joyce's story titled *Afternoon* (1987) one of the initial works of hypertext fiction. It produces multiple readings possible as the reader navigates through various segments. It was his work that brought forth the idea that a reader becomes a co-author. It is the hypertext fiction that became the Avant -garde of the digital age by bringing together postmodern literary tradition with the computer and technology. N. Katherine Hayles in E his work *Electronic Literature* puts forth that these works 'interrogate the boundaries of authorship and reading' (25). They ask what a story could be and who had the power to tell it. Her notion of electronic literature offers a base for understanding digital storytelling as an expansion of the literary. She argues that 'the materiality of the medium' is central to meaning-making; digital narratives cannot be separated from their technological environments (Hayles 21).

Gérard Genette and Roland Barthes developed narratology based on structure of the narrative the same is reconfigured in the digital writing. The

plot that was so far linear now takes the form of hypertextuality where the narrative loops and branches through links. As Marie-Laure Ryan observes in *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2*, digital storytelling “challenges the classical paradigm of narrative sequence” by enabling multiple temporalities and perspectives (Ryan 45). Barthes who declared death of the author finds its relevance in digital context where the authors authority is divided between readers, collaborators and programmers. Henry Jenkins in his work *Convergence Culture* extends this by suggesting that ‘the consumer becomes a producer,’ participating in the construction of narrative worlds (Jenkins 131).

Gradually digital storytelling started becoming personal and accessible as opposed to hypertext fiction which was largely confined to artistic and academic circles. Media tools like digital camera, editing software etc now made it easier for ordinary people to make their own stories. Important figure here was Joe Lambert who established Center for Digital Storytelling in California in 1994. He developed a model for people to create ‘digital stories’ combining images, voiceovers and music. According to him, digital storytelling was ‘the modern expression of the ancient art of storytelling’ (Lambert 1). During the 1990 and 2000 digital storytelling sees a change from literary form to social participation. It became a tool for forming identity, empowering community, preserving culture and aligning itself closely with postcolonial, feminist and diasporic concerns.

With the expansion of the world wide web and social media digital storytelling also became a global phenomenon. The storytellers on gaining internet access began to share and publish and even collaborate on digital narratives, through websites, blogs and other multimedia platforms. People started publishing digital texts and hypermedia works on their personal websites. Online magazines also started becoming a major platform for publishing E.g., Iowa Review Web and Born Magazine. Then came the interactive era of mid 2000 where participatory platform like YouTube, Flickr etc made content creation easier. Inclusion of video blogs, online memoirs

interactive documentaries all became a part of digital storytelling. Projects like BBC Capture Wales and Silence Speaks are examples of the same. By 2010 the documentaries makers too started using interactive format allowing the reader to navigate through stories. E.g., Bear 71 (2012) and Hollow (2013). Thus, this period was the mainstreaming of digital storytelling which was no longer restricted to literary circles but also embedded in everyday life.

This paper is an attempt to place digital storytelling within literary studies focusing on two major aspects feminist and diasporic narrative. As digital storytelling has come to occupy a distinct position at the junction of technology, narration and identity. The feminist digital stories question patriarchal authors whereas diasporic digital stories on the other hand questions the notion of belonging and cultural displacement. When put together both of these theories present how digital storytelling has become a tool for forming an identity and literary innovation. Postcolonial theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak devised tools in order to understand digital storytelling. Bhabha's concept of the 'third space' describes the hybrid zone where cultural identities are negotiated (Bhabha 218). Digital storytelling functions as a third space with respect to diasporic literature where identities are created through digital media. Spivak's question "Can the subaltern speak?" (271) resonates in this context: digital storytelling becomes one medium through which the subaltern can indeed *speak*—reclaiming visibility through self-authored narratives.

