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Cell Phone Novel A New Genre of Literature

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Introduction

Cell phone is one of the most popular and portable of almost all the modern electronic gadgets used in the modern world, especially by young men and women. A cell phone nowadays has become a multi-purpose household electronic device since its utility has been highly increasing day by day, for speaking and chatting, for sending and receiving messages, as a camera, as a storehouse of a number of valuable information, as a music player and recorder (voice recorder too), as an FM radio, as a calculator, as a modem for internet connection and internet surfing, as a medium for advertisement, even as a medium for conducting bank transactions, as a mini-projector and so on.

Recently it has become the latest form of entertainment, in providing novels for readers through its screen which has been called by various names such as cell phone novel, mobile phone novel, text messaging novel, m-novel, m-lit, cell literature, phone novel, and even as SMS novel.

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Cell Phone Novel and Its Brief History

A cell phone novel, or mobile phone novel, which is originally written and read on a cellular phone via text messaging, is the latest and “the most subtle and delicate of the world’s literatures.”¹ This unique form of literature has its origin from, and has grown immensely popular in Japan, the land of rising sun – the nation which has been massively devastated in many of its parts by a severe tsunami and several earth quakes in March, 2011. It is ‘*Keitai Shousetsu*’ (literally ‘*Keitai*’ means ‘cell phone’ and ‘*shousetsu*’ means ‘novel’) by which a cell phone novel is called in Japanese. It is a kind of serialized fiction written or uploaded on a cell phone by the author for its readers, generally teenagers, of the modern digital age. In a sense, therefore, a cell phone novel does have its roots back to the days of Charles Dickens when Dickens was writing stories or novels or his “Pickwick Papers” (1836-1837) in a serialized format, and also to the days of the epistolary novels of 18th century England.

The First Cell Phone Novel

However, the genre of cell phone novel was first started in 2000 by a young Japanese writer from Tokyo who posted the short chapters of his novel by using a pseudonym “Yoshi.”² He gave the title of his novel as *Deep Love*. As there was no website to host his serial fiction during that time, initially he sent out the ongoing Chapters of his serialized fiction to the readers via e-mails and MMS (Multimedia Messaging Service). Later Yoshi himself “Set up a website in 2000 and started posting [his novel] *Deep Love* in small segments.”³ This is a story of a Tokyo based teenager, a 17 year old girl who engages herself in “subsidized dating”– ‘*enjo kosai*’ – a form of prostitution in order to collect money for a heart operation of her boyfriend Yoshiyuki. But, much like O. Henry’s short stories, the money that she earned, unfortunately, never reaches to her boyfriend as she is contracted with AIDS from one of her clients and subsequently dies an immature death. This “romance peppered with scenes of rape, pregnancy, abortion, suicide attempts and drinking addiction [gradually] became a grassroots sensation”⁴ among the readers, and thereafter it was picked up by the Starts Publishing Company of Japan in 2002 that sold the novel in printed form about 2.7 million copies like hot cakes. Not only that, *Deep Love* was so popular among the readers that it was later turned into a ‘*manga*’ (English /ˈmæŋgə/ or /ˈmaːŋgə/, a kind of comics and print cartoons), a television drama and a film in Japan. “The book (*Deep Love*) also sparked a renaissance among cell phone users with time and creativity to use.”⁵

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Thus Yoshi set the pattern of cell phone novels in the world which has slowly become immense popular not only in Japan alone but in whole of the world, especially in the countries like China, Switzerland, South Korea, Taiwan, USA, South Africa, and gradually in India too.

One of the main causes behind the extensive popularity of this micro-lit is that cell phone novels create a virtual world for the readers, mostly the teenagers, via mobile phone or cell phone or more precisely, via text messages. The readers, as in virtual computer/online games, can put themselves into first person in the story of a cell phone novel. A cell phone novel, thus, creates a personal space for every individual reader who can even “comment on the story and help the author by giving feedback and pointers”⁶ of what he would like to see happen next in the upcoming chapter(s) of the text. The author, in his turn, also tries to employ the relevant feedback given by the readers into the plot of his novel in order to grow the interest of the readers for the novel. The author and reader relationship in this case, therefore, is very unique and critical too.

