

Resurfacing of the Literary Public Sphere: Interpreting Pattern Change in the New Media

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Abstract

This paper examines the literary criticism which has burgeoned in the New Media, foregrounding the pattern change in the text-interpreting process with the help of Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 2002) and Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (Habermas, 1962). According to Relevance Theory, the discourse initiator (writer) wants the discourse recipient (reader) to consider what is being communicated as the most relevant, which constitute “cognitive effects” and which may be applied for interpreting any communicative event. Thus the study contends that such a pragmatic approach enables us to critically engage with the reader’s behaviour facilitating literary study in the digital humanities and further helps in evaluating and determining the requirements of a reader in conjunction with the expectations of a writer. So with these literary forums, literature and literary criticism no longer exist in isolation as in earlier times. Their dissemination to a much wider public has given rise to a new media reader as well as critic. Furthermore, the paper posits that these literary forums may be identified as the “literary public sphere” of Habermas (1962). The study focuses on four Indian diasporic writers, Kiran Desai, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Amitav Ghosh and Rohinton Mistry, and their community review in an online literary forum website: www.goodreads.com.

Abstract in Malay

Artikel ini mengkaji kritikan sastera yang semakin berleluasa dalam Media Baru, dengan mengutarakan corak perubahan dalam proses pentafsiran-teks dan menggunakan *Relevance Theory* (Teori Perkaitan) (Sperber and Wilson, 2002) dan *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Perubahan Struktur dalam Ruang Awam) (Habermas, 1962). Menurut Teori Perkaitan, pencetus komunikasi (penulis) mahu penerima komunikasi (pembaca) untuk menimbangankan perkara yang sedang dibincangkan sebagai yang paling relevan dan sekali gus membentuk “kesan-kesan kognitif” dan boleh digunakan untuk mentafsir sebarang situasi yang melibatkan komunikasi. Oleh itu, kajian ini berpendapat bahawa pendekatan pragmatik sedemikian membolehkan kita untuk berhubung secara kritikal dengan kelakuan pembaca yang membantu kajian kesusasteraan dalam kemanusiaan digital dan seterusnya, membantu dalam menilai dan menentukan kehendak pembaca selari dengan yang diharapkan oleh penulis. Jadi,

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dengan adanya forum kesusasteraan seperti ini, sastra dan kritikan sastra tidak lagi cuma wujud secara berasingan seperti sebelum ini. Penyebarannya yang lebih meluas dalam ruang awam telah mewujudkan pembaca dan pengkritik media baru. Artikel ini turut mengusulkan bahawa forum-forum kesusasteraan ini mungkin boleh dikenalpasti sebagai “ruang sastra awam” (Habermas, 1962). Kajian ini mengetengahkan empat penulis diaspora dari India, Kiran Desai, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Amitav Ghosh dan Rohinton Mistry dan ulasan atas talian komuniti mereka di laman web forum kesusasteraan: www.goodreads.com.

Keywords

Literary criticism, Habermas, Relevance Theory, Indian diasporic writers, new media, pattern change

Keywords in Malay

Kritikan sastra, Habermas, teori perkaitan, diaspora dari India, media baru, pendekatan pragmatic, corak perubahan

This paper applies the Relevance Theory enunciated by Sperber and Wilson (2002) to the study of literary criticism which has burgeoned in the New Media (Manovich 43), foregrounding the pattern change in the text-interpreting process. The paper is also an attempt to look at these literary forums as the transformation of the literary public sphere identified by Habermas (1962) into the virtual realm (Manovich 185). According to him, the literary public sphere which developed in the eighteenth century could critically discuss art and literature, drawing on the emotional resources developed within the family. Furthermore, this study contends that a pragmatic approach enables us to critically engage with the reader’s behaviour, and thus facilitate understanding of the dynamics of literary study in the digital humanities. Regardless of a literary text’s merits or demerits, its key function is social in nature. In addition, the paper posits that the New Media, which is a term meant to encompass the emergence of digital, computerised, or networked information and communication technologies in the later part of the twentieth century, helps in evaluating, gratifying and determining the requirements of a reader as it should be and as expected by a writer. Therefore, with the emergence of these literary forums literature and literary criticism no longer exist in isolation as in earlier times. Their dissemination to a much wider public has given rise to a new media reader as well as critic.

