

HINDI CREATIVE WRITING AND SOCIAL MEDIA: NEW HORIZONS IN THE HINDI LITERARY FIELD?*

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Abstract

In questo articolo si discute l'interazione fra la scrittura creativa hindi e i social media, analizzando alcune opere di Manīṣā Kulśreṣṭha, Candan Pāṇḍey, Prabhāt Raṃjan e Kuṇāl Siṃh. Si tratta di nomi fra i più apprezzati della cosiddetta “nuova generazione” di scrittori e scrittrici hindi. Questo gruppo è stato oggetto di un dibattito critico nel mondo letterario hindi, nel corso del quale alcuni dei critici letterari più potenti si sono schierati non solo contro le giovani scrittrici e scrittori, ma anche contro le nuove pubblicazioni, tacciate di essere meramente delle operazioni commerciali.

Si mostrerà come alcune scrittrici e scrittori hindi usano strumenti di pubblicazione consolidati, ma al contempo sfruttano Internet al fine di migliorare la loro visibilità. La tesi principale è che nuovi stili espressivi tipici dei social media si stanno aprendo uno spazio all'interno della scrittura creativa hindi.

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In this paper, I will discuss the interaction between Hindi creative writing and social media by looking at the work of Manīṣā Kulśreṣṭha, Candan Pāṇḍey, Prabhāt Raṃjan, and Kuṇāl Siṃh. They are some of the most appraised authors in the so-called “new generation” of Hindi writers—a group that has been the object of a critical debate in the Hindi literary world. Over the course of that debate, some of the most established and powerful literary critics have positioned themselves not only against young writers but also against the new publications that they consider to have been created merely for the market.¹ I will show how some Hindi writers make use of established publishing tools while harnessing the Internet in order to enhance their visibility in the literary field; I also argue that new styles of expression that are typical of social media are carving space for themselves within Hindi creative writing.

Before beginning to analyze their work, I will introduce the four young writers who stand at the center of this paper. The eldest, Manīṣā Kulśreṣṭha (1967, Jodhpur), is a freelance writer who has published four collections of short stories - *Baunā hotī parchāī* (*A Dwarf Shadow*),

¹ I studied this topic in 2010 thanks to a research grant by Uppsala Universitet. Since 2009 a plethora of special issues of literary magazines have been devoted to subjects such as “Hindi new writing”, “Hindi young writers” or “Hindi youth creativity”. At the beginning many writers and critics of the older generations lamented that young writers follow the market (Kāśīnāth Siṃh), look after publicity and sponsors (Paṅkaj Biṣṭ) or write in genres that are bound to get lost in the internet (Jñānraṃjan); others thought that the new generation lacks creativity (Viśvanāth Tripāthī) and that they are just imitating the masters of the old generation (Vijay Bahādur Siṃh). All in all, the most terrible flaw seemed to be that they are over good ol’ time realism. As for Nāmvar Siṃh, his dismissal of young writers such as Ajay Nāvāriyā as “*lauṃḍe*” (snotty kids) and the mocking comments on the 2009 Navalekhan’ special issue of «Haṃs» at the 24th Haṃs Conference on “Young creativity and moral values” (2009) remain in the records, even if later on he relented and now seems to support new media for literature.

Kaṭhputliyām (Puppets), *Kuch bhī to rūmānī nahīm* (Anything but Romantic), *Gandharva-gāthā* (The Godly Singer Ballad) - and a novel, *Śigāf* (Split, 2010). She received the Candradev Śarmā award from the Rājasthān Sāhitya Akādmī in 1989. She has pioneered Hindi writing on the Internet: *Inṭarneṭ aur hindī* (Internet and Hindi) is the title of a column she wrote for some years on «Nayā Jñānoday» and for a decade she has been editing the popular web magazine «Hindinest», perhaps the first ever online magazine in Hindi.

The next, Candan Pāṇḍey (1982, Paṭkhaulī, Uttar Pradesh), was awarded the Bhāratīya Jñānpīṭh prize for young writers in 2007 and has published two short story collections: *Bhūlnā* (Forgetfulness) and *Ísqfareb* (Love Deceit). He has been active on Facebook since 2009 and edits a blog named «Nayī bāt» (Something New). In 2010 he started the blog «Indian Farmer», which seems to have been immediately aborted; he now works for a corporation and lives in Bangalore.

The third, Prabhāt Raṃjan (1970, Sītāmaṛhī, Bihar), is a fiction writer, translator, essayist, and editor who teaches Hindi at Zakir Husain Evening College, Delhi University. His short story *Jānkīpul* (Jānkī's Bridge) won him the Sahārā Samay Kathā Cayan (2004). In 2007 he was awarded the Premcand Samman. He has published three short story collections: *Jānkīpul*, *Bolero Klāṣ* (Bolero Class), and *Koṭhagoī* (Tales from the Brothel). He is also very active on the Internet through his blog «Jankipul».

