

## The Trigger of Literary Appreciation: Frenzy or Analysis?

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### Abstract

The perception of the relevance and role of art and literature in contemporary society has been undergoing rapid changes over the years. The technological advances have recast the nature and scope of life on this planet in a surprisingly brief period of time. Alongside develops a new culture of literary/art appreciation that is more vicarious than participatory. An array of new possibilities offered by the virtual world has added to this visible shift in the contemporary approaches to the appreciation of art and literature.

The common assumption is that literature springs from spontaneous, imaginative talent strokes that naturally demand reflection and analysis to extract its essence leading to occult delight. However, the sights and sounds emanating from the sites of performances and the scenes of entertainment make us think otherwise. There are instances that reiterate the role of the 'epidemic frenzy' chiefly perpetuated by the visual media and internet social network groups. When entertainment becomes visualised and vicarious, 'frenzy' develops from the impulsive outbursts of the mind submerged in virtual reality. There is entertainment even in those events and emotions that are capable of generating excitement. There used to be a time when art and literature offered soothing tranquillity to troubled minds, but now it is the frenzied mind that sets the norms of excellence in addition to its blatant indulgence in meanness and crudity.

### Introduction

The appreciation of literature or any other art form has been undergoing changes not in a way that the literary/art critics would like to predict by their ways of analysis. The self-styled interpreters and value judges of literature or art who have their own theories to hold onto believe that literary appreciation is equivalent to extracting aesthetic lessons from texts or art forms based on the established practices prescribed by the theorists. The presupposition is that the change in the collective consciousness of people prompted by the contemporary socio-cultural trends and the entertainment industry induced tastes that determine the norms by which they appreciate art or literature. Thus, the recognition and understanding of content-bearing media, literary devices, critical commentaries and value judgements by the art critics are believed to precede literary appreciation. However, the certain contemporary responses to works of art/literature show a reversal of the trends that have been in vogue for years.

The commonplace belief is that literature springs spontaneously and its appreciation presupposes critical thinking and analysis. But the current trends appear to make this order reverse. The premeditated attempts by the writers sensing the mood of the readers/spectators and the style of social life result in creations; public response becomes spontaneous and mass-mediated. This reversal of the situation has created ripples in the entertainment industry that churns out many weird iconoclastic spectacles. These instances reiterate the role of 'frenzy' that spreads like epidemics through internet and social network groups. It is this 'frenzy' that has made all the difference in the contemporary appreciation of art or literature. Frenzy is generated by the sight and sounds generated externally with their meanings playing insignificant roles. If at all they play any role, they remain superficial and unchallenging leaving little room for analysis or interpretation. Hence they remain passing fancies whose impact vanes even before the moment another such spectacle hits the scene.

Criticism based literary appreciation is nothing but an academic exercise which is losing its aura in non academic circles because of its foregrounding on abstract theories and ideologies. Perhaps, it is more correct to say that criticism gives way to appreciation where the norms do not show any allegiance to ideologies. The appreciation of literature cannot be equated with the love for literature that is construed as an objective of literature courses in education. This idealised version of the love for literature essentially needs the support of theories and ideologies. However, the drifting, fast moving mind of the present-day technophile generation does not leave much room for the theories and ideologies to capture its imagination; rather it views them as impediments out to disrupt their comfort zones. In the torrent of its movement, it tramples upon the authority of theories and ideologies that no longer form the basis of literary appreciation today.

The phenomenological function of understanding reality and the epistemological function of gaining knowledge should ideally go hand in hand to make appreciation a holistic, meaningful process. This involves the abstraction of meaning from the work of art along with enjoyment the intrinsic pleasure gained out of reflection and/or analysis. This meaning is the proper source or stimulus that leads to appreciation and entertainment. The singularity of human experience which may either be universal or particular would finally lead the appreciator to a lofty idea, mood, or attitude. In this process, reflection and analysis play a crucial role in that they keep the appreciator from getting carried away by the sensational but superficial reverberations of frenzied emotions. Such tremulous emotions cannot sustain tranquil reflections leading to understanding and appreciation.

### **Author Intent and Reader Response**

The much debated question in literary appreciation is whether it is the author intent or reader response that determines the outcome of appreciation. While author intent remains obscure and immeasurable reader response is scattered and multidirectional. Many of us tend to disregard the classicist idea of the author/creator as the constructor of meaning and favour the view that it is the reader who 'breathes life into the work' (Barthes 1975). However, you cannot expect the same kind of reaction and collaboration (Umberto Eco 1979) in one kind of reader, let alone expect this to happen in different readers belonging to a particular social group. The phenomenological position that the perceiver constructs meaning is comprehensible, but how each perceiver's response turns into a uniform code to develop the 'frenzy' that characterises the present day

network induced merriment. This never falls short of literary appreciation though it has much to do with the working of mob psychology. The network groups propagating their objects of social entertainments through social media are akin to mob-moralists taking law into their hands to give vent to their outrage at the violation of their perceived social norms.