Literary criticism is a practical activity carried out with the purpose of understanding. The ability to criticise a work of literature comes with experience, by reading and thinking about a wide range of material from other literature and criticism. The critic uses her/his gained knowledge to realise as completely and sensitively as possible whatever is before her/him in the text.

The critic aims for generality, consistency and objectivity, drawing her/his arguments from a logical base to avoid refutation. But unless criticism is content to remain personal preference, an unsupported elaboration of gut feelings, there must be some larger body of understanding, some agreement as to what literary discourse is and what it does. Possibly that understanding will only be secondary to begin with, before analysis feeds through into the critics' responses. A literary text is initially an event, an experience, something arousing delight and approval. The critics do not conjure up theory as they read or listen. But afterwards they consider, re-read, re-enjoy; it helps them to map out those responses, think what they amount to. It is surely a common observation that responses are not settled, that appreciation comes slowly, after much effort. Criticism is not a handing down of judgements, but an explanation of the critics' own responses, of faculties through which they appraised and explained with the help of a theoretical framework. And this might get modified from day to day in their appraisal, until they arrive at what their skills and time can materially improve, understand and explain.

Habermas's literary public sphere prepared people for political reflection by giving them the chance to discuss art and literature critically. They burgeoned in coffee houses in eighteenth century England and in salons on the Continent. In this literary public sphere the key theme was critical debate about literature and reading material. Habermas argues that all were unconcerned with social status, addressed "unthinkable" questions and were in principle inclusive.

The present study focuses on four Indian diasporic authors, Kiran Desai, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Amitav Ghosh and Rohinton Mistry, and their community review in an online literary forum website www.goodreads.com. This is a new form of literary criticism which to some extent reflects the Habermasian eighteenth century concept of "lay judgment" but has its own distinct features as is evident from the following examples:

The Mistress of Spices: A Novel

by [Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni](#) (Good reads Author)

★★★★☆ 3.48 · [rating details](#) · [2,238 ratings](#) · [298 reviews](#)

On a mythic island of women "where on our skin, the warm rain fell like pomegranate seeds" powerful spices like cinnamon, turmeric, and fenugreek whisper their secrets to young acolytes. Ordained after trial by fire, each new spice mistress is sent to a far-off land to cure the life pains of all Indian seekers, while keeping a cool distance from the mortals. Only [...more](#)

Paperback, 352 pages

Published February 17th 1998 by Anchor (first published 1997)

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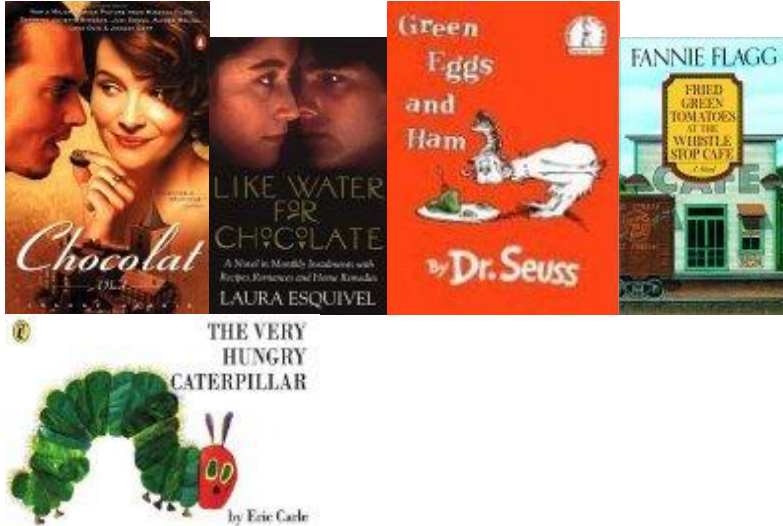
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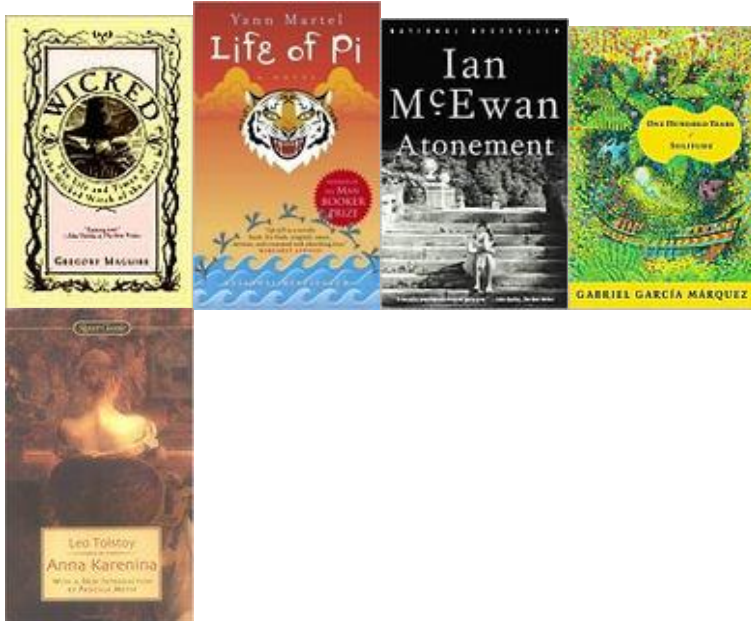
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Food-Related Fiction