The last, Kuṇāl Siṃh (1980, Kolkata), is a translator and editor for Bhāratīya Jñānpīṭh. The short story *Sānatan bābū kā dāmpatya* ("Sānatan Bābū's Happy Married Life") was awarded the Bhāratīya Jñānpīṭh Puraskār and the Kathā Puraskār in 2005. In 2010 he published his first novel, *Ādigrām upākhyān* (The Chronicles of Adigram). He

edits a column on cinema, *Sinemā, nayā sinemā* (*Cinema, New Cinema*), for the literary monthly «Nayā Jñānoday», and also has a cinephile blog, «Kunal Talkies».

Writing and new media

New media forged new linguistic expressions that have begun to appear in literary texts. For example, in Kuṇāl Siṃh's story *Romiyo Jūliyaṭ aur aṃdherā* ("Romeo, Juliet and Darkness")², in a passage that portrays lovers exchanging SMS messages, the dialogue appears as it would look on the phone screen, with Hindi written in Latin characters:

«सपने के नीले डिजिटल स्क्रीन पर किसी हड़बड़ी में टाइप किया हुआ तुम्हारा

पहला एसएमएस—sukh!

-dhutt!

-dhutt kya? it's me-manoj. I got my cel. plz save my nmbr.

-o ye 2m ho?

-aur koun? aur kitne ashīq hain bhai 2mhare?

-ek akele 2m mere romeo.

-main 2mhara romeo & tm meri Juliet.

-hum dono romeo & Juliet.

-aur sukhl!

-dhutt!»³

Communication through different media requires different registers of language. Code-switching and

² First published in Kuṇāl Siṃh (2008), *Sanātan bābū kā dāmpatya*, Bhārtīya Jñānpīṭh, Dillī, pp. 90-160. It was reprinted in the series «Ek kitāb ek kahānī» by Harper Collins Publishers.

³ Kuṇāl Siṃh (2008), p. 128.

«Typed on the blue digital screen of the dream, somewhat confused, your first SMS— happiness!/- damn! /- damn wht? / it's me-manoj. i got my cel. plz save my nmbr./-o ye it's u?/-wh else? hw many lovers u hv?/-only 1, u my romeo/-me ur romeo u my juliet/-we romeo & juliet/-and happiness/-damn!». All English translations from Hindi in the article are by A. Consolaro.

Hinglish are very common in the spoken language, but they become even more evident on the written page, even more so because the mixing of scripts further emphasizes the complex linguistic interplay. The following conversation begins *via* SMS and is recorded in shorthand Latin script. Then it continues on the phone, where it shifts to *devanāgarī*; in code-switching, even full English sentences are written in *devanāgarī*.

«-r u ok babu? umid hai gauripur me sb thik hoga.
-ya, evri thing is right hear. guahati ka kya news?
-thik nhi. mtlb ye sb kya ho rha hai 2m jante hi ho.
kitna galat hai na sbkuch! pata nhi kya hone wala hai.
-dont wry. sb thik hoga pahle ki tarah. satdey ko
milta hu 2mse. i m mising u badly. teri bahut yad ati
hai moti.

-हलो?

-हाँ अनुभा । यह मैं हूँ ।... कैसी हो?

-तुम कैसे हो मनु? अभी तुम्हारा एसएमएस ही पढ रही थी ।...मुझे भी तुम बहुत याद अते हो मनु । काश तुम अभी मेरे पास होते । मैं तुम्हें छिपा लेती अपने भीतर कहीं ।

-कहाँ? ... अपने भीतर कहाँ?

-चुप, केवल शरारत । बदमाश कहीं के!

-आई लव यू अनु ।

-आई लव यू टू मनु ।

-सैट डे को तुम्हें ढेर सारा प्यार करूँगा । पक्का ।

-माहौल ठीक हो तभी आना बाबू । अच्छा?।

-अच्छा ।

-अब रखूँ मनोज?

-टेक केयर बाइ

-बाई ।»⁴

The use of mixed language is common to other young writers. The short story *Sitī pablik skūl, Vārāṇasī* (“City Public School, Varanasi”) by Candan Pāṇḍey⁵ is written in a typical Hinglish student lingo:

«फिर तो उस वंडेफुल गर्ल ने जो किया उससे यह पता चल गया कि क्यों सिर्फ उसे ही मेरी डार्लिंग होना चाहिये । प्रेयर से लौटते ही या बीच किसी पीरियड में निकी उन काडर्स को कुछ इस ऊँचाई से यों फाड़ती थी कि जिसने भी किया है, देख लो । एक दिन लंच टाइम में उसने तरुण को बताया, सम बास्टर्ड्स आरे हेयर इन अवर क्लास । एट लास्ट हमने संघिता की हेल्प लेनी चाही ।»⁶

These examples display certain stylistic strategies that these young Hindi writers have adopted so as to construct texts that are not only literary refined but are also

⁴ Ibid., p. 143.