Indian diaspora being as one of the diverse in the world has expressed its experiences through storytelling whether oral or written fiction. With the coming of the digital age this mode has found new form of articulation in digital storytelling. The convergence of narrative, identity and technology has reshaped how a diasporic individual negotiates with the sense of belonging and cultural continuation. In context of Indian diaspora, digital storytelling becomes both a continuation of diasporic self-representation and a changing medium that reconfigures literary expression. Displacement, nostalgia hybridity these are the words associated with diaspora and find continuous

mention in the works writers like Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee etc. Rushdie's view in his work *Imaginary Homeland* that the diasporic writer 'creates fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homeland' (10) focuses on the emotion of displacement. Digital storytelling approaches this idea by enabling diasporic individual in creating virtual homeland through online space, multimedia archives and digital narratives.

The question of identity and belonging in the Diasporic literature in print was explored through memory, language and generational conflict. In contrast to the digital storytelling which combines multi modal making use of sound, music, image and text to construct identity. As Avtar Brah in his work *Cartographies of Diaspora* (1996) opines that diaspora is not just about geographical displacement but also about 'the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of staying put' (182). This entanglement is made visible by digital media by connecting dispersed communities through their shared stories and digital archives. Therefore, various social media platforms have become a dependable narrative space for the second generation of Indians staying abroad who tell story to create an identity. In this way digital storytelling takes the diasporic literature beyond the print form where the diasporic individual articulates the self through audio visual and interactive forms.

Writers of the Indian diaspora have more than often reflected a sense of in betweenness, of being caught between 'home' and 'elsewhere'. Writers like V. S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie have portrayed migration as both a physical as well as psychological journey. Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival* evokes a deep yearning for roots while also questioning the very notion of home and belonging (Naipaul 45). Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands* similarly explores the fractured consciousness of the migrant who is both insider and outsider, suggesting that the homeland often survives as an imaginative construct rather than a physical location (Rushdie 10). In the works of these authors, though separated by the style of writing, share a common concern

with exile, memory, sense of loss and displacement all of these are the central idea that digital storytelling too continues to explore in its new media form. Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri later writers further carry the same exploration through the characters who undergo migration, loss of culture, creation of new identity, and problem of assimilation.

Mukherjee argued that the immigrant experience is one of “continual transformation” (*Imagining Homelands* 268). Her famous novel *Jasmine* shows the evolution of an Indian women who navigates through cultural shift in the foreign lands. Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake* shows the struggle between tradition and modernity faced by the second generation of the Indian American families living abroad. In fact Lahiri’s later decision to write in Italian shows the dislocation of language itself, something that parallels with digital storytelling – self invention and language hybridity.

With the innovations in technology communication was transformed and so did the art of storytelling. In the late twentieth century there was a rise in the internet leading to democratization in the narrative production. This came as a revolution for the Indian diaspora for they now were not dependent on the traditional or institutions to publish their works. The new generation of Indian abroad were mostly fluent in the English language and digital technology began to narrate their stories through blogs, shot films, podcasts and digital magazines. Such platforms offered them with a space to experiment hence their stories now became crisp, more visual, personal and instantly shareable.

The diasporic Indians now start to build virtual homes on YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp. It can be ascertained that Salman Rushdie’s idea of idea of “imaginary homelands” has now taken a digital turn. The second-generation Indians in the US or UK started reconnecting with their ancestral traditions through YouTube channels and cultural vlogs. Such digital narratives though were quite informal in nature, but they did serve as an expression of diasporic memory. They bridged the generations together by

allowing grandparents in India to share experiences on a common digital platform with their grandchildren abroad. Writer Jhumpa Lahiri's observation that "the process of transformation is, for the immigrant, unending" (Lahiri 72) is further extended by the digital platform by transforming written literature into interactive media.