The moral policing actions of the mob-moralists erupting across the length and breadth of our country could also be seen as the manipulation of the psychological bend of humans that turns into orchestrated social actions. It is the same spirit that superimposes the frenzied propagation of vicarious media entertainment and the sadistic pleasures derived from the plight of the victims who have been surreptitiously harassed in many a social sphere. This kind of celebration of mob psychology is also a recurrent feature of stage shows, reality shows, social networking and instantaneous appreciation of art or literature. An examination of the popular culture reveals that the entertainment industry controls structures of knowledge, values, and power, and consequently, collective identities of social groups are largely shaped by the popular visual culture manifested in, and propagated through, the visual media. Hence the mutual influence exercised by literature and culture cannot be understood if we ignore the diverse ways in which people become acculturated with the sensationalism recreated by virtual reality

The modes of thinking and the styles of action in the post-structuralist world are characterised by the absence of permanence and consistency with regard to theories and ideologies. In fact, the forces that influence them are the drifting elements and passing phenomena of the virtual world. The young minds are receptive to the drifting images projected by the virtual world that offer no permanence but vicarious entertainment that can occasionally supplement their perception of success. Hence any drifting artefact letting out some mirage of novelty attracts attention and appreciation. The sweeping popularity of the 'kolaveri song' in Tamil and the (in) famous Santhosh Pandit Malayalam film that frenzied the crowds amply prove this point. The former has already hit the B-Schools as a fit subject of case study exemplifying 'viral marketing' whereas the latter with all its crudeness has become 'infamously popular' with the youngsters thronging cinemas to give vent to their base instincts and get pleasure out of it.

This shows that appreciation or the enjoyment of art or literature need not always come as a response to artistic fineness or the critical acclaim that follows it. Sensibilities in human heart are not stimulated in an organised predictable manner. People should feel like sharing what they think will entertain others too with all its weird content and form. The input of any kind goes into the framework of mind is viewed in accordance with the perception of values its holder possesses. The 'kolaveri' song emanates the language of the youngster who has been moulded to fit into the globalised world by modern education. Besides, he carries with him a language that is characteristically hybridized by the global exposure the modern education has provided with him. It also represents a break from all the conventions that were considered to be desirable to sustain the artistic qualities of a song. This kind of minimalism is the hallmark of modern youngsters who are out to formulate a pliable, multifunctional language form to serve the purpose of creating instant, vicarious means of entertainment.

The public response to literature and other forms of art often defies the parameters set by literary or art critics. At times it surpasses all limits of predictable response negating the interventions of perceivable theories and ideological standpoints that brand or classify artists and writers. Overturning the formalist posit that art is a spontaneous, self-determining and permanent

human activity, many of the new generation writers try to gauge and anticipate the public response to make novel but transitory creations that catch the attention of ‘viral marketers’. This kind of stock response promotion is in contrast with the conventional writers who aim to ‘disrupt stock responses and generate awareness to restructure our ordinary perceptions of reality’ (Hawkes 2001).

Designing a new technophile reality to replace the existing one seems to be the hallmark of contemporary life style that is characterised by the desire to carnivalize life with voyeuristic pleasures and technogenic comforts. In replacing the jaded vision that the conventional art forms offer, difference takes precedence over quality. Latest trends in literary appreciation reveal that human actions, however weird they are, have the potential to replace the jaded visions by disrupting the stock responses and generating the ‘frenzy’ to heighten the desire for novel ways of appreciation. In virtual reality spaces, people appreciate artistic creations when they offer some amount of sensationalism that is in tune with their current ways of life. Literary works too are no exceptions as they adapt themselves to fit into the virtual space by the use of virtually engaging elements. These include the use of rapidly moving visual environments providing little or no time for the viewers to pause and think of their artistic quality and cultural appropriateness. The content, tone and tenor of such rapid action scenes are enough to carry the viewers to momentary but intense levels of frenzy that gets propagated instantly by the extension of virtual culture.

The generation of people floating on the images of the virtual world cannot entertain the idea of ‘noble heroes and absolute truth’ as virtual reality is closer to the base elements and mundane ways of life. Our extreme indulgence in virtual reality destroys the faith in reality and shows us that it is possible to create as many realities as we want without the backing up of any ideology. What really entertains us in the virtual world is not that which gives us intrinsic artistic gratification but things that contribute to our carnivalistic pleasures leading to some amount of material gains. These things explain the virtual celebrations of the network groups as well as the motivated actions of mob-moralists, the self-styled guardians of social morality.