«-r u ok, darling? I hope evrithng is ok in gauripur /-ya, evri thing is right hear (sic!). whats up in guahati?/-no good. i mean u know what's going on. it's totally wrong, na! I don't know what's going to happen./-dont wry. evrithing will be as before. satday meet u. i m mising u badly (sic!). miss u dear./Hallo?/Hi Anubha. It's me.. how are you?/How are you Manu? I was just reading your SMS ... I too am missing you badly Manu. Wish you were here with me. I would hide you somewhere inside me/Where? ... where inside you?/Oh, shut up, you only say silliness, what a rascal!/I love you Anu!/I love you too, Manu/Sat'day I'll give you a whole lotta loving, I promise!/Come only if the situation is ok, darling!/Ok!/Shall I hang up?/Take care, bye!/Bye!». Underlined parts are in English in the original text.

⁵ Pulished in Candan Pāṇḍey (2009), *Bhūlnā*, Bhāratīya Jñānpīṭh, Nayī Dillī, pp. 137-152. The story has also been reprinted in *Isqfareb*, published by Penguin India.

⁶ Candan Pāṇḍey (2009), pp. 137-138.

«Then what did this wonderful girl do, she got to know that only she was to be my darling. But Niki just coming back from prayer or during some period would tear those cards in such a way that whoever had written them would notice. One day at lunch time she said to Taruṇ “Some bastards are here in our class”. At last I had to get help from Saṃghitā».

attractive to young readers. The difficulty that at least part of the establishment has experienced with regard to accepting such innovations is evident in the debate that has taken place in major Hindi literary magazines for the past five years. Transcriptions of colloquial language and slang may well appeal to younger readers, but these innovations are hardly appreciated by more “purist” readers and literary critics who rely on a notion of literary language as a standardized entity.

Writing and social network

Blogs allow writers to bypass publishing houses and/or promote works online, yet blogger-authors are not entirely absent from the mainstream publishing market. I will now turn to Kuṇāl Siṃh’s literary blog «Bhāṣāsetu» (*Linguistic bridge*), which he co-edits with Suśīl Kānti.⁷ The first post (01/17/2010) introduces the blog as a portal through which to share Hindi and Bengali literature. The linguistic register is very informal; it signals the blogger’s will to create an informal link with the reader; the implication is that sharing literature leads to mutual enrichment. Posts try to involve readers directly, for example, through announcing future publications to them, presenting them with an exclusive publication or narrating to them anecdotes from the blogger’s personal life.

There is often a strategy of customer retention: Kuṇāl Siṃh promises that he will post at regular intervals, thus creating a habitual appointment with his readers that points to their becoming regular readers of the blog. Hints about future publications and anticipations of unpublished passages similarly encourage readers to

⁷ I am grateful to my student Chiara Garombo for allowing me to share some findings of the BA dissertation she conducted under my supervision.

revisit the blog.⁸ Direct interaction is visible in the comments sections of blog posts, where readers can express their opinions freely: in the case of posts on foreign publications, readers judge the quality of translation; if the blog material emerges from new Indian authors, readers might judge its style. Comments are succinct and informal, miles away from the lengthy critical articles of literary magazines.

The stylistic register changes according to the context of the blog post: in introductions to posts, it is more formal, while in answers to readers' comments, it is very colloquial. Kuṇāl Siṃh often writes in Latin script rather than in *devanāgarī* and he uses very informal language that is rich in English terms. Here is an example:

«shukriya dosto,
jaldi hi ek aur ansh ka anuvaad post karne wala hun.aap sab dosto
ne jaisi hausla afjaaii kii hai. uske liye ek adad thanx kahna ajiib
lag raha haikunal singh
November 18, 2010 11:30 PM»⁹

Blog readers and followers - at least the ones who make themselves known through the comments - are often other writers or intellectuals. For example, the above-mentioned message is the final comment in a series of

⁸ These techniques are neither exclusive of the internet nor new: since the advent of commercial publishing in the Hindi field at the end of the 19th century, they have been used in order to improve customer retention and widen the audience, and Hindi readers have always been very active in writing letters to the editor and comments on the works published in their favorite magazines. I wrote about that in Alessandra Consolaro (2011), *La prosa nella cultura letteraria hindi dell'India coloniale e postcoloniale*, Stampatori, Torino, pp. 58-62; 315-327; 399-407. What is radically new is the immediacy of the contact and the range of the audience that can be reached by new technologies.

⁹ «Thank you so much, friends, I'll post another portion of translation very soon. You have been encouraging me very much, and I must thank you infinite times, n times would sound inappropriate. Kuṇāl Siṃh».

comments that were posted in connection with Kuṇāl Siṃh's translation of a portion of Milan Kundera's novel *Immortality* and among the people who posted a comment in this series are Prabhāt Raṃjan – an awarded Hindi writer, translator, blogger and editor that I already introduced and about whom I will talk later – and Hitendra Paṭel (1968), who teaches modern history at Rabindra Bharti University, Kolkata, and is himself a Hindi writer and a blogger at «Hittisaba».

