

Authors as Performers in the Digital Era: The Self-Branding of R Rajasree, Amish Tripathi and J K Rowling

Ravikrishnan T¹, Dr. Vinod Kumar², Dr. Rakhi Raghavan³

¹Research Scholar in English – (Part time) Bharathidasan University / Assistant Professor of English,
Pazhassi Raja N.S.S. College, Mattanur, Kannur, Kerala 670702

²Professor and Head of the Dept. of English, Bharathidasan University, Trichy

³Associate Professor and Head of the Dept. of English Pazhassi Raja N.S.S College, Mattanur, Kannur
Kerala 670702

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the changing role of authors in the present era of social media. It tries to explain how three authors R Rajasree, Amish Tripathi, and J K Rowling, belonging to different geographical and cultural backgrounds, mediate with social media. It can be said that in today's world authors have a lot of exposure and liberty than the authors in the earlier period and they use the technology to interact, influence, and market themselves and their works to the targeted groups. They are not any more isolated writers, but are the ones who always want to communicate with the expected readers on a daily basis. For that they use websites, social media like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, X (former Twitter), etc. The authors are self-branding themselves and becoming performers in the liberalised world of opportunities. The capitalist publishers have found a huge market in the publishing industry and open up new venues for selling using the authors. This article attempts to depict the ways these three writers adopt to address and use the technological world in their creative writing. In this context, one can substitute the word "pen" in the proverb "pen is mightier than the sword," with the word "virtual world" and rephrase it as "virtual world is mightier than the sword" as it drives public opinion and movements, and becomes a cohesive force. The three authors, one from the regional and another from the national level, and one from the Western world, are taken for discussion as they have been unique or have gone to an exponential level, in exploring the possibilities of the digital space.

Keywords: Authors/performers, digital space, digital narratives, production, publication and marketing.

INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE REVIEW

The digital world is rapidly developing and entering all fields of human achievements. What will be the future of writing? With the proliferation of speech-to-text, will we forget writing in the near future? With the advent of translation software, will the human role in translation be rendered obsolete? Will AI take over or shrink human thinking capabilities and write text for humans? What is the role of a writer in the digital world? How do authors explore the digital space and respond to it? Are they more than just authors but performers as well? How they manipulate the digital space in the changed world is an interesting area of enquiry.

Miram J Johnson, in his chapter, "Identity and Performance of Authorship," writes about how the authors use the online spaces and the evolving landscape of authorship in the digital age, using different approaches and methods explains the construction of digital personas. The study also addresses the issue of digital divide between authors and readers and stresses the point of authenticity in the digital world.

Audrey Laing's article, "Authors Using Social Media: Layers of Identity and the Online Author Community," offers an analysis of the impact of 'professional social-media engagement upon authors' (254). The social media dissolves the public and private identities of the authors to a great extent and takes the relationship between author and reader is more solidified in the digital space communication. The authors overcome the

limitations of traditional marketing with the involvement in the digital space. The online media spaces create a strong author reader community.

In the paper “Digital Literature and New Media: Emergence of Literature in Digital Formats and Its Impact on Storytelling,” Gupta et al. argue that digital literature reshapes narrative structures and redefines reader engagement, incorporating, interactive fiction, hypertext narratives, and multimedia-rich storytelling experiences’ (3872) and the digital platforms democratize authorship.

Nishant Shah’s article, “What Is a Digital Author? Generative AI, Concealment, and Notes for the Emergent Moment,” says that the emergence of AI made a paradigmatic shift from Search to Prediction in the field of digital information. The narratives of AI shape new forms of digital authorship with certain concerns to be addressed. This article attempts to depict the ways the writers adopt to address and use the technological world in their creative writing.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this article is a comparative analysis of different authors in the use of social media and how they do explore the digital space to market themselves and their products.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Amish Tripathi, in an interview given to Gayathri Anuradha for *The News Minute*, points out the importance of marketing and the changing role of authors in the modern times as: “Marketing is always important. It is a fallacy to think a good book sells itself. Anything in the modern world needs to be marketed to sell, because this is such a hyper-communicative world. But in marketing it is not always about the quantum of money that you have. It is about how good the ideas are. You have to have good marketing and a good product” (Anuradha). Amish Tripathi was pointing to the importance of marketing in a hyper-communicative world; otherwise, there is every chance that a product may not sell itself. In the age of social media, it is not just a literary product that needs to be marketed, but the author is also branded and marketed. The most prominent space in communication in modern times is the digital space. What is the role of a writer in the digital world? How does he/she explore the digital space and respond to it? The means of production, publication, and marketing have drastically changed since ancient times and have also become personal in the digital world. To have a closer look, the three authors from the regional and national and the western world, i.e., R Rajasree, Amish Tripathi, and J K Rowling, respectively, are taken for analysis as they have been unique or have gone to an exponential level, in exploring the possibilities of the digital space to connect with their expected readers and followers.