10th out of 108 books — 130 voters



Abandoned Books

91st out of 428 books — 793 voters

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Feb 10, 2009

[Laura](#) rated it ★★★★★

I probably wouldn't have read this if I hadn't been introduced to Ms. Divakaruni by a former student who was taking a class from her and loved her. I always feel as though I should read people's books if I've met them, which has gotten me stuck with some duds. Fortunately this wasn't one of them. With a writing style that's both conversational and lyrical, Divakaruni engulfs you in a heady blend of mysticism, romance, and realism as complex and sensual as the spices she writes about. [...more](#)
[like 8 likes 3 comments](#)

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(showing 1-7 of 7)



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message 1: by [Laura](#) (new)

[Feb 11, 2009 05:49pm](#)



How does it compare to *Chocolat*? From your description it reminds me of how the Juliet Binoche character healed people with her confections.

[reply](#) | [flag *](#)

message 2: by [Laura](#) (new) - [rated it 4 stars](#)

[Feb 12, 2009 02:42pm](#)



I haven't read *Chocolat* (I saw the movie, but that was mostly because I love chocolate and Johnny Depp). This has a totally different feel, though. Tilo's story is mystical & magical, and the stories of her customers are very

mundane, though interesting – it’s an odd contrast. But they’re not interwoven into a village story like *Chocolat*.

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message 3: by [Dewi Kharisma](#) (new) - [rated it 3 stars](#)

[Jun 11, 2010 06:23am](#)



Gosh. I don’t believe it my manuscript has so many similarities with this novel.

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[about Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni](#)



Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an award-winning author and poet. Her work is widely known, as she has been published in over 50 magazines, including the Atlantic Monthly and The New Yorker, and her writing has been included in over 50 anthologies. Her works have been translated into 20 languages, including Dutch, Hebrew and Japanese.

She was born in India and lived there until 1976, at w [...more](#)

[More about Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni...](#)

The Inheritance of Loss

by [Kiran Desai](#)

★★★★☆ 3.23 · [rating details](#) · [9,866 ratings](#) · [1,808 reviews](#)

“In a crumbling, isolated house at the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga in the Himalayas, lives an embittered judge who wants only to retire in peace from a world he has found too messy for justice, when his orphaned granddaughter, Sai, arrives on his doorstep. The judge’s cook watches over her distractedly, for his thoughts are claimed by his son, Biju, who is hopscotching [...more](#)

Paperback, 384 pages

Published August 29th 2006 by Grove Press (first published 2006)

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Apr 02, 2007

[Sreevatsa Kota](#) rated it ★★★★★ · [review of another edition](#)

Have you ever lived a dream outside a slumber during your waking hours? This book makes it possible. I have come to realise that every Booker-winning novel follows a distinctive pattern of sorts that reveals all the instantly recognisable Booker leitmotifs that are vital to the plot: A range of emotions that both flavour and colour it. Thus, crude hilarity, raw sex, untold pain and interminable suffering, not to mention loads of scatology, form the mainstay of a typical Booker story. And the primar [...more](#)
like 8 likes 1 comment

about Kiran Desai



Kiran Desai is an Indian author who is a citizen of India and a permanent resident of the United States. Her novel *The Inheritance of Loss* won the 2006 Man Booker Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award. She is the daughter of the noted author Anita Desai.