Literary blogs are flexible and their content is not rigidly structured. «Bhāṣāsetu» contains posts about poetry, short stories, novel quotations, articles, and images. Kuṇāl Siṃh inserts links so that readers can immediately access sources, in-depth articles, or other blogs from which quotations are taken—and in that way, he makes use of the web's ample potential to promote debate and the circulation of ideas. Posts can be divided into various categories. First of all, there are Hindi poems and narratives, most of which are the work of young poets. They generally have short introductions that mention the authors' published works and the prizes, if any that they have received. The introduction is often enriched with a personal comment of appreciation, which is typically followed by a request for readers' evaluations of the work.

Another major category of posts centers on translation - generally those of Kuṇāl Siṃh or Suśīl Kānti - and this category aims to present non-Hindi works to a Hindi-reading audience while imbuing the Hindi literary field with a sense of transnationality. Another category is related to socio-political issues and current affairs and here the flow of literary posts is often interspersed with published images.

The blog's journalistic articles and short essays on literary themes are similarly relevant to our discussion. For instance, in "Blogs are Democracy's Fifth Columns" (01/20/2010), the author addresses blogging itself as a mode of literature. This post reveals Siṃh's urge to legitimize the web (and blogs in particular) as a platform for the promotion of literature, however skeptically mainstream literary critics may look at such efforts. Kuṇāl Siṃh quotes the foremost Hindi literary critic Nāmvar Siṃh, who expressed his reluctant acceptance of blogs over the course of a two-day national conference that was held at the Allahabad branch of the Mahatma Gandhi International Hindi University and that was attended by the Vice Chancellor Nārāyaṇ Rāy and about thirty bloggers from all over the country.

Their panels boasted titles such as "Hindi: Blog as a New Medium of Expression", "Hindi Language and Literature on the Internet", and "The Blog's Technical Aspects". Kuṇāl Siṃh ends his post: «This is no doubt good news for Hindi blogs: even mainstream writers begin to pay attention to it». This tells us much about the structures of the Hindi literary establishment as late as 2010, when it was apparently still necessary to "legitimize" or at least make a case for distributing and discussing Hindi literature on the web. The situation has somewhat changed in the past years to date, but there remains a strong hegemony of the established older writers and critics.

The Internet has radically changed the relation between reader and writer. It allows for an immediate and direct contact between reader and author, and it helps writers to reach a much wider audience because it allows them to bypass problems of distribution and cross national borders. Kuṇāl Siṃh does not use his blog to promote his

own creative writing: there are only two poems of his, neither of which is published with an introduction or a commentary section, so as to understate them.

By contrast, his Facebook page (created in May 2011) immediately presents itself as a personal showcase for the author and his works. One should note that a writer can choose two ways of opening a Facebook account: a personal profile or a fan page. A personal profile is like a door open to the private life of a person, while the fan page has a more formal character. In the Info section, for instance, there is a list of literary prizes that Kuṇāl Siṃh has received: the author shares details about which short story has received an award and in which year. Pictures are abundant: most of them appear to have been taken at awards ceremonies, but others include close-ups and photos with friends.

The Facebook Wall permits readers to be in constant and direct contact with the writer. It is quite common to find congratulations, comment or simple greetings. The tone is extremely informal: in their comments, readers freely express their ideas about posted texts, the author's writing style, or the author himself. Within the social network, the writer stakes the private sphere of his life: he allows himself to be commented upon as an individual and not merely as a published author. The author skilfully capitalizes upon the great visibility of the virtual page; when he gives advance news of fresh publications, as he did in June 2011 with his post entitled “New Story *Jhūṭh tathā anya kahāniyām*”, (“Lies and Other Short Stories”) it's as if he briefing his readers in real-time.¹⁰ The effectiveness of these advertisements and their promotional significance is evident from the many comments on the post. Two days later, Kuṇāl Siṃh

¹⁰ See 06/15/2011: “New Story *Jhūṭh tathā anya kahāniyām*”.

published a short excerpt from the story that he had announced in the earlier post, a move that helped fuel readers' expectations about the launch of this new work. The whole story was published one year later on a pioneering Hindi blog, Anurāg Vats's «Sabad».

Yet Kuṇāl Siṃh seems to have invested in web activities and social networks only part-time. His presence on Facebook, which began in 2011, is not regular, and there can be long intervals between posts. «Bhāṣāsetu» was maintained for about a year (05/29/2010 to 06/06/2011) and has not been updated since; even his blog on cinema was active only for a year (01/15/2010 to 06/06/2011). Kuṇāl Siṃh's decrease in online social media activity leads to a question about the real involvement of young, early-career Hindi writers with social networks: Kuṇāl Siṃh may have relied on these communication media at the beginning of his career, but he seems to have abandoned them, to an extent, after getting more involved in the mainstream literary field. It appears that he either no longer had the time to maintain and update his online presence and social media accounts or lost interest after his initial bout of enthusiasm.

