

Juxtaposing Orality and Literacy

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Abstract

Notwithstanding the fact that modern cultures have been operating through written modes of representation, orality has always been the fundamental carrier of knowledge since the genesis of human civilization. This fact has been corroborated by famous linguist Ferdinand de Saussure when he laid his focus on primacy of speech and went on to say that writing is nothing but a visible form of oral expression. He believes that writing has ‘shortcomings’ and ‘dangers’. Various critics and philosophers like Jacques Derrida and Plato find writing is a ‘lifeless’ kind of thing because there is not give and take response in it and the author is not always there to explain what he/she actually means. This paper discusses the aspects of orality and literacy both from historical and descriptive perspectives. Discussion relates to the relationship between the two with the identification of some features such as Aggregative rather than Analytic, Situational rather than Abstract, Empathetic and Participatory rather than Objectively Distanced, Agonistically toned, Redundant and Copious, etc.

Key words: Orality, literacy, writing, speech, shortcomings of writing, situational, abstract

Orality as the Basis

Language is so overwhelmingly oral that there are thousands of spoken languages which have been prevalent in human history, but only 106 languages have an advantage of writing up to the extent that they can produce literature. In the early years of human history, orality was considered as a carrier of knowledge. The term ‘knowledge’ here means everything or every aspect of life. Orality was the only medium of transferring historical, social, religious, medicinal and political facts from generation to generation.

Even today there are hundreds of myths, traditions and rituals that are prevalent in every society. Orality has always been a dynamic form of transferring knowledge. The verbal aspect of language is so dominant that we even think verbally or one can say that speech is inseparable from our consciousness. Oral aspect of language can exist without 'writing' but writing can never exist without 'orality'. Due to this importance of orality 'rhetoric' which basically means 'speech art' has always been an important academic subject in western culture. Orality has its own relevance in every civilization of the earth and it can be understood well when we analyze them in depth.

Importance of Oral Mode in Indian Civilization

Indian culture which is approximately 5000 years old has always been disseminated and presented in oral mode. This civilization is popular due to its diversity in its culture, tradition, religion and customs. This diversity has always been there due to the diversity in its oral tradition. Indian mind has an element of primitiveness and that's the reason that people of this area are very particular to their religion and customs. India possesses large variety of great epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* and other texts like *Kathasaritasagar*, *Jatakkatha* and *Panchtantra*, etc. which have been understood and practiced in oral mode in spite of their being rendered into written form. In fact Indian culture and tradition have been operating in the mode of katha-pratha (story-telling). The impact of these texts and kathas (folk-stories) can be captured in a single glance at Indian life.

Stages of the Development of Human Language

Human language has gone through various stages in its development, first the origin of speech, then pictograms, after that the development of phonetic alphabet or symbolic expressions of sounds to typography and at the end the electronic age of today. One thing is apparent that humans learned spoken language first and writing came much later. It becomes clear by the fact that the primal species of humans is 50,000 or 30,000 years old and the earliest script is just 6000 years old. As far as writing is concerned it is

supposed that the first script/alphabet was developed in 1500 BC and after that the Greek alphabet/script was developed in 720-700 BC. These developments of script can be observed in the field of literature with the help of below mentioned table:

Year(s)Event(s)

- | | |
|------------------|--|
| c. 2150-2000 BCE | Earliest codified version of Gilgamesh Epics (Old Sumerian Poem Version) codified (3rd dynasty of Ur); the date of composition is uncertain |
| c. 1800-1700 BCE | Earliest Akkadian version of Gilgamesh Epics (Early Akkadian Version) codified |
| c. 1300-1000 BCE | Standard Akkadian version of Gilgamesh Epics codified |
| c. 550-500 BCE | These Homeric epics were said to be composed around early 8th century BCE (Iliad) and late 8th century BCE (Odyssey) in Homeric Greek (Ionian dialect amalgamated with aspects from other Greek dialects), the very language it was codified. It is widely believed that the canonical text of these poems were codified in the era of Athenian tyrant Peisistratos (546-526 BCE). |
| c. 400 BCE | Codification of Mahabharata (oral form originates back to 9th to 8th century BCE, in Sanskrit |
| c. 200 BCE | Codification of the critical editions of the Iliad and the Odyssey by Alexandrian scholars Aristarchus and Zenodotus, in Homeric Greek. The division of two epics in twenty-four books each originates from this edition |
| c. 29-19 BCE | Aeneid was written, in Latin |

Source: Myeong, Do Hyeong, “History of Oral Literature and its Codification: The Textualization of Epics and Legends in their Historical Context.” <http://www.zum.de/whkmla/sp/1213/jeannedarc/mdh4.html>. N.p. web. Aug. 2014.