Cell Phone Novels throughout the World

Though Japan was the original birth place of this micro-lit called cell phone novel, the phenomenon soon moved to China and some other countries including Switzerland, Finland, Italy, South Africa, USA, Brazil and India too as mentioned earlier. In September 2004, China saw its first cell phone novel, *Out of the Fortress* written by Qian Fuzhang which was described by *The New York Times* as a “marriage of haiku and Hemingway.”

India too got its first SMS novel in the same year written by one young author who called himself as Ro Gue and the novel was published by 3825 Web Media. His *Cloak Room*, the first mobile phone novel in English in India, was launched in November 2004. But the series was stopped by the author himself after the publication of its 16th chapter in December 23, 2004. Later P. R. Harikumar, a lecturer in Malayalam of Sree Sankara College in Kalady, India, published a complete cell phone novella, *Neelakkannukal* in Malayalam in November, 2006 which is available for free download at his own website: <http://www.prharikumar.com>.

The phenomenon of cell phone novel got its way into Finland in the year 2007 with the publication of its first text message novel, *The Last Messages* which was written by a Finnish author called Hannu Lunthia. This is the story of a fictitious IT(Information Technology)-Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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executive in Finland who resigns from his job and travels throughout Europe and India, keeping in touch with his friends and relatives only through text messages. Italy found its first mobile phone novel, *Compagni di Viagg* in July 2007 which was written by Robbert Bernocco, an Italian IT-professional whose own words regarding the publication of his novel are very interesting:

“Only a few years ago I would have struggled to find both the time and the publisher to enable me to create this book . . . Thanks to my Nokia and Lulu (Lulu.com.) I am now proud to be a published author.”⁷

With Satoshi Takatsu’s (or *taka-chan* in short) *Secondhand Memories* (January 2009 onward), an award winning cell phone novel written in original Japanese-style cell phone novel in English, America got its first phone novel. This is one of Takatsu’s many writing projects, which, according to the author himself, is:

“A simple story about a high school love. A story about the true meaning of love, sacrifices, friendship and pain . . .”⁸

This is needless to mention that the novel was viewed by more than 30000 viewers and won several awards in USA including Readers’ Choice Award and Literary Agent Rep Winner in ‘textnovel. com contest 2009.’ South Africa where the cell phone novels are called ‘m-novels’ had also successfully launched its first m-novel *Kontax* on September 20, 2009 by the Shuttleworth Foundation of Cape Town which gave the readers incentives as Steve Vosloo, a communication and analytical skills fellow at the Shuttleworth Foundation said: “Every day we ask readers to leave a comment, and the best comment wins air time.”⁹

The movement also appeared in Australia in 2005, but in some other forms such as m-publication or cell phone publication of samples of chapters or excerpts from books to come up. “The service is called Mobile Reader and it was created to fulfill the needs of book lovers who don’t have the time to gather information on the upcoming books.”¹⁰ The delivery of soap operas and the texts of national and international authors via text messages is the reflection of the gradual exploration of the micro-lit under discussion in the countries like Brazil. Thus, this ubiquitous and the latest literary genre of the 21st century gradually entered into the literary

culture of almost every corner of the present world and not to speak of only Asia where it originated.

Basic Characteristics of the Cell Phone Novels

The present paper may seem incomplete if some of the key characteristics of the cell phone novels are not discussed in brief that may help in finding the truth behind the rise and huge popularity of the cell phone novels in Japan and the rest of the world, which, according to some, “is the first major literary movement of the 21st century.”¹¹ The discussion on some of the fundamental features of the cell phone novels can be done on the basis of the following aspects:

- Themes of the cell phone novels,
- Plots of the cell phone novels,
- Characters in the novels,
- Language and Sentence structure,
- Use of non-verbal or non-textual elements like symbols and emoticons,
- Use of first person perspective,
- Use of pseudonyms by the authors.

Most of the cell phone novels are generally written on romantic themes like teenage love, relationship, love triangles and sometimes also on the unconventional themes like rape, pregnancy, teenage prostitution, disease, drug addiction and violence. Yoshi’s *Deep Love* (2000), the first ever novel in this genre, reflects on the theme of teenage love and the true value of love though a number of episodes showing teenage prostitution, rape, AIDS, pregnancy and death appear in the sequel. *Love Sky* (2007) written by a young authoress called Mika also tells the story of a teenage girl who is bullied and gang raped, becomes pregnant and ultimately suffers a miscarriage.