Hindi literature and popular culture

One of the hottest issues in today's debate about new Hindi literature focuses on the relationships between literature, the market, and popular culture. Critics who lament Hindi literature's turn toward the market are actually repeating an old argument of the Marxist writers of the 1950s, who would charge any literati who interacted with popular media (which meant cinema at the time, but later included television) with accusations of involvement with capitalism (Jośī 2002). The equivalence of the term "*lokpriya*" ("popular") with "cheap" and

“commercial” has been taken for granted in the Hindi literary field, even if, in the first decades of independent India, projects such as Hindi Pocket Books’ «Domestic Library Project» succeeded in creating a widespread and regular audience of readers for Hindi literature of high quality. Moreover, the gap between “serious” and “popular” literature created a split in the editorial field. Publishers specializing in *jāsūsī* (detective) literature and similar genres provided the market with thrilling novels by the “pocket book” writers, all of whom were banned from formal academic discourse, while “serious publishers” would deal with “the real thing” (Raṃjan: 2002).

Prabhāt Raṃjan’s blog «Jankipul» continues the polemic that established Hindi magazines typically espouse in their critical discussions: his comments on the hot topics of the Hindi literary field are sharp, and he does not hesitate to share pointed criticisms (for example, in his negative comments on «Tadbhav»’s editor Akhileś and on the writer Nilākṣī Siṃh on 03/31/2012, the harsh tone of which is even more striking when one recalls that the epigraph of the collection *Jānkīpul* was dedicated to “kathā guru Akhileś”) or to take part in controversial issues by posting lengthy articles (on topics such as the controversy over a misogynist claim that Vibhūti Narāyaṇ Rāy made in the August 2010 issue of «Nayā Jñānoday»: 08/04-13-22; 09/09/2010). Not only does he read and comment on other blogs, but he also publishes other writers’ works (e.g., 01/10/2012 Pratyakṣā; 07/23/2012 Manīṣā Kulśreṣṭha). His Facebook page, which he created in 2008, is not used for self-promotion, but functions, rather, as a personal page and as a link to his blog.

An important section of the blog «Jankipul» is devoted to discussing new media and their relation to Hindi

language and literature; it similarly addresses popular culture and cultural studies. Both topics factor into one of the most striking perceptions about Hindi literature: in Chetan Bhagat's words, reading in Hindi is not "cool".¹¹ Other aspects of Hindi culture that used to suffer from a perceived lack of sex appeal are now fashionable and have proven relevant not only in the Indian English-speaking middle class environment, but also worldwide. A few years ago, there was a common perception that speaking Hindi was just for "rustic" people, but nowadays, urban, young, middle-class people use it in its Hinglish form.

Likewise, Hindi written in Latin script has become the language of advertising, and Hindi films and music are no longer something to be ashamed of. Yet reading literature is a different story: some Hindi books may sell well - Ved Prakāś Śarmā's books sell millions of copies - but they have no presence in the kind of mediascape that is perceived as glamorous. According to Prabhāt Raṃjan (05/20/2011), this absence emerges in part from the peculiar connection between Hindi writers, publishers, and official institutions: not only is there a tendency for writers to be judged according to the ranks that they hold in government or in academic institutions, but publishers are also more interested in being subsidized than they are in launching "stars", and many of them hold conservative publishing policies.

Established literary magazines such as «Haṃs», which was notably progressive in the 1990s, are no longer innovative today (07/31/2010). Hindi bestsellers do exist in numbers, but they are not valued as innovative works of literature because they are classified either as classics or as cheap literature. These bestsellers therefore stand

¹¹ Interview during the TV show «On the Couch with Koel» 10/15/2011. Prabhāt Raṃjan's comment on «Jankipul »10/18/2011.

apart from the upscale book market, since, whatever comes in contact with commercial media is perceived as somewhat polluted, and is still not accepted as “real literature”, which is projected as a purely aesthetic or idealized venture.

Social media and creative writing

Social networks increase the writer’s visibility and facilitates the kind of contact with readers that allows for new opportunities and increased popularity. There can be no doubt that this means of literature dissemination is going to develop further, but it is difficult to predict (at this point) its long-term effects on publishing, the roles of writers, and the literary field at large. What *is* clear is that the interaction between creative writing and the Internet is influencing the style of Hindi “serious” literature as well.