The people move on rapidly leaving behind the objects that entertain them. They never pause to have a close look, nor do they reflect on the objects that captured their attention. How can then their appreciation exhibit deep levels of thinking prompted by theories and ideologies? Thus, appreciation become highly relative to individual sensitivity and attitudinal responses that can be cultivated by viral marketing or mobilisation of public opinion by the manipulation of social media. Literary appreciation, therefore, would be based on impressions rather than on facts empirically or aesthetically obtained from the work of art. The post-modern reader/spectator keeps contemporary literature away from its formative function of helping man to perfect his rational essence by refining or reforming his sensibilities. His mode of appreciation inverts its stature to bury its intrinsic value under the floating façade of vicarious entertainment. Then, the observable from of the exposition on the nature of appreciation is the absence of a basis formed out of reflection and analysis without which criticism and evaluation of literature would be untenable and irrelevant.

### **Social Reality in Virtual Space**

Literary appreciation, in the Marxist view, cannot come without recognition of social reality. If social reality is in conflict with virtual reality, the theory of dialectical materialism might partially explain the changes that occur in literary appreciation even though virtual reality

cannot fully fit into the description of a social force. However, it is clear that the dialectical relationship between social reality and virtual reality creates ample space to accommodate the elements of 'carnival' (Bakhtin 1981). The conflict arises when social reality becomes subservient to virtual reality in that the elements of carnival take precedence over the ideological discourses where subjugation of rational consciousness develops into frenzy driven modes of vicarious entertainment. This is where the 'kolaveri song' or the 'Pandit film' thrives to create a space for itself. Thus, any artefact, however weird it appears catches the imagination of the 'frenzied mob' that gets carried away by the 'difference' it offers.

Bakhtin (1981) could predict the metamorphosis of the public spirit of the 'carnival' into the 'carnavalesque' in which the spirit of carnival gets rendered into literary/art forms. In his view, the essence of carnivalesque laughter is in its liberating and regenerating power. The present-day portrayal of comic violence, mob fury, blurring expletives, exaggeration, frenzy, sarcasm and the public's amoral posturing on sensitive social issues reflect the emergence of carnivalesque literature in a visually charged virtual world. This exemplifies not only the liberation of the human spirit that transcends all societal sanctions but also reflects the exhilarations unleashed by the possibilities offered by the virtual world. Thus, carnivalesque literature seems to take on the oppressive and debilitating forms of thought and paves the way for the imagination to bloom and grow subsequently into 'frenzy' that defies all logic in the celebration of the creation of a virtual fiefdom by the technophiles. Its liberating potential assumes new dimensions in which callousness, impiety and immunity to ridicule clear the ground for weird but bold ideas to enter into the sphere of public discourse.

The paradigm of carnival encompasses some phenomena of popular culture which show the base characteristics of grotesque realism, vulgar language, and celebration of the lower elements, masquerading, clowning and sensationalism. The festive ambivalent laughter, low comedy, and the suspension of hierarchal structures are also capable of bringing oppositions together. However, the manifestations of popular culture cannot be viewed in isolation from the social system. Thus, the discourse of carnival should essentially accommodate the possibility of perceiving popular culture as expressions of carnivalesque elements. The significance of the carnivalized aspects of popular culture is that they tend to subvert established social order and cultivate new instant popular tastes exploiting the angularities of the virtual culture. Bakhtin (2003) views carnivalization as an 'artistic form of visualization' the elements of which permeate into the social fabric prompted by the predominant virtual culture. Such forms of visualization allow us to recast popular culture incorporating new modes of literary/art appreciation and entertainment within a socio-cultural environment crafted by the emerging carnivalesque system.

Before the dominance of the virtual world and its massive influence on human affairs, different cultures, societies and individuals perceived the world in different ways and these perceptions affected the way they appreciated literature/art forms. People made choices about the way they viewed the world. Then the rightness of decisions, actions and ideas about the world were relative not to some inherent correct order for the world ordained somehow in nature, but to theories, positions or ideas institutionally constructed (Birch 1989: 25). In such a world order, there were levels of appropriateness relative to particular ideas and social systems that constrained and controlled emotions to keep them below the level of frenzy.