It was Roland Barthes who, in 1967, came up with the concept of “the death of the author” to give importance to the individual reader’s interpretation of a work, rather than relying on the intentions and background of the author to get the actual/definite meaning of the work. He said, “Once the Author is gone, the claim to ‘decipher’ a text becomes quite useless. To give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification, to close the writing ... the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author” (Barthes 147-48). So the author-centered reading of a work, based on the author’s identity, experiences and biases, was criticized by Barthes. The readers were expected to exclude and distance themselves from the author to arrive at their own understanding of the text. A text is thought to be self-sufficient and its meaning is evolved from the readers as they interact with it. Though Barthes’ concept gives importance to the various interpretative possibilities and the meanings that may arise through different readers’ experiences, what one notices in the 21st century scenario is the literal emergence of the authors who are ever willing to interact with their fan followers, by marketing themselves, as performers, branding themselves through various channels of communication, both physically and digitally.

The perception of an author/artist as someone who sits idle in his/her private space, but involves in his/her their creative world, has changed dramatically in the modern scenario. An author is not someone who is distanced from the readers. Author in present times is not a person who tries to communicate with the expected readers through their work only, but rather is one who tries to interact with readers through various modes of

communication channels. The authors are ever ready to interact with them through various social media platforms, through interviews, blogs, and the like. It is the evolution of digital space that made this possible.

The concept of literature, its production, means of publication, and fields of publication over the period of time have moved from oral narratives to manuscript writing, to typing, printing, and to digital forms of publication. Digital publishing involves creating and distributing content in digital formats, such as eBooks, articles, or online magazines, while digital marketing focuses on promoting products and services using digital channels.

Authors participate in lit fests, give interviews, post comments, create celebrity functions, use digital media, social media accounts etc., to make their presence ever felt in the literary market. In this regard, R Rajasree, an Indian writer in Malayalam, Amish Tripathi, an Indian writer in English, and J K Rowling, a Western writer in English seem to have an upper hand in comparison with their contemporaries in their literature. The various social media platforms like YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, Websites, Podcasts, emails, etc., are used by the modern authors/artists for publication and facilitating the promotion of their work of art. Use of these spaces of the digital world can enhance the visibility, engagement, and wider reach of one's content or business in the online and offline world.

The Indian writer in Malayalam R Rajasree's novel entitled *Kalyaniyum Daakshaanyiyum Ennu Peraaya Randu Sthreekalute Kata*, published in 2019, was originally presented, though not completely, as a series of Facebook posts. Whether one can call it marketing is doubtful. She may have thought of writing only on social media. But that was an innovative method from a Malayalam woman writer. Upon gaining popularity on social media, "Mathrubhumi Books," a leading publisher in Malayalam, decided to publish it in print form. The popularity of the yet-to-be-published novel was such that the readers went to the Mathruboomi bookstores to grab a pre-publication copy of it even before its official release. The novel has gone into its 17th edition and is still counting. The book is translated into English by J Devika with the title *The Story of Two Women Kalyani and Dakshayani*. This serialized posting on Facebook by a woman author of her novel is probably the first of its kind in Malayalam literature. This method is more common in the field of poems and non-fiction works such as essays and reviews. Such works made public through social media have later been brought into print form by the authors or some publishers. This also points to the fact that hard copy reading of the material as a passion and fashion has not died out of human priorities.