[More about Kiran Desai...](#)

The Hungry Tide: A Novel

by [Amitav Ghosh](#)

★★★★☆ 3.80 · [rating details](#) · [1,185 ratings](#) · [200 reviews](#)

“*The Hungry Tide* is a contemporary story of adventure and unlikely love, identity and history, set in one of the most fascinating regions on earth. Off the easternmost coast of India, in the Bay of Bengal, lies the immense labyrinth of tiny islands known as the Sundarbans. For settlers here, life is extremely precarious. Attacks by deadly tigers are common. Unrest and [...more](#)

Paperback, 352 pages
Published June 7th 2006 by Mariner Books (first published 2004)
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Jan 03, 2009

[Stephen](#) rated it **★★★★☆** · [review of another edition](#)

I have mixed feelings about “The Hungry Tide.” Amitav Ghosh tells a large story firmly set in a particular place – the Mangrove-covered islands in the estuary of the Ganges River. The story has everything: love, class-difference, political conflict, natural and man-made catastrophes, and, of course, dolphins, tigers, and crocodiles (dangerous encounters with the latter two, friendly encounters with the first). And that’s the problem. The story is contrived and contains dialogue that f [...more](#)

[like 2 comments](#)

about Amitav Ghosh



Amitav Ghosh is one of India’s best-known writers. His books include *The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines*, *In an Antique Land*, *Dancing in Cambodia*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Glass Palace*, *Incendiary Circumstances*, *The Hungry Tide*. His most recent novel, *Sea of Poppies*, is the first volume of the Ibis Trilogy.

Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta in 1956. He studied in Dehra Dun, New D [...more](#)

[More about Amitav Ghosh...](#)

A Fine Balanceby [Rohinton Mistry](#)★★★★★4.31 · [rating details](#) · [12,264 ratings](#) · [2,151 reviews](#)

“India, 1975, and a callous government has declared a State of Emergency. In these uncertain times Dina Dalal – a spirited Parsi widow determined to avoid a second marriage – takes a student boarder and two Hindu tailors into her ramshackle flat. As the cruel policies of slum clearances and enforced birth control bring chaos to the city, the four strangers, whose live [...more](#)

Paperback, 624 pages

Published November 30th 2001 by Vintage (first published 1995)

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Aug 16, 2007

[Z](#) rated it ★★★★★

Recommends it for: anyone looking for a deep and complex read

Shelves: [favourites](#)

I stayed up all night to finish this book, because the climax is simply unputdownable. I am hesitant to formally review it because it's one of those few books that can't be confined within the bounds of a critique or summary, and one that is so magnificent and moving that the idea of reviewing it makes me feel insolent already! So I'll just note what I feel about the book, and the kind of effect it's had on me.

It's grim. Very grim. There are moments of tragicomedy, of ove [...more](#)
like [28 likes](#) [4 comments](#)

about Rohinton Mistry



Rohinton Mistry is considered to be one of the foremost authors of Indian heritage writing in English. Residing in Brampton, Ontario, Canada, Mistry belongs to the Parsi Zoroastrian religious minority.

Author photo courtesy of Faber and Faber website.

[More about Rohinton Mistry...](#)

An analysis of the foregoing examples reveals a pattern wherein initially a description of the author's work is given and then reviews by readers are invited. We have incorporated Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* review in detail. However, it has been observed that a similar pattern emerges insofar as the other three writers included in the present study are concerned.

