

Interview

Literature and Language in the Age of Media

Mona Sinha in Conversation with Prof. Simi Malhotra

Simi Malhotra is Professor and Head, Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi. Her latest publications are the edited books *Food Culture Studies in India: Consumption, Representation and Mediation*, and *Inhabiting Cyberspace in India: Theory, Perspectives and Challenges*, both in 2021 from Springer; and co-authored books *Terrains of Consciousness: Multilogical Perspectives on Globalization* (2021) from the Würzburg University Press, Germany, and *Ocean as Method: Thinking with the Maritime* (2022) from Routledge.

Mona Sinha (MS): Welcome to Fortell, Prof. Malhotra. You are a scholar and a theoretician who has been sharply observant of critical pedagogies over the last three decades. You are well-known for having conducted and mentored research on popular and folk culture, varied media practices, and cyberspace. We are living in the age of digital and media explosion which surrounds each moment of our existence, and impacts each aspect of our lives. How do you see the medial turn in literature as well? And, is there now a new definition of literature?

Simi Malhotra (SM): What you describe as the 'medial turn in literature' has been with us for some time now. For a long time, departments of English were engaged with literature only in print. But as we know, print is also a 'medium'; print technology is only a few hundred years old, and literatures have existed prior to the advent of print technology, say for instance in its oral and performative forms (which are also 'media', by the way) and of course more recently in its digital avatar. Naturally, the departments of literature have to be responsive to all forms of literary articulation, be they oral or print or digital. Further,

the recent acceleration of digital cultures, not least because of the Covid pandemic, has alerted us all the more to these newer modes of literary and cultural articulations and we as academics need to respond to these forms even more urgently.

MS: “The medium is the message”, said Marshall McLuhan famously. Has the speed of the medium and especially social media relegated literature to a secondary status?

SM: I wouldn’t say that the “speed of the medium” or “social media” has relegated literature to a secondary status; what it has done however is to significantly alter the field. For instance, it has led to production of newer registers of literature and culture—say insta-poetry, electronic literature, generative art, etc., as also opened up newer modes of response to literature and culture—from generating digital archives to producing fan art/fan fiction, as also opened up altogether newer spaces of circulation of literature and culture—all of which involve us in different ways. For instance, our immersion into digital literature and culture is much more multisensorial today and consequently it produces its own particular affect/s. I suppose as intellectuals we need to respond to these shifts positively.

MS: One gets the sense that the consistent advancement in technology is constantly framing and re-framing the relationship between media and literature. What would you say about the necessity of finding new literary practices?

SM: Much has been written about the relationship between accelerationism and capitalism and its impact on micropolitics of bodies and mind, especially in relation to technology and media. I suppose in that sense speed or acceleration that you spoke of above, has certainly altered our sense of time/space, especially in relation to technology and media, as also in our experience of literature and culture today. The apps on our mobile phones or laptops do not get upgraded over months or weeks but within a day or two. All of this also impacts our own response to media and technology, if not to literature and culture, mediated by it. Not wanting to sound an alarmist and to speak only of pathologies of addiction to watching reels for instance, but to state that certainly our own responsiveness to long and short forms of literature/culture has changed for example, and is a symptom of this altered terrain of encountering literature/culture.

As to your second question, as I said in response to Question 2, new literary practices have already been found; the point however is for us as intellectuals to engage with them properly.

MS: In the age of the internet, the reader is not only a consumer of media-enabled literature but also its active producer. What is the role of the teacher and the classroom in enabling the student?

SM: Absolutely. One is no longer an end user but a content creator, be it through blogs, photographs, videos, etc., circulated on social media and other internet sites, and of course it has led to unleashing of creativity of another order, having got rid to a great extent of the deeply problematic gatekeeping and the resultant keeping out of many talented individuals that the earlier print media driven literary apparatus did, and altered our very definition of archives, museums, libraries, publishing, etc. And I suppose there is academic content too being generated, shared, and read/viewed digitally, more so after the pandemic. However, one needs to be alert to other debates in the field as well. For instance, debates about meta-data and data mining; needless to say, there are a number of very urgent ethical/political questions involved, not just about access or lack thereof and control, or privacy and misinformation, but also a number of issues, not least of which concerns our increased lack of freedoms today. I suppose as a teacher in a classroom one needs to take a wide view of the field here and accordingly engage in the classrooms.

MS: Flash-fiction, twitterature, insta-stories, etc. are staking a claim to be considered as literature. There are hardly any potential classics that are being produced. Do you think it is time to hail these as the new gods?

SM: I am not sure if we need to hail these as new gods or even pit them in competition with what we may consider as old gods. One may have had similar snide remarks to make about literature in print when print as a medium was first invented, and alarmists then would have lamented how there were hardly any 'potential classics' in the new-fangled corpus of the democratizing medium of print, and rued the displacement of the old classics held only in manuscript forms by the elite few. What is to be noted here is that there is certainly an opening up of the field of literature/culture in and through the digital media, however ephemeral it may seem. I am not sure if it is entirely at the cost of print media or whether it has opened up the space for hybrid modes of articulation and for print to adapt to the digital format or for that matter for oral and folk

forms to find another space for articulation in the digital space, but for sure electronic/digital articulations have produced their own aesthetic forms, practices, and experiences.