The *Eternal Dream* (2008) written and posted by Mone which was accessed online for at least 3 million times in 2008 also tells the story of a small-town high school girl-student who is abducted, gang-raped by three strangers one day after school and abandoned on the side of a road. Later she is rescued by one of her male schoolmates from there which resulted in a love-hate relationship in them.

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Likewise, most of the cell phone novels of the world reflect upon a theme either of love and passion, rape and pregnancy, violence and murder, disease and death or teenage prostitution and suffering in more realistic way than the traditional literatures. As a result, no one can find in any of these novels a concrete plot or any typical development of the plot in comparison to that of the conventional novels. Nor, one can even find the endless descriptions of things and situations in these novels which are the essential requisites of traditional novels. What exactly the readers can find here are purely self-centred thoughts and actions mostly in the form of dialogues that actually attract the readers of this genre of literature.

The number of characters in these novels is also very less, and there is an absence of development of character(s) and complex personalities which are considered as the most essential aspects of the traditional literature especially of novels. The principle characters of the m-novels are generally, like their readers, young city dwellers who often have the terrible and sordid experiences of modern urban life including bulling, rape, murder, teenage prostitution, unwanted pregnancy, infection by Sexually Transmitted Diseases like AIDS etc. what, much like T.S. Eliot's poems, exactly entail the plots of the cell phone novels.

The language which is generally used in the cell phone novels is very simple and often having the "repetitive vocabulary"¹² – a language that is frequently used by common people, especially by youngsters in their day to day lives. Sentences are very short (essential because a mobile phone screen can hold maximum 100 to 200 characters in a single text) and simple but meaningful and, to quote Dana Goodyear, "there is ample blank space [in between sentences] to give the eyes [of the reader] a rest."¹³ 'The blank space' might have another essential implication too from the writer's point of view: to provide time and space for the reader's thought process. This point has been finely explained by Satoshi Takatsu in his essay "The Cell Phone Novel Manual: About Cell Phone Novels, What They Are and more":

"The unseen or omitted becomes a vital part of the reading experiences, allowing deeper meanings and interpretations to unfold."¹⁴

As the writer is limited by the small length of the text (maximum 100 to 200 characters at a time as mentioned earlier) which is designed to fit on a cell phone screen, it is a real challenge for him/her to pour within a small text the best of the creative frenzy or "Creative juices" as said

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Brian Clark, a member of 'Copy blogger'. An excerpt from Takatsu's *Secondhand Memories* can help us in understanding the point more clearly:

The water was cool, a refreshing touch at our feet.

I heard a loud Splash and felt a wall of cold was over me.

I turned to a giggling Uchida Aoi. I smiled roguishly.

Suddenly, I put my hand in the water and gave some right back at her.

She screamed when she was dripping wet too.

In revenge, she unleashed a tsunami at me.

Instead, laughing, I rushed over,

wrapping my wet arms around her and tackled her into the water.

With a crash and a Splash, we plunged into the water, squealing.

Summer meant no cares in the world.

Summer meant happiness.

That's what I always thought.¹⁵

A frequent use of non-verbal or non-textual elements like emoticons and other symbols in the texts of the cell phone novels, undoubtedly, tries to give "a modern dimension to the text."¹⁶ Literally, an 'emoticon' is "a facial expression pictorially represented by punctuation and letters [and numbers too], usually to express a writer's mood."¹⁷ Some of the fundamental emoticons are :- (smiling or agreeing), :-D (laughing), :-((sad or unhappy), :-@ (screaming), :-& (tongue-tied), :* (kisses) etc.¹⁸ These emoticons are generally available in almost every mobile set of the time. Being tiny pictograms or symbols these emoticons represent a variety of expressions of the writer and thereby save a number of characters of the text. The writers of the text novels are, therefore, very much accustomed to use these emoticons in the short chapters of their novels. The readers of these novels, at the same time, are also frequent users of the emoticons especially

in text messaging. Thus there is always a general urge from, and undercurrent expectation of the readers for these emoticons in the cell phone novels.

Another very common but important aspect of the cell phone novels is its ‘first person perspective’ or ‘first person point of view’ — an approach to the reader through the text so as to make him/her identify with a particular character of the story and thereby to make him/her feel a part of the same. The cell phone novels give a personal space to each and every individual reader who, in his turn, also gives feedback and pointers by commenting on the story that envelops an opportunity for the author to edit the upcoming chapter(s) of his novel. This author and reader relationship of the cell phone novels is uniquely different from any traditional genre of literature.