The practice of serialised publication of a likely novel on a digital platform like Facebook might be a new experience, but theoretically it is not something new; it is an old practice in a new format. Before the coming of television, the Malayalee common readers were after the weekly print publications, where they could read the serialized publications of their favorite authors. Irrespective of these magazines' ability to hook up people in its readership, and its service in making reading a common habit among the women, some critics in Kerala disdainfully called these magazines "Ma Varikakal," meaning poor quality weekly magazines, due to its so called low standard but popular literary content. But as time passed, with the widespread of television, the dominance of these magazines dwindled and the soap operas began to appear on the televisions. As the channels increased, so did the number of serials too. Now the modern trend is the OTT Apps and their content. All this seems to have a regressive impact on traditional reading at large. It has its consequences on human faculties. There are different realms of understanding reality: of real-life experience (lived experience), of reading (includes books and e-reading materials), and of multimedia (digital life). In the world of real life, humans understand the world as they live the life; and there are no retakes. But in the world of books and digital life, during its writing/production, creators have scopes to edit and correct, and to do the take and the retake; and while reading, viewing, and experiencing it, individuals can pause and think, and understand it. Here, watching and reading seem almost synonymous activities. But the reality is otherwise. In the reading process, readers are create a world of imaginative reality in the form of mental images, using the organic device called the brain; it helps in developing personal thinking and communication skills. Whereas, while viewing in the digital world spectators are at the receiving end, even though the digital world appeals to all their senses, it does not demand that much intellectual activity as in reading.

Consider reading the novel *The Godfather* by Mario Puzo and its brilliant adaptation into a film by Francis Ford Coppola in 1972. Notwithstanding the film being good, it would appeal more to those who have not read

the novel, because the reading of *The Godfather* creates an imaginative world of the novel in the mind based on the imaginative skill of the reader. While reading, the intellectual and the imaginative faculties get improved. Here comes the advantage of printed version, as reading creates different worlds for multiple readers based on their imaginative skills. Whereas to a person who has not read the novel but watched the film, it would appeal differently; of course, he would enjoy it, but he is enjoying the world someone has created. But this also serves a different purpose as the saying goes, “something is better than nothing.” In the translation of a work, a similar debate prevails. The question of whether the translated work is equal to the original work or not.

What makes the use of social media different in the case of publishing a work is based on its flexible format and the freedom it offers. It does not require a publisher or money for publishing. It is in a digital format. Anyone interested in publishing any piece of text, article, image, or film can do it at his/her will. Here comes the advantage of digital space over print capitalism. In ancient times, there were patrons in every field, and the authors wrote a few manuscripts of the material and most often dedicated all of them to their patrons. Later, with the coming of print, there was a revolution in reading. The printing revolutionised the spread of reading. Grammar and spelling of language became more established. The authorship came to the authors and they got freed from the patrons, and gradually the patrons were replaced by the publishers. The royalty of the print material came into existence. Printing technology ruled over the world of documentation from the 15th to the 20th century. With the spread of industrialisation and mobility, the common people got more free time and they started to spend time on learning and reading. Apart from that, it is the technology (in the form of household gadgets) that liberated women from the four walls of their kitchens/houses and provided scope for learning and made them self-reliant. But the coming of the digital era has sidelined hitherto practised methods in printing and publishing, and the digital technology has even produced some of the gadgets that men used and carried along with them like the old Kodak film strip camera, typewriter, watch, recording systems, etc., for example. Now an author does not require wealth for digital publication on social media, though there are digital and print publishers with strong influence in the world of literature of all sorts. In this context, in the proverb “pen is mightier than the sword,” one can add a rephrase it as “virtual world is mightier than the sword” as it drives public opinion and movements, and becomes a cohesive force. Almost every person is now influenced by the digital world, knowingly or unknowingly; digital publication and marketing open the doors of digital literature to the common man.