Late Invention of Writing

It can be observed that writing was invented very late. And the reason of this late invention of concrete form of language was this that alphabet depended on sound. And

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:5 May 2015

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sound diminishes at once as it is used and a thing which diminishes at once seriously requires time to take a concrete form. So, the knowledge which was transmitted orally from generation to generation, started to get a permanent form in the form of written scripts. It was here humanity had a gift of written religious texts. Writing reinforced a competition in every religion. And every religion tried to secure the most indigenized form of their religious text as soon as possible. Scholars always have contradictions regarding the proper date of codification of various religious texts. It is supposed that the '*New Testament*' (Christian Bible) was written within the thirty years of resurrection of Jesus Christ. James and Galatians who are thought to be initiators in this field had written their books in 45-50 AD. '*Quran*' the holy book of Muslims is assumed to be written in 650-656 circa. '*Torah*' (*Old Testament*) the religious book of Jews which is believed to be a product of Babylonian exilic period (600 BCE) was completed by the Persian period (400 BCE). Scholars believe that '*Bhagvad Gita*', the religious book of Hindus was probably written in 5th to 2nd century BCE. After the codification of various religious texts, people started giving respect to all their 'texts' because they thought that it always carried some kind of knowledge. Walter Ong observes that "texts can be felt to have intrinsic religious value" (Ong, pp. 91-92).

In early years it was really difficult for oral society to accord writing a proper place in its boundaries. It can be understood through the perspectives of various renowned people. The great philosophers like Plato and Socrates urged that writing is 'inhuman' because it never responds like speech. It was a manufactured item which destroys memory. It also relied on external resources which never probed to think or one can say that it weakens human mind. Hieronimo Squarciafico, promoter of printing of the Latin classics, also argued in 1477 that "abundance of books makes men less studious," and he also said that writing relieved human mind from too much work.

In the early years of writing, writing was a privileged of the upper class of the society. Later the revolution in printing had given an advantage of reading to the other classes of society. Every ardent reader should thank these initiators for giving this opportunity to all.

Various experts of different fields at various stages have also responded to it positively. Jack Goody, a renowned anthropologist, has shown it to be a shift from ‘magic to science’ or from ‘prelogical to the rational state of consciousness’ or from ‘savage mind’ to the domesticated thought.

Defining Orality and Literacy

Now, the two concepts *orality* and *literacy* can be defined well in these words: Orality (oral tradition) refers to a dynamic and highly varied oral-aural medium for evolving, storing, and transmitting knowledge, art, and ideas from generation to generation. Literacy, on the other hand, refers to a medium or a method which involves the usage of written script. However, the concept of orality and literacy do not contradict each other; that is, both orality and literacy can co – exist and mostly works simultaneously about one work which could be both orally transmitted to others and written down in a script at the same time.

Co-existence of Orality and Literacy

Walter Ong in his book *Orality and Literacy* writes about how oral based thought is different from writing. Ong writes that “The characteristics treated here are some of those which set off orally based thought and expression from chirographic ally and typographically based thought and expression, the characteristics, that is, which are most likely to strike those reared in writing and print cultures as surprising.”(Ong, pp-36))

Having said that Orality and Literacy can co-exist, orality does seem to have an upper hand due to the following reasons.

Close to the Human World

Ong writes it truly that one of the distinct features of oral tradition is that it is close to the human life because in day to day life generally that thing survives which has its relevance in the practical life of humans. In India, the whole life of an Indian revolves around the oral recitations of his holy books. For every occasion such as birth, marriage or death, the Indians have something very sacred to speak.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:5 May 2015

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For example, in a Hindu marriage, everything (time, clothes, and make-up items) is selected according to the rituals and no one tries to challenge it. All the festivals - Holi, Diwali, Basant Panchami, Lohri and many more in the country are related to mythology and seasons. Their essence is transferred orally. The dramatic representation of Ramleela and participation of all groups with full joy is an excellent example. Although Ramayana has been written down hundreds of years ago but written form never achieved that success as dramatic form.

Aggregative rather than Analytic

In folk traditions generally the description is aggregative like a beautiful princess, or a brave soldier rather a simple description of a human being. Generally it is never analyzed that why a brave soldier. Or, in other words, one can easily imagine that oral traditions are generally set to be free from all kinds of logic. No one tries to ask logics behind the stories of *Panchatantra* and *Ramayana*. In India there are many versions of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Each part of India has different - different interpretation of these two texts.

Situational rather than Abstract

Oral traditions are situational on the other hand writing is abstract. Oral traditions are never individual based. They are related to a complete community or bounded to specific situations. On the other hand writing is individual based and generally based on one or more situations of an individual. Whenever a writer writes although he keeps his/her readers in mind but unable to enumerate each and every individual and situation. So it's very easy to engage readers in speaking rather than reading. Speaking is more effective all time and due to even in this technical age it is used for various purposes. In Haryana (North India), even today during elections political parties use *raginis* and *swang* for campaigning.