Blogs like *Brown Girl Magazine* and podcasts like *Desi Women Diaspora* showcased the diversity of the Indian diaspora—from women entrepreneurs to students struggling with cultural identities in a distant land ("Desi Women Diaspora"). These new-age digital platforms offer a shift from the traditional hierarchy of authorship; for now, anyone with a phone and a tale to tell can become a narrator. As compared to the initial diasporic writings that focused on middle-class, English-speaking migrants, digital spaces have opened up for stories from South Indian workers in the Gulf, Tamilians working in Singapore, and truck drivers from Punjab living in Canada. The lived experiences of the migrants now find expression through facebook, community websites and Instagram pages in a mix of languages. This linguistic hybridity is what Homi Bhabha described as the "third space," where identity is neither pure nor fixed but is constantly negotiated (Hall 398). In the new digital world, this third space becomes a screen where different cultures meet and merge together.

A major feature of digital storytelling is that it involves participation from the readers. The traditional literature was linear, where the writer used to write, and the readers used to read the creation. Whereas with the digital age the reader is not a mere reader, rather he participates in the story through his comments, shares, and collaborations etc. Through web series like *Made in Heaven* and *Never Have I Ever* diasporic sensibilities are reflected globally. Facilitated by digital platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime these shows extend the Indian Diaspora narrative to millions across the world. As Amitav Ghosh writes in *The Shadow Lines*, the boundaries of nations and identities are often "imaginary," drawn by perception rather than geography (Ghosh 56).

The digital age facilitates these lines as these are drawn and redrawn through stories that move around across borders.

Digital storytelling is also seen as a preserver of culture for many second-generation migrants who grow up far from their native customs and traditions. Online projects such as *Desi Journal*, *South Asian Diaspora Voices* and *Indian Memory Project* document family stories, migration histories, and forgotten photographs, multimedia exhibits, and blogs that preserve the evolving identity of diaspora life (Sulistyarini). These blogs enable the diaspora to prepare a digital heritage that is portable and enduring. Language also plays a crucial role in digital storytelling as the creator blends in various languages. E.g., writing the captions in English whereas while speaking in the videos he may not restrict to one particular language. It is sort of cultural fluency for the digital creators– belonging to multiple worlds at the same time. This struggle with linguistic displacement is often seen in the characters of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri. Therefore, what postcolonial literature once dramatized is now celebrated by the digital storytellers, making hybridity the new normal. As Stuart Hall notes, diaspora identity is “a matter of becoming as well as being” (Hall 395). Digital storytelling captures this state of becoming fluid, inconstant and alive. It is interesting to note that the eminent writers are happily embracing the digital platforms. Salman Rushdie uses online and virtual readings to connect with his readers. Jhumpa Lahiri’s interviews and lectures are available on YouTube for the audience to reach far and beyond. This move shows a blend of literature and technology where a story doesn’t end with its publication, rather it lives through dialogues and interaction.

A heartening fact came to light during the pandemic of Covid 19 where the diasporic communities through social media shared their stories of survival, conducted fundraising programs and also connected with other families across the globe. Hashtags, blogs and vlogs took the forms of digital storytelling. Such an act of empathy changed the individual account into a

community narrative. This showed how storytelling outside of the traditional mode can deepen social ties and develop better cross-border understanding.

To conclude, therefore, digital storytelling in its essence is not doing away with traditional literature rather it offers an extension to it. A printed book and a digital post are part of the same continuum of expression that arises from the need to remember and to connect. The Indian diaspora resorting to digital media shows its adaptiveness, a willingness to take on a new identity in a totally different cultural scenario. As Mukherjee said, "The immigrant has no past. He is always inventing one" (*Imagining Homelands* 270). Through tweets, blogs, reels, and digital archives, these inventions are not just restricted to paper. Indian diasporic literature has seen a major transformation with the advent of digital storytelling. It has changed from who can tell a story, how it is told and on which platforms it is shared. The movement from page to pixel is not merely a technological shift, rather a cultural evolution. Just as traditional writers used prose to translate into art, digital creators use media and the internet to showcase their identity. Both forms use narrative to seek a sense of belonging, wherein digital storytelling is more inclusive and immediate. Ensuring that the voices of the Indian diaspora will continue to evolve, adapting to each new medium that technology offers. As long as there are screens, voices, and memories, the storytelling will go on.

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