While R Rajasree is an Indian author who writes in Malayalam and uses social media ingeniously to reach her readers and followers and uses it as a medium to promote her work, there is Amish Tripathi at the national level, who has brilliantly used the various platforms to promote his works. Probably, there is none like him to achieve this kind of celebrity status; he is one of the most famous mythological writers of India, who has a great fan following in India and abroad. He is the one who has gone into innovative ways of communicating with his expected readers as well as marketing his works. He is the author of *The Shiva Trilogy (The Immortals of Meluha, The Secret of the Nagas, and The Oath of the Vayuputras)* and *Ram Chandra Series (Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku, Sita: Warrior of Mithila, Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta and Lanka)*. Author Amish Tripathi’s acknowledgements in the first book of the *Shiva Trilogy, The Immortals of Meluha*, are themselves indicative of the collective effort of book production, publication, and marketing. He says, “An outstanding group of people have come together to make this book possible” (xi). His thanks goes to his wife, family, his first publisher, his agent Anju Bahri, present publishers Westland Ltd., editors, cover designer, trailer film makers, musician Taufiq Quersh, Mohan Vijayan for publicity work, website makers, to the readers and lastly, but not the least, to lord Shiva for the story being his blessing. It is said that Amish Tripathi was rejected by 20 publishers before his first book on the *Shiva Trilogy* was published. Amish wanted to be a historian and later entered the finance and marketing field before becoming a full-time author. The experience he acquired in the marketing and product management field became handy later in selling books. As a marketing strategy, Amish persuaded bookstore owners to give away printed sample copies of the first book for free, uploaded a trailer film on YouTube, and gave interviews. To promote his second book, Amish screened a high-quality video trailer at multiplexes before the start of high-budget movies. This is probably the first of its kind that the trailer of a yet-to-be-published book is screened on YouTube and Multiplexes. Not only that, through podcasts, Facebook, Instagram and X (formerly Twitter), Amish Tripathi kept posting videos and interacting with his readers. He also organized the ceremonial launch of his book by celebrities like Amitabh Bachan and Akshay

Kumar. For the final book of the Shiva trilogy, *The Oath of the Vayuputras*, an original soundtrack was made, and it is the first ever for a book series, and popular artists like Taufiq Qureshi, Sonu Nigam, and Palash Sen were part of it. This is something no other author has ventured before. Showing a trailer in theatres, as that of a mega-budget film, for the promotion of a book was a new concept. The result of the *Shiva Trilogy* made him the fastest-selling author in India. More than 3.5 million copies of books were sold and are still counting. He has been called "India's first literary popstar." "Amish is India's Tolkien," opines *Business Standard*. He has also produced non-fiction books that are also sold like hot cakes. As an author-cum- businessman who has used digital media to promote his works, with interviews on various channels, audio launches, YouTube and theatre trailers, posts and videos on Facebook and Twitter (X), and celebrity performances, his reader can only guess what his next promotional move would be. But even a tweet by him would be enough for the fans to be in line to grab the next work of the author.

J K Rowling, the author of the *Harry Potter Series*, has an upper hand in the world of marketing and using digital media to promote her work when compared to any other author. She is the most successful writer, having a fan following of more than seven million people. Her brand value extends beyond her works to movies, theme parks, merchandise, and many more. Her name has become synonymous with the world of magic. She very well understood the importance of curating her public persona by engaging audiences with interviews and digital events and selling her brand value. For that, she uses platforms like Twitter, Instagram, etc., to interact with the readers in real time. Readers follow her with such enthusiasm so that every tweet, blog post or event contributes to Rowling's brand identity. She launched a website known as *Pottermore*, where her fans could read new stories and engage in quizzes. This performative aspect of her brand name made her one among the most popular writers. Authors like R Rajasree, Amish Tripathi and J K Rowling prove that in the digital era, it is not just the quality of the book that matters, but the performative aspect of the authors that matters more; by constantly connecting themselves with the readers and by the use of social media, interactive platforms, and global marketing strategies, they can become cultural icons.

CONCLUSION

The modern day author is very much a performer of all sorts. Here, only three authors have been taken; an Indian writer in Malayalam, an Indian writer in English, and an English writer, to justify the point that modern day authors are branding and selling themselves to become cultural icons. Others are no exception. Authors brand themselves, engage with fans through social media, give interviews, involve in promotions, and are part of celebrity functions, either directly or indirectly, to promote and sell their works. Some authors are powerful enough to keep/decide the royalties of their works and have control over the pricing and selling of their works. Irrespective of the regional, national or international level, the publishers get them signed for promotion of their books through various platforms, even before the contract of publication is signed.

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