Difference in Language

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Difference in language is natural in these two forms because as it is mentioned that oral traditions are close to the human life world. So it is natural that its language is vernacular. The creators of folk traditions are anonymous and these traditions are passing through generation to generation with subtle changes. On the other hand in writing the specific writer uses language and words with great deliberation. And generally in that language is preferred which is different from colloquial language. Although language in folk traditions also varies according to the genre (e.g. language which is used in various holy texts like Vedas, Ramayana, and Mahabharata is the most pure form of that language), oral traditions are bounded with repeated change and also bounded with formulaic repetitions. The teller himself becomes the transformer and can easily modify his/her speech according to the interest of his/her audience. There is a very less scope of change in a written text. Writing requires a lot of practice and efforts and due to this some decades back writing was restricted to some specific groups.

Empathetic and Participatory rather than Objectively Distanced

Oral traditions are generally performance based and every listener is an active participant. The primary purpose of these traditions is to maintain social relationships in a community. On the other hand the main purpose of writing it to give authentic information. It gives us scientific and philosophical knowledge. Generally it is said that writing separates the knower from the known. And it's a true fact because during writing of any text a writer could not imagine the actual reaction of its audience and also cannot keep every single individual in mind. The comprehensive use of prosody (stress, rhythm, and intonation) is an advantage to orality. On the other hand achieving this mastery in the use of prosodic symbols requires a lot of efforts in writing.

Agonistically Toned

In oral traditions knowledge is embedded in specific contexts and no one can deny that fact in that situation. For instance utterance of one proverb or riddle challenges the hearer to top it. We can understand this fact by considering various proverbs, riddles prevalent in oral traditions. They are very well artistically formed. In Ramayana Lord

Rama is an ideal character. All those qualities which have been described in Rama are never questioned through the parameters of idealness.

Redundant and Copious

Redundant kind of explanation is always there in oral traditions. Generally it is not found in writing because writing is a slow process as compare to orality. During writing one has sufficient time to furnish his/her ideas. One can easily correct his/her errors and omissions. In speech the desire to ‘say everything’ is a limitation and if a word is slipped from one’s tongue one can’t change it. Although it is different fact in oral-traditions redundant expression enriches interest. Variation can also be a reason of this redundancy because oral traditions change with time and there is a lack of complete removal of previous details.

Orality Allures Us!

All the aforesaid features of oral based thought allure us to think time and again the importance of orality in day to day life. Written literature or any written text has always its genesis in oral-traditions. And it is said that spoken language is the soul of humans. This fact can be understood by various instances.

Shakespeare the great English writer has selected most of the stories of his great works from folk narratives. Derrida writes it honestly that “thought is nested in speech not in texts” (ong.pg.73). This fact is so dominant that it is really difficult to ignore a speech. Due to this fact from past few decades the whole literate and non-literate world has become conscious for the differences in orality and literacy and tried to define it accordingly.

Primary and Secondary Orality

Walter Ong divided orality into two categories: ‘primary orality’ and ‘secondary orality’. ‘Traditional orality’ is a new kind added to it by sociologists. Primary orality is that in which there is no use of writing at all or a society completely oblivious about writing. Secondary orality is that in which with the use of technology orality is dominant

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:5 May 2015

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for e.g. use of telephone. And third category traditional orality which refers to a situation in which people are familiar with reading and writing and may have learned it well in schools but generally use oral communication in their daily life except formal purposes. Although in this technical age the distinctions between these two concepts (orality and literacy) is really difficult to enumerate because it is clear that they are two faces of the same coin which work simultaneously.

Writing Never Reduces Orality

Writing has its own relevance it never reduces orality but motivates and helps it to live forever. According to Walter Ong, “writing from the beginning did not reduce orality but enhanced it, making it possible to organize the ‘principles’ or constituents of oratory into a scientific art.” (Ong, p.9) There’re so many languages which have been diminished due to their limited use or zero use in writing. But the verbal aspect of language can’t be ignored because man is a social being and without language a society cannot be developed. Writing is bounded with sight and speaking with hearing and generally it is observed that ‘sight’ isolates because each and every human being is a different observer on the other hand it is said that sound incorporates because when a sound comes to one or more person, they listen the same thing and also respond to it accordingly and mostly in the same fashion. So, the whole life of a human being revolves around the verbal aspect of language.

Both the Forms are Necessary

In the globalized era today, life is impossible without both the important forms of language – Orality and Literacy. But it’s a fact that since birth, any human being learns to ‘speak’ by mimicking first and follows ‘writing’ much later in life. As said earlier in the article, ‘writing’ definitely has its advantages and being ‘literate’ one benefits much more than by being just oral, but that certainly doesn’t provide us the reason to ignore ‘orality’. Orality has been and it will remain the supreme carrier of knowledge.

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