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Trolls and Memes: Erasure of the Boundaries in Modern Literature

The question of what is literature has been asked by the various literary schools in the past and this quest continues even today, as is evident from the topic chosen for this seminar '*Popular Fiction/Literary Canon: Vanishing Boundaries*'.

Over the years, from the period of the New Critics and Formalists to Structuralists to today's Post-modernists, literature has expanded its boundaries to include classics, myths, legends, manuscripts, folklore, poems, prose, songs, hymns, fiction and fantasy; to information, documents, advertisements, brochures, leaflets, pamphlets, circulars, flyers, handouts, handbills, mailshots, bulletins, blurb, notices, facts, junk mail, anime, graphic novels; to movies, film songs, news, quiz and TV programs to even architecture, sculptures and paintings. Today, we see that this list of what comes under literature is endless because from expanding its borders, literature has grown itself to disintegrate and erase its borders.

This paper focuses on how trolls and memes, that are part of today's everyday life, can also be given the status of literature. This would be done by comparing the features/ characteristics of trolls and memes with the so-called characteristic features that define literature such as aesthetics in the literal sense, social relevance, literary devices, inter

textuality, etc. This paper attempts to view the growth of trolls and memes as part of Urban legend/folklore as a growing genre of literature.

What is treated as literature depends on the time period and its related political, social, religious, cultural and economical contexts. It also depends on the leisure time people have to enjoy and appreciate literature. For example, Charles Dickens wrote for an audience who had a lot of free time and hence his run-on, connected sentences running at lengths like paragraphs were appreciated as literature by the people who never got tired of reading and re-reading them to grasp their meaning. Later, as the span of leisure time decreased, people started accepting and appreciating the abridged versions of Dickens while continuing to give them the status of literature. Today, with people having very limited time to read whole books, they depend on reviews and summaries and if that is the case, it suggests that length of the text is not a determining factor for literature, and hence the trolls and memes that convey a lot of meanings with limited words can also be considered as literature.

Another distinguishing feature of literature is that it is a representation or reflection of the emotions, feelings and sentiments of the author/creator. Each troll or meme is also a reflection or a religious, social, cultural or political view point of its creator. And hence, like literature, they also give different perspectives on the same subject or issue. This potential for multiple interpretations is yet another characteristic that both conventional literature as well as trolls and memes share. Connected to this aspect is the most prominent feature of literature, its ability to give power to subaltern voices by bringing them to the centre from the margins. Trolls and memes also provide a platform for the repressed voices. Thus, if subaltern literature is significant in the literary canon for raising the repressed voices, questioning norms and breaking stereotypes, trolls and memes are equally relevant as they too perform these same functions.

Literature always had in the past and continue to have in the present an economic value associated with, in the forms of patronships, sponsorships, publishing value, sales value and revenues. Trolls and memes also have an economical value associated with them depending on the number of clicks, views and shares on social media.

Creativity and imagination are two terms intrinsically connected to literature as advocated by renowned writers like TS Eliot in his book “”. The in-depth knowledge of the writer on the subject matter and his/her skill need to be connected with creativity and imagination to give rise to a piece of literature, as is true in the case of developing trolls and memes. The New Critics like Cleanth Brooks and Russian Formalists like Schlovsky talked at length of the importance of literary devices in rendering the ‘literariness’ to literature. Such literary devices like puns, similes, metaphors, irony, paradox, ambiguity and hyperbole are used extensively by troll and meme makers incorporating their in-depth knowledge in the subject matter, wit and skills.

One easiest but significant definition of literature is that it is some kind of communication, and this holds true for trolls and memes too. Like literature, trolls and memes are also thought provoking and invoke multiple emotions like humour, awe, wonder, relaxation etc. They also make the viewer easily relate/connect with them. Aesthetics and social relevance are two other dimensions of literature which are perfectly echoed in trolls and memes. The makers are particular about creating socially relevant and socially responsible trolls and memes because just like literature, they also have the power to influence and to even manipulate the responses and reactions of the public. A good example for this would be the political parties or politically inclined troll makers. Even Kerala Police has an official troll team of police officers to influence public through social media.

Roland Barthes, the prominent Structuralist pointed out that there is nothing original in literature and there is no original text. Everything is a mix and match from a limited resource.

We know that a text does not consist of a line of words, releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author God), but is a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, no one of which is original: the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture... the writer can only imitate a gesture forever anterior, never original; his only power is to combine the different kinds of writing, to oppose some by others....(Barthes, 4)

This concept brings out the prominence of inter-textuality, a prime focus of literature that looks at how a text draws itself from other texts and theories. This feature also mirrors in trolls and memes as they draw references from movies, songs, books, paintings, advertisements, etc. and this also connects back to the point that the troll and meme makers must have in-depth knowledge in various fields to make witty, thought provoking, creative trolls and memes.

The book *Living Folklore, An Introduction to the Study of People and Their Traditions* by Martha C. Sims and Martine Stephens says, "Pop culture is usually created or produced in large quantities for large audiences and is usually shared or transmitted through mass media such as television, radio, magazines, and the Internet". When pop culture is widely identified and accepted as urban folklore, trolls and memes that satisfy the demands of this definition can also be included as urban folklore and thus as literature. Moreover, Alan Dundes, a prominent folklorist identifies that folklore includes legends, folktales, jokes, proverbs, riddles, curses, insults, retorts, taunts, teases, toasts and even practical jokes.

Though there continues to be an effort to define literature, we realize that it is a tedious task and today's scenario makes it all the more an impossible task. Literature has no boundary and even if one exists, today it is gradually expanding, disintegrating and vanishing. One possible definition of literature, though not an all-encompassing one, is to say that literature is anything and everything around us with an aesthetic appeal and a (re)presentation of creativity, imagination, fantasy, reality, ideas, facts and dreams that are transmitted and conveyed using meaningful words or images. And if this definition holds good for literature, it is equally good for trolls and memes too and hence we may say that trolls and memes are today's literature or at least a part of today's literature.

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