MS: In the present digital age, 'intermediality' or the transgression of boundaries between conventionally distinct media has become the key word. What has so far been Comparative Literature too seems to be moving towards the Cultural Studies space. How do you see the current University literature departments adjusting to this new scenario?

SM: I think for a long time the departments of literature have been responding to this cultural turn in the humanities by engaging with other media texts that have come to constitute the corpus of teaching and research in these departments, be it oral or folk forms, or performance texts, theatre, films, television texts, and increasingly digital texts, electronic literature, video games, etc. There has been a renaming of a number of departments of literature as departments of literature and culture, which documents this shift quite clearly. And, even where such renaming has not taken place, texts from other media like folklore, theatre, cinema, and visual art have been part of our literary curricula for more than half a century now.

MS: Is it time to reflect on consciously designing our literature and language courses in such a way that they foster media competence in the students, be it in the area of film or music or the visual arts? Do you think that under the present structure of NEP 2020 this can be possible since it gives due space to experiential learning?

SM: There is no doubt that if departments of literature are increasingly engaging with texts from other media, they need to augment their methodologies and pedagogical tools suitably, to make students adept in reading practices which suit these media, be it reading visual texts, or film studies, game studies, performance studies, folkloristics, culture studies etc. to be able to respond appropriately to the diversity of the corpus at hand. I am sure there are creative ways of designing courses under the NEP 2020 to not just train students in these methods and tools but to also make them experience art, literature and culture joyfully. A move towards a Nietzschean Joyful Wisdom, rather than only an augmentation of media competence in terms of analytical skills!

MS: It has been just about 600 years of print culture, and in this period literature has become synonymous with the written word

alone. However, from a historical and semiotic point of view, genres of literature such as the lyric poem, the epic, drama, and other oral forms were originally transmitted through the performative medium using many technical and institutional media. Do you feel that teachers of literature departments need to stress more upon the performativity of literature which tends to get side-lined?

SM: I think I have spoken about this above and I wholeheartedly agree with your proposition.

MS: Conversely, do you feel that if it hadn't been for the written script and print culture, students of literature would have been deprived of access to the vast range of genres that have been incorporated into the field of literary studies?

SM: This too. Though one must not conflate writing with print. Writing has been around for 5,000 years or so, while print, as you have yourself pointed out, for less than 600 years. There are different kinds of literacies and discourse competences. Print is certainly an important register which makes a wide corpus of texts available to us, and not being able to access written material would certainly deplete us in ways unimaginable. However, there are many other kinds of literacies, which too need to be brought to play in departments of literature, be they oral, performative, audio-visual, digital, etc. and one needs to augment print literacy with visual literacy, digital literacy, media literacy.

MS: Has the introduction of (inter)mediality into literary studies led to the problem of over-burdening of this space? Aren't we stretching the capabilities of both the scholars and the students which are naturally limited?

SM: I do not think so at all. In fact, not engaging, will make us impoverished. Moreover, students live, what you call, "intermedial" lives in any case, and engaging with different media can hardly be seen as burdensome. Their lived world—the world in which they autonomously participate in culture and enjoy it too—is already multimedial; in fact, it is pulling them out of their lived cultural world, and holding them captive in the very limited world of print, that would be burdensome for them. Since you quoted McLuhan above, his book *Understanding Media* is for the right reasons called *Extensions of Man*.

MS: Your final thoughts on literature and language in the age of media.

SM: As I have said repeatedly in response to your previous questions, literature and language have always been implicated with the media. The technologies and the media may have changed—from oral techniques of public speaking, to performative techniques of stagecraft, to scriptural techniques of writing, to the mechanical technology of print, to the electronic audio-visual technology of television and cinema, to the digital media of today—but all ages have been the ‘age of media’, and there has never been an era when literature and language have not been mediated. Each succeeding technology and medium have further expanded and enriched the scope of literature, while posing problems too (like writing and print introduced the hierarchies of access to literature, because of its dependence on literacy, which has always been limited, with class-caste-gender-race restrictions on who were allowed to be literate in the first place), and the digital media also have their own share of issues and problems that one needs to be wary of. But, as one’s final thoughts, one can only see a further expansion and enrichment of literature with the emergence of digital media, with the restrictive medium of print being slowly phased out and the more accessible new media becoming the primary modes of articulation of the ‘literary’.

MS: Very rightly articulated. You are so very right in referring to the politics of gate-keeping and elitism in literature. Indeed, one can see how the digital media has blurred the divide between the educated elite and the barely literate, leading to new articulations of the ‘literary’.

Thank you, Prof. Malhotra for sharing your thoughts with such clarity and lucidity. It has been a pleasure talking to you.