Manīṣā Kulśreṣṭha has been interested in the connection between literature and the Internet for a long time. In 2001, she started «Hindinest», which she claims is the first online magazine in Hindi. Then, from 2006 to 2009, she edited a column on «Nayā Jñānoday» to which she contributed articles that discussed the importance of new media not only in developing the Hindi language at an international level, but also in the promotion of Hindi literature.¹² She strongly argues in favor of literature on the Internet. First of all, she argues, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, there was tremendous technical advancement in typing the scripts of Indian languages.

¹² I am grateful to Manīṣā Kulśreṣṭha who kindly sent to me the whole set of articles (“Sāhitya kā vaiśvik maṃc aur iṃṭarneṭ kā setu” - “Literature’s Global Stage and the Bridge of Internet”) and discussed with me some of the major points. Unfortunately the manuscript copy does not quote the «Nayā Jñānoday» issue on which they were published, and I had no chance to check the paper issues of the magazine. I will therefore refer to the title.

Unicode solved the problem of having to use different programs in order to write, and now, says Kulśreṣṭha, India is rich in young IT experts who are willing to provide freeware and technical knowledge.

Today's problem, rather, is the resistance of conservative writers and academics who do not even want to try and write using a computer; their attitude matches that of those who rejected books at the beginning of the print era. Computerized writing makes editing easier; OCR¹³ and online dictionaries help avoiding misprints, and these tools increase the quality of the published work. Writers on the Internet achieve more visibility and can reach readers on a global level, but Kulśreṣṭha argues that this very kind of globalization is what print publishers fear; she calls them a sort of mafia who try to maintain the status quo with their claims that publishing online would decrease sales. In fact, statistics show that many bestseller writers increased their sales thanks to blogging and downloads.¹⁴ And while the Internet is not universally available in India, Kulśreṣṭha is optimistic about what its steady diffusion in small cities and *qasbas* would make possible, especially for young people.

Kulśreṣṭha also takes issue with critics who claim that the internet is only good for frivolous writing: blogs have no other filter beyond the audience's response to their content, these critics argue, while literary magazines have an editorial board that is able to discern what literature is worth publishing. In fact, Kulśreṣṭha says, it is entirely possible for Hindi literary magazines to publish material of poor quality, since these publications are often linked to one powerful editor-writer whose idiosyncratic taste

¹³ Optical Character Recognition [NdR].

¹⁴ "Skrīn ṭū skrīn banām nitāmt yuva pīḍī" - "Screen to Screen versus a Brand New Generation".

influences editorial choices; an editorial board therefore is no guarantee of literary quality or intellectual depth.¹⁵ What's more, literary magazines that have a narrow circulation in print can reach a wider audience through the Internet. This kind of reach can draw in young readers who don't typically find anything of interest in conservative Hindi print publishing. She insists that young Hindi readers do exist, and that they are eager to interact with authors, but that in order to make Hindi reading "cooler", one must "shake off the dust of obsolete academics".¹⁶

Kulśreṣṭha emphasizes that initially, Hindi literary portals on the Internet were mostly amateur, but that now, there are professional online magazines that can attract advertisers and that also have some printing activity. Yet «Hindinest» maintains the format of a print magazine, and is not (by my account) graphically appealing, even if it is updated regularly and rich in content. If we compare it to innovative webzines such as «Pratīlīpi»,¹⁷ it suffers from the same problems that other Hindi online magazines do, which is to say that it does not pay particular attention to the special nature of digital writing production and distribution.

Kulśreṣṭha's novel, *Śīgāf*, is itself an interesting example of the interaction between new social media and Hindi creative writing.¹⁸ The first section of the novel "Lā Māncā kī rāh par" ("Road to La Mancha")¹⁹ - and

¹⁵ "Inṭarneṭ blāgs banām abhivyakti kī svatantratā" - "Internet Blog versus Freedom of Expression".

¹⁶ "Skrīn ṭū skrīn".

¹⁷ «Pratīlīpi» is a fully independent journal founded in April 2008 by Giriraj Kiradoo, Rahul Soni and Shiv Kumar Gandhi. To date it has presented works of more than 400 writers from more than 30 languages across the world.

¹⁸ I am grateful to Hans Harder for drawing my attention to this novel during the discussion session in Panel 37 at the 22nd ECSAS 2012 in Lisbon.

¹⁹ Manīṣā Kulśreṣṭha (2010), *Śīgāf*, Rājīkamal Prakāśan, Nayī Dillī, pp. 9-64.

subsequent passages are written in the form of a blog, with its posts and comments. The novel's protagonist, a (fictional) blogger, is an expatriated Kashmiri Hindu young woman named Amitā. The novel zeroes in on the way in which writing can help a person clarify her own feelings and ideas; it exposes the reader to different forms of written self-expression from the more innovative to the more literary established.