One more common feature, that enhances no less the attractiveness of the cell phone novels, is the use of pseudonyms by the authors of the text novels. Almost all the authors of the cell phone novels published ever have a special fascination for posting and publishing their works under a pseudonym very often by using a first name only. Starting from Yoshi, the first cell phone novelist to Takatsu, Rin, Chaco, Yupina, Ro Gue, Xinping 2016, Mugi-chan, Mone and others, almost all the authors of the text novels love to remain anonymous to their readers. But why anonymous? An answer to this question can be found very cogently in the words of Jaime Sorenson and David Pollack in their essay “Mobile Novels: A Novel Media”:

“This desire for anonymity stems from the fears that others will notice an individual’s different behaviour and will embarrass them [the authors].”¹⁹

Rin, herself a cell phone novelist, acknowledges that she prefers to write anonymously because “others might think . . . [her to be] . . . a bit strange.”²⁰ As a matter of fact, most of the writers of the cell phone novels, especially of Japan are young girls, many of whom are college or university students while a number of whom are also under-trodden of the society. Thus the authors are not usually a part of the literary mainstream. These young girls have found a comparably easy and portable medium to express and sometimes to confess, too, the darker aspects of their personal lives which include their indiscriminate sexual relationships and experiences, drug addiction, *enjo kosai*, unwanted pregnancy, abortion, the venereal diseases they suffer from, cheating by their lovers and what not! Of course, these girls dare to express the

darker side of their lives by authoring the cell phone novels but, at the same time, they fear to disclose their personal identities. As a result, they publish their works under pseudonyms.

Critique on the Cell Phone Novels

Keitai shousetsu as a new genre of literature has also raised certain alarming questions among the critics and scholars of literature. It raises question to the future of literature of Japan in particular and of the whole world in general for its poor vocabulary, slangy and sub-standard language, and also for its romance and sex based content. As the structure of the sentences in a cell phone novel is very basic and compact, the meaning of the sentences also very often remains vague to the reader(s) for which “there is a general worry in Japan that with such vague descriptions, people will begin to feel bogged down by the colourful details in a normal novel which will lead to even fewer readers of traditional paperback books.”²¹ The phenomenon of cell phone novels also raises another very striking question which is very consequent to the earlier one: “will the cell-phone novel kill ‘the author’?” — a question for which “*Bungakukai*,” a popular Japanese monthly journal, afforded its January 2008 issue.

The chapters of the cell phone novels hardly ever undergo any form of editing before these are being posted to the readers or being made available to the public. Therefore, the standard of the language used generally remains very raw with many of its grammatical and/or spelling mistakes. As an aftermath, this leads the “adults to worry that mobile novel will stunt the growth of children’s vocabulary, accelerate illiteracy, and damage their ability to express themselves,”²² because a greater portion of the readers of the mobile novels is children. One class of the critics, therefore, is enthusiastic to call cell phone novels as “yutori” — a Japanese slang term that is used for those who cannot “properly read, write or think because of Japan’s “yutori kyouiku” — ‘slow education’ — a system which has been adopted in Japan since 1977 with an aim “to reduce pressure on kids.”²³

One critic, R. Lingam has concluded his essay “The Advent of Cell Phone Novels” with an enticing assessment on cell phone novels at large that

“Above all cell phone novel is just a pastime and there is no scope for any innovation, stimulating thought, etc.”²⁴

But we should not forget that the genre of cell phone novel itself is a piece of innovation by the younger generation authors in this digital era. Moreover, the author, in this case, has to pour the utmost of his creative potentiality within the very short span of a single chapter on a cell phone novel that can consist of a maximum of 200 text-characters. The author, within this very short span, has to squeeze out the essence of his creative and innovative zeal. Otherwise, he fails to keep and grow the interest of the reader(s) to look forward for the next chapter of the serial. Brian Clark of ‘Copy blogger’ that successfully organized a rare kind of competition to write an entire story in just 140 characters on a cell phone screen in June, 2008, commented while introducing the contest that:

“Being constrained to exactly 140 characters will spark your creative juices and force you to focus stringently on word choice, sentence structure, and even punctuation.”²⁵

What is this, if not the creative frenzy of the author?