Application of Relevance Theory helps us to understand this pattern change as it assumes that the criticism of a literary text is concerned first and foremost with the "cognitive effects" it has upon a reader. The two principles upon which the theory is based are:

1. The cognitive principle of relevance which states that, "Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance." (Sperber and Wilson, "Relevance Theory" 251)
2. The communicative principle of relevance which states that, "Every act of ostensive inferential communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance." (Sperber and Wilson, "Relevance Theory" 256)

The second principle is the one that operates in the domain of literary criticism as it may be viewed as a form of communication. According to the theory, the discourse initiator (writer) wants the discourse recipient (reader) to consider what is being communicated as the most relevant, which constitutes "cognitive effects" and which may be applied for interpreting any communicative event. Thus, this paper contends that Relevance Theory can be regarded as a potent tool for analysing literary criticism in the New Media.

The fact that an utterance creates some expectations of relevance sheds light on how readers may identify the intended interpretation, given that mutual expectations can serve to limit the search space. (Furlong 335) The reader assumes that the first interpretation tested and found consistent with this criterion is the intended interpretation, and stops processing. This is guaranteed by the Relevance-theoretic Comprehension Procedure and the Presumption of

Optimal Relevance. According to the Relevance-theoretic Comprehension Procedure a reader follows a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects. In this procedure the reader (a) considers possible interpretations in order of accessibility and (b) stops when the expectations of relevance are satisfied. Simultaneously the writer writes with the presumption of optimal relevance and provides (c) the ostensive stimulus in such a way that it is relevant enough to be worth the reader's effort to process it and also (d) the ostensive stimulus that the writer provides is not only the most relevant one but is also the one that is most compatible with her/his abilities and preferences (Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance* 275).

In a similar vein, applying Davies's concept of meaning interpretation by hearers in spoken discourse to literary discourse (18) we find that readers assume that a literary text addressed to them is intended to be meaningful. Hence if the literary text does not have an appropriate conventional meaning, they will look for a *more useful* (and non-conventional) interpretation. As far as the reader is concerned, the writer providing an uninterpretable (meaningless) text would be pointless and therefore irrational. Now relating this to literary criticism we first discuss the comprehension procedure occurring during traditional literary criticism and then illustrate the pattern change that has surfaced with the introduction of these community review forums.

This paper claims that the criticism discussed at length by Habermas in his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and which evolved in the salons and coffee houses may be viewed as "traditional literary criticism," a craft that is learnt by emulation and practice. However, criticism does not exist in isolation, i.e., it must not only explain the "facts" but combine those explanations into a larger, autonomous and self-referencing whole within a theoretical framework. Further, it grows by resistance, by being measured against the experience of the critic, and is full of assumptions and preconceptions. Moreover, despite a great deal of familiarity with the text, it still needs considerable effort. According to Habermas the process of criticism is a privileged activity which is practiced by a few specialists. To quote him:

The conflict about lay judgment, about the public as a critical authority, was most severe in that field where hitherto a circle of connoisseurs had combined social privilege with a specialized competence in painting, which was essentially painting for expert collectors among the nobility until here too the artists saw themselves forced to work for the market. To the same degree painters emancipated themselves from the constrictions of the guilds, a court, and the Church; craftsmanship developed into *ars liberalis*, albeit only by way of state monopoly. (Habermas 40)

Critical writing about art and literature emerged, as did critical periodical journals. Coffee houses continued the discussion begun in their pages. This

interaction occurred through letters. Letters, diaries and first person narratives were all experiments with subjectivity, oriented towards an audience. The relationship between author, work and public became intimate but the interaction was slow and limited to a small group of people.

When a reader as critic engages in the process of traditional literary criticism we maintain that “maximal cognitive effect” can only be obtained with “increased processing effort.” Thus it is possible to elucidate the comprehension procedure where there is “maximal cognitive effect” only with “increased processing effort” in the following manner. Literary criticism first and foremost is an individual effort. At the initial stage the critic has no idea about the text’s quality. Thus, a critiquing of the text is a purely intellectual or academic activity on the part of the critic. In the process of critiquing the text, the reader/critic distinguishes and explains the structure/theme of the literary text. The reader/critic is required to collect the evidence from the text solely. This evidence is gathered from evocative clues such as words/phrases which are highly charged with meaning in their relationship to the rest of the text. This process of critiquing along with the application of different theoretical frameworks to the understanding of the literary text explains “why” and “how” it has been written in a particular way. The critic’s expectations of understanding the literary work is rewarded after a lot of exploration of the literary text and possible contexts with the help of theoretical tools.