For example, the third chapter, entitled "Cinār kī do pattiyaṁ" ("Two Poplar Leaves")²⁰ is the diary of Yāsmīn, a school friend of Amitā, who records her thoughts from 1989 until her death in 2000. Meanwhile, another chapter presents a sort of stream-of-consciousness from the perspective of another character, the militant Vasīm; it is aptly titled "Ātmālāp" ("Monologue").²¹ Another chapter, "Zulekhā kā mithak" ("Zulekhā's myth"),²² narrates the life of a young female suicide-bomber through a collage of newspaper articles and the transcription of an interview with the character's mother.

We first meet Amitā in Pamplona, Spain, where she is writing two blogs. After completing her postgraduate diploma in translation, she works as a translator for a Spanish publisher who suggests that she explore her creative talent by writing about her own experience and the country of her childhood. In January 2005, she decides to go back to Kashmir (after fifteen years' absence) in order to write a book: she wants to compare her teenage memories to her new experience as a returning exile. Her initial urge is to investigate her personal sorrow - the natural condition of a Hindu Kashmiri refugee - but the project develops into a deeper and wider reflection on the life of the Kashmiri people at large.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 90-127.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 215-228.

²² Ibid., pp. 186-214.

Through social networks, Amitā maintains personal relations with worldwide faraway friends and relatives, and she comes into contact with other expatriates and readers who are interested in discussing the Kashmir issue. She is aware of the fact that identities on the Internet can be purely fictitious. When chatting with an “unknown foreign friend” named “Goddess Madonna”, she remarks: «She may even not be a girl... or a foreigner», since masking one’s true identity on the Internet is a commonplace. Discussions in chatlines are free and open, but there is always a sort of deception, since there is no way to verify the sincerity of one’s interlocutors in those forums. When she happens to be in an uneasy conversation herself, she escapes by signing off with an excuse (which I will quote below).

The novel describes a situation in which access to a social network is restricted to a few privileged people. Amitā lives in Europe, and when she goes back to India, she faces a totally different situation: As soon as she leaves the urban areas, she finds out that not only is access to the Internet not taken for granted, but even phone communications become a problem. When she reaches Srinagar, she discovers that her SIM card is not working any longer and that she cannot use her cellphone, but getting a new SIM card proves to be a complicated text: she eventually procures a cellphone with the help of an army officer in Srinagar who happens to be connected to her family (Kulśreṣṭha 2010: 140).

This text raises some interesting questions as to new formats of the novel in Hindi literature. In fact, we have a blogger protagonist published as a blog, therefore, in the narrative, form and medium are constructed as such. But this form is then inserted in a regular, printed novel, thus

creating a circulation of media and forms, that is quite new in the Hindi literary field.

The ideal audience of the book appears to be part of this non-metropolitan, decentralized India. In fact, most of the characters do not use computers intensively, and still live in a world where important things are written on paper—sometimes in letters that will never be delivered. Amitā is surprised when she finds out that her journalist friend (and possible lover) Zamān reads her blog, since he had stated that he used computer only for his job, and the Internet only for e-mails (Kulśreṣṭha 2010: 253)

The use of English in the novel, too, helps to connote the audience. While the language is generally standard Hindi, the part of the text that records blogging is imbued with English words, and there are often full sentences in English. The English text is always written in *devanāgarī*, and - as with expressions in Spanish, Kashmiri or Urdu - is followed by the Hindi translation in brackets. The parenthetical translation, however, is not consistent: some sentences that the author considers immediately understandable are not translated. Here is an example:

«अमिता, आई डोंट अंडेरस्टैंड, वाय कश्मीरीज़ आर फ़ाइटिंग? फ़ॉर हूम दे आर फ़ाइटिंग? इफ़ चॉइस इज़ देयर बिटवीन टू थिंग्स, इदर विकमिंग ए जुगलर वेन ऑफ़ पाकिस्तान ओर ए रोज़ इन द बकेट ऑफ़ इंडिया (अमिता, मैं समझ नहीं पाती कि कश्मीरी किसलिये लड़ रहे हैं? किसके लिये वे लड़ रहे हैं? अगर उनके पास दो विकल्प हैं कि या वे पाकिस्तान की दुखनी और खून बहाती रज़ बन जाएँ या भारत के गुलदस्ते का गुलाब।)

मैं क्या जवाब देती? मैंने साइन ऑफ़ कर दिया।

सॉरी मेडोना आयम साइनिंग ऑफ़... आई हैव टू लीव...।

पोस्टेड एट 11.30 ए.एम.». ²³

²³ Ibid., p. 57.