One major part of Japan’s literary elite, however, is not ready at all to consider the mobile novel as any form of literature, rather this is, according to them, “the offspring of an oral tradition originating with mawkish Edo-period marionette shows and extending to vapid J-pop love ballads.”²⁶ One group of critics even commented that the cell phone novels should at the best be counted ‘as comic books and pop music rather than literature’ as Norimitsu Onishi in “Thumbs Race as Japan’s Best Sellers Go Cellular” (2008) has pointed out.

Although the genre of cell phone novels seems to have been massively denounced by a major part of its critics, some notably positive attributes of this genre are really worth mentioning here.

- The cell phone novel has already started changing the traditional habits of reading and/or writing a novel. The reader no longer has to physically go to a bookshop and purchase a book for reading; now, he can procure this online and read it in his personal cell phone anywhere, anytime as per his convenience and requirement. One anonymous critic, thus, rightly said:

“These Cell phone microlits help the public transportation users to utilize their commuting time reading novel when it is almost impossible to open or carry a book.”²⁷

The writer of the cell phone novels similarly does not need to sit in his study or at a solace place to speculate on the thoughts of his writing; rather, he too needs a cell phone with internet connection to write and post the chapter(s) of his novel from anywhere and at any time. Thus its mobility, portability and convenience often save time and space for both the writer and the reader of a cell phone novel.

- Cell phone novel has become a very safe and sheer haven of self-expression and personal fulfillment for a huge number of Japanese women, because most of the authors of Japanese cell phone novels, writing under pseudonyms or anonymously, are women many of whom are directly coming from the darker side of the society. “Culturally speaking, women are often discouraged from revealing their emotions and opinions publicly in Japan.”²⁸ Quite naturally, they found *keitai shousetsu* as the only safe refuge to express their personal emotions and experiences even without disclosing their self-identities to the public. Thus cell phone novels give exposure to and reevaluate the lives of the women under curtain.
- Cell phone novels promise the beginning of a new era in Japanese literature in particular and in the literature of the whole world in general. In respect of the content, writing style, rawness of the vocabulary, use of emoticons, and above all its sequel format in the way of short chapters, the cell phone novel has undoubtedly given birth of a new epoch of literature as a whole. Satoshi Takatsu, himself a renowned author of a good number of cell phone novels, is so much confident about the possibilities of the cell phone novels that he boldly expresses, if not exaggerates: “Personally, I believe it [the cell phone novel] transcends existing literature in all its forms.”²⁹ His further reflection on this point of discussion is very much noteworthy:

“The short chapters brings out the best of art and combines it into one [perhaps, the grammatical error is also intentionally done here by the author-critic himself to bring about the essential ‘art’ that he points out].

In each chapter readers will be able to experience narration, poetry and

even visual arts in the use of carefully chosen line breaks, punctuation, rhythm and white space [gaps].”³⁰

- Thus, one must acknowledge without any doubt that it is not ‘a killing of the author,’ nor even a degradation of any form of literature that has been done by the advent of the cell phone novels. Rather, it is a kind of reinvention of the author and an up gradation of literature, or at least of the genre of novel as per the needs of the time.
- Moreover, so far the question of deterioration of the standard of language and vocabulary of the younger generations, as doubted by the parents and critics alike, is concerned, cell phone novel is not going to drag down at all the standard of vocabulary or language used by the youths. Because, the language used in the cell phone novels is very often the same language that is commonly used by the youths of the time. This is the zeitgeist of the time. The text novel is a medium only, so to say, that attempts for the first time to give this language recognition.
- Further, this world is always moving at almost the zed speed towards the latest inventions and discoveries in every field including Information and Technology. Therefore, cell phone novel, which can be considered as the latest brain child of IT, is never going to turn into nonexistence and disappear from this world; rather, it may be transcended to a highly moderated and up-to-date form of literature in future.
- Furthermore, cell phone novel will persist for ever regardless of any criticism, because it fills “a niche in Japanese society”³¹ which is also true for the other countries of the world that have cell phone novel in their literary culture. Therefore, instead of mere offensive and derogatory criticism, what is more required for the genre of the cell phone novels from the world is a proper direction and unbiased guidance, so that the young authors of the cell phone novels can rectify the shortcomings, if any, in their writings. Thus, Jaime Sorenson and David Pollack have a strong point when they suggest in their essay, “Mobile Novels: A Novel Media”:

“The world will have to learn how to adapt to this new genre and guide it in a non-offensive direction.”³²

Then, who can anticipate that today’s well discussed and highly criticized cell phone novels will not turn into tomorrow’s classics?

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