As the virtual world expanded its boundaries to encompass social life and provide it with a global character, the old world order began to get destabilized. In addition to opening up novel

possibilities, it has exposed the world almost threadbare to deny people the pleasure of excitement resulting from discoveries. It has outrageously gone to the extent of laying bare even the private lives of people to trigger frenzy, a rather cheap and superficial substitute for the thrill discoveries offer. There are no more unheard melodies, unseen beauties, unravelled mysteries, unexplored territories and forbidden fruits. Inquisitiveness has given way to familiarity breeding contempt; jaded experiences have resulted in morbidity. Anything that fails to produce fun and frolic is systematically subverted. Insensitivity reigns supreme in a hedonistic 'virtual world' where discretion and courtesy are replaced by frenzied manifestations of fun and frolic. All this points to the revival of 'pastiche', a haphazard combination of ingredients that was once deemed unfit for literature. Literature mirrors contemporary life; so does this neo-pastiche the frenzied rumblings of the virtual world.

### **Imagination and Occurrence**

Literature and art have always been making use of the infinite possibilities of imagination to make their impact unique and scintillating. What we see through the mind's eye today will be the things that we use or experience in our real life tomorrow. The virtual media offer greater possibilities for the expression and realisation of imagination however wild or far-fetched it is. The dwindling gap between the expression of imagination and its realisation in real life creates in the viewers and readers a feeling that what they experience in art and literature and what occurs in real life are inseparable. Thus, the proverbial dichotomy between imagination and reality vanishes to make fictional creations appear real for the readers or spectators. Even the wildest figments of imagination do not baffle them, nor do they consider them unrealisable. Instead, they take them as things happening around them, perhaps passing without touching them but sufficiently comical and reproducible to drive them to frenzy.

There used to be a time when fiction and virtual reality created alternate realities not merely to entertain us but to help us understand the world around us by drawing comparisons and forming insights. Often they seemed poles apart from our real lives even though their didactic value remained intact and their appeal grew in vigour as the viewers and readers approached them analytically. Analysis is ordinarily based on accepted literary theories or a set of principles by which one can understand the nature of a literary form. The literary theory is derived from a liberal reading of representative works in a given form. The reading should result in an understanding of what makes each form succeed as a literary structure engaged in the concretization of an otherwise hazy and illusionary experience. This kind of approach often resulted in pleasure derived from acts of discovery and academic achievement; ultimately, works of art were looked upon as a means of perfecting the real world by superimposing on it a new world order crafted on certain idealistic or ideological platforms.

Virtual reality has now become one of the most exciting and frenzy-generating tool because of its strong hold on popular imagination. The instances of imagination merge with reality not to make them appear real but to garnish real life events with flavours acting as stimulants to generate frenzy. The cutting edge of the current technology reiterates the predominance of viewing over other means of access to literature and art. Such instant viewing experience along with interactive user faces and conspicuous designs tends to initiate a world order where people have neither the time nor patience to entertain themselves by close reading or close watching followed by reflection and analysis. Current technology has not only snapped

them from the privileges of past knowledge but also bewildered them with enormous amount of information and entertainment accessible online and by means of visual media. Such involuntary break with the past enables them to assimilate new cultures of appreciation and entertainment more easily.

One of the most glowing characteristics of virtual systems is their celebration of the present. Ideally speaking, art and literature, especially those appearing in print or on canvass, cannot exist independent of history and culture. Consequently their appreciation banks heavily on an understanding of history and culture. But the virtual world creates a kind of experience that constantly reminds us that we are in the present and our responses are propelled by the sights and sounds reflecting the qualities of contemporary life style. The means by which presence is being constructed is corporeal as well as digital. The spectators not only feast their eyes on the drifting visuals but also identify themselves with the sights and sounds the visuals generate. In this celebration of virtual identity, cultural jingoism and linguistic chauvinism give way to profligacy and hedonism, no matter what means of expression pushes up the frenzied outburst of fickle minds.

### **Conclusion**

The mass-mediated appreciation of art and literature has reduced its level and quality just as the visual culture has desensitised the human sensibilities to delve on sensationalism and vicariousness for entertainment. The cultural authority of the present-day virtual reality lies in its power to usurp traditional modes of entertainment and its ability to extend the power of visual culture to the ambience of educational practices. This results in the domination of the pleasures of the image over the intellectual demands of reflection, analysis and critical inquiry. Subsequently, it reduces human perceptions and sensibilities to the levels of consumerism which the modern entertainment media cashes in on. Such minimalistic tendencies in the media apparatus shatter cultural homogeneity and historical awareness that sustain the feelings of cultural identity, social solidarity and nationalism. It incessantly works to create a commercially saturated cultural climate in which the elements of mobocracy spread their tentacles to destabilize culturally transmitted systems of entertainment. This kind of demolition and recasting of cultural systems give rise to the elements generating frenzy with the active support of the emerging consumerist culture which creates an environment conducive to nurturing the elements of sensationalism and the resultant frenzy.

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