Certain new linguistic codes that are typical of communication on the web and on electronic media started to permeate traditional literary genres such as the short story and the novel. The most recent development of which I am aware is that Hindi creative writing has reached Twitter, where it experiments as *laghukathā*²⁴ in the extreme (Consolaro 2016). At the 2013 Jaipur literature festival, the publisher Westland-Yatra launched the first-ever Hindi literary competition on Twitter. Every day, a number of books would be awarded to those who submitted the “most impressive” 140-character stories.²⁵ Editor Nītā Guptā said that they would consider even five submissions a success («Jankipul» 01/17/2013), but the contest closed with the enthusiastic participation of some prolific authors, and the organizers promise they will continue with «shayd weekly ya fortnightly contest» (01/28/2013 @yatrabooks)

Each winning writer contributed more than one story, but the publisher only specified the winning authors, and not which of their submissions received the award; I selected one submission from each of the three winners for the first day. The first Tweet is by young writer Tripurāri Kumār Śarmā, a collaborator of Prabhāt Raṃjan who edits «Being Poet», an independent bilingual literary

«Amitā, I don't understand, why Kashmiris are fighting? For whom they are fighting? If choice is there between two things, either becoming a jugular vein of Pakistan or a rose in the bucket of India. (If they have a choice, then it is between becoming a painful and blood flowing vein of Pakistan, or else a rose in the vase of India/What can I answer? I signed off.

Sorry, Madonna, I am signing off... I have to leave...

Posted at 11:30 AM».

²⁴ *Laghukathā* is a genre in Hindi literature, characterized by extreme conciseness of form and a definite and pronounced socio-political agenda, that gained momentum in the 1970s and is still very popular. Alessandra Consolaro (2016).

²⁵ The competition was tagged #kahani140 .

blogzine that celebrates the literary oeuvre of a particular poet on his/her birthday.

«देखो...मैं तुमसे बात नहीं करना चाहता» बिस्तर में लड़के ने दूसरे लड़के की मुँह की तरफ मुँह करते हुए कहा।»²⁶

Atula Gupta introduces herself as a freelance writer and the founder and editor of *indiasendangered.com*, a site that serves to spread the word about India's endangered species of plants and animals across the world. One of her stories is:

«Kya bura hai gar shyam ki jagah salman dost hai mera, kya kagaz ki kashtiya kuch tedi ban jayengi?»²⁷

Last but not least, Aashish Rai Jain, who edits the blog «The Life's Way», which he uses as a platform on which to share his feelings. One of his creations:

«ghumsum sa baitha tha woh park ke kone mein, dekha ek baccha door ro raha tha, laga ki bicchad gaya woh maa se, bhool gaya apna duk»²⁸

Some may wonder about the extent to which these 140-character stories count as literature, but for the organizers of this surprisingly popular contest, Tweets-as-literature became an effective way to connect *Hindiwallas*²⁹ to new media (and new media to *Hindiwallas*).

²⁶ «“Well... I don't want to talk to you” said the boy in the bed, turning his mouth to the mouth of the other boy».

²⁷ «What's wrong if Salman is my friend instead of Śyām? Will paper boats be crooked?».

²⁸ «Sitting somewhat dejected in a corner of the park, he saw a child, crying aloof, looking as if he had been separated from his mother, he forgot his sorrow».

²⁹ Hindi speakers [NdR].

Conclusion

My analysis has explored the ways in which certain members of the younger generation of Hindi creative writers have used online and social media platforms to draw a new Hindi literary field - all while being established and published along traditional lines themselves. These writers have integrated the language of the Internet and social media into their work, which has led to remarkable stylistic innovations; they have also used online media to publish and promote their writing. In doing so, they are beginning to challenge longstanding publishing practices.

When it connects writers with their readers regardless of national or social identity, the web challenges cultural elitism; it urges authors to allow their readers, not their publishers, to drive their work. On the other hand, Hindi literary circles online present themselves as restricted (or even self-involved); they perpetuate more traditional ways of writing and publishing fiction in Hindi. Moreover, Hindi webzines and blogs do not always take full advantage of what is unique to digital writing. As we see in the case of Kuṇāl Simh, who quieted his online activity once he had grown more involved with the traditional publishing establishment, online publishing platforms can be considered less-desirable alternatives to paper-and-spine publishing. But new publishers such as Yatra and Pratilipi are changing that perception through their innovative retailing strategies and distribution systems—and these practices are themselves reshaping Hindi literature such that it is increasingly multilingual and stylistically innovative.

It is difficult to predict how the use of the Internet by Hindi new authors will actually impact on audiences. In the past years Hindi content consumption on the web

took off, growing 94 per cent year-on-year compared to 19 per cent growth for English content. India's Internet population is growing fast, from 100 million users in 2011 is now well-poised to reach 500 million by 2017 (Anon 2015). Also the Central government is very active in promoting the use of technology with Indian languages other than English.

In the intersection of old and new media in the literary field, new styles of expression that are typical of social media are carving space for themselves within Hindi creative writing, and a certain degree of experimentation is taking place. With the rapid socio-economic changes of the post-liberalization era and in the sites of globalized India a new generation of Hindi speaking products of IITs and universities settled in the world of media and communication has entered the Hindi literary field. They have started experimenting with creating writing and, although Hindi creative writing on the new media is a very restricted sphere, it seems to be also an active arena of discussion and interaction.

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