On the other hand, literary criticism in the New Media has transformed into a community activity. The present kind of literary criticism in a literary forum usually wants the readers to understand and review a text through discussion, and also it wants them to find information about the text efficiently, even though the order in which the information can be accessed may vary. The relevance of the literary text’s criticism in these literary forums is determined by the ability to present concrete information about the reader’s response through discussion. Although the inferring process is the same, the objective, i.e. the relevance we look for, is at variance with the traditional literary criticism as readers are different.

The pattern change in literary criticism that has taken place with the burgeoning of these literary forums may be explained by this comprehension procedure where there is “maximal cognitive effect” with “minimum processing effort” in the following manner. In these forums, first the reader/critic gets certain inputs, such as a brief biography etc., regarding the text. The forum indicates how the website rates the writer and the text. This helps the reviewer to critically place the writer and also gain some kind of understanding about this type of work. This enables the reader/critic to look for further clues in definition, another review, a related quote etc. The act of critiquing in the forum involves certain tools which are: Rating it by giving stars, by providing certain links such as “like” or “post comments” given on the page, and so on. Other

ways of integrating the discussion into wider structures is like “recommendation” or “shelves.”

One advantage of this approach is that it shows more explicitly the manner in which expectations are created and understood during criticism. A human orientation towards cognitive efficiency allows the writer or the forum to meta-represent the mental states of others (reader/critic) and act accordingly. This tendency is exploited in criticism by covertly and overtly invoking specific effects on the critic, knowing that the critic has exactly this expectation. Ostensive inferential communication (Relevance Theory) attempts at communicating – by deliberately providing evidence of one’s *intention* to lead the reader/critic towards a certain conclusion – create *expectations of relevance*, which guarantee that the reader/critic will expend the effort needed in comprehension because the ostensive stimulus automatically impinges on attention and elicits, at the same time, a process of interpretation. These ideas are gathered in a specific pattern change in criticism.

In this new approach, in which pragmatic theory operates in the literary criticism arena, Relevance Theory seems to explain pattern change in literary criticism taking place in literary forums, whose content determines inferentially how the process of critiquing takes place by lessening of the processing effort. These literary forums are a good example of the virtual transformation of the kind of criticism that occurred in eighteenth century discussion groups in salons and coffee houses. To quote Habermas:

Like the concert and the theatre, museums institutionalized the lay judgment on art: discussion became the medium through which people appropriated art. The innumerable pamphlets criticizing or defending the leading theory of art built on the discussion of the salons and reacted back on them – art criticism as conversation. Thus, in the first half of the eighteenth century the amateurs *éclairés* formed the inner circle of the new art public. To the extent to which the public exhibitions received wider attention and, going over the heads of the connoisseurs, presented works of directly to a broader public, these could no longer maintain a position of control. (40)

However, the present day online literary forums differ from the eighteenth century discussion groups identified by Habermas insofar as the new media has generated these literary forums wherein the discussion on literature has become a group activity which can be performed with ease. They provide tools (such as “like,” “post comments”) for criticism which were not available for the Habermasian literary public sphere. Thus, in Relevance theoretic terms the effort needed in coming to some conclusion about the meaning of a literary text, or interaction between author and reader, requires much less effort now than before. Moreover, the new critic formed through these literary forums is a

larger group than existed in the coffee houses and salons of the eighteenth century.

Furthermore, the flexibility and generality of the Relevance theoretic approach facilitate explanation of the changes that are taking place in the practice of literary criticism due to the existence of the online literary forums, which has moved from an individual activity to a community activity thus creating a new critic in the process. In addition, the theory also enables us to observe and analyse these community literary forums as the virtual transformation of Habermasian eighteenth century literary public sphere. In conclusion, it may be observed that the Relevance theoretic approach to pattern change in literary criticism opens up some yet-to-be-explored directions of research in literature and language.

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