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ENSSLIN (Astrid), ROY (Samya Brata), « Electronic Literatures as Postcomparative Media », *CompLit. Journal of European Literature, Arts and Society*, n° 5, 2023 – 1, *New Critical and Theoretical Approaches in Comparative Literature / Nouvelles approches critiques et théoriques en littérature comparée*, p. 145-171

DOI : [10.48611/isbn.978-2-406-14861-6.p.0145](https://doi.org/10.48611/isbn.978-2-406-14861-6.p.0145)

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ENSSLIN (Astrid), ROY (Samya Brata), « Electronic Literatures as Postcomparative Media »

RÉSUMÉ – Les littératureS électroniques, en tant que média post-comparatif, sont un phénomène pluraliste et fluide qui interroge les implications politiques, régimes sélectifs et procédés analytiques inhérents aux pratiques institutionnalisées de la littérature numérique. À l'encontre du technopositivisme et du capacitisme, nous présentons une approche intersectionnelle et co-relationnelle en auto-narrant les développements de l'écologie émergente et subalterne des médias e-littéraires en Inde.

MOTS-CLÉS – littératureS électroniques, médias post-comparatifs, Inde, technopositivisme, capacitisme

ENSSLIN (Astrid), ROY (Samya Brata), « Les littératures électroniques comme médias postcomparatifs »

ABSTRACT – This article examines electronic literatureS as postcomparative media: a pluralistic, fluid phenomenon that questions the political implications, selective regimes, and analytical practices inherent in institutionalised e-literary practices. Exposing the technopositivist, ableist and accessibleist tendencies of skills-based approaches, we showcase our intersectional and co-relational approach by auto-narrating developments in India's emergent, subalternative e-literary media ecology.

KEYWORDS – electronic literatureS, postcomparative media, India, technopositivism, accessibleism

# ELECTRONIC LITERATURES AS POSTCOMPARATIVE MEDIA

## INTRODUCTION

This article examines electronic literatures as postcomparative media. We argue that electronic literature (or e-lit) ought to be seen not only as a form and object of comparative literature,<sup>1</sup> but indeed as a pluralistic phenomenon that calls into question the very political implications, selective regimes, and analytical practices that tend to undergird institutionalised creative, scholarly and curatorial practices associated with literature in general and electronic literature more specifically. Collectively spanning lived experiences and affiliations from North America to Europe and India, we as co-authors represent a diversity of intersectional, ethnic, and cultural communities. We have been witnessing the rapid growth and diversification of the field of Electronic Literature, whose community we belong and are dedicated to, and we are acutely aware of the opportunities as well as some of the key challenges of diversification and inclusive policy-making. Against this situated background, our article traces recent developments in an e-literary culture of the Global South that reflects idiosyncratic creative, editorial, and curatorial values embedded in subaltern in the sense of subalternative media ecologies. These emergent and fluid e-literary practices call for not only a postcolonial but indeed a postcomparative approach that undermines the myth of the global as an all-encompassing vision anchored in ethnocentric biases. We develop our argument through an auto-narrated case study documenting the emergence of e-lit

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1 See Jessica Pressman. "Electronic Literature as Comparative Literature". In: *Futures of Comparative Literature*, edited by Ursula Heise, London: Routledge, 2017, pp. 248-257.

in India as a fluid set of uniquely and diversely situated works, research and publishing landscape, as a fast-growing intersectional and diversely enabled community, and in terms of the curatorial, editorial and pedagogic practices it has brought forth. In so doing, we interrogate the very notions of “work” and “electronic literature”, whose widely sanctioned Western-based definitions only tangentially match the material and epistemic realities of the Indian subcontinent.

Electronic literature is a dynamic set of digital-born literary practices, works and cultures. It comprises aesthetically driven “texts that were conceived in a computer to be performed on a computer”<sup>2</sup> and that “would lose something of [their] aesthetic and semiotic function if [they] were removed from that medium”.<sup>3</sup> This means that their aesthetic intent would fail to materialise phenomenologically if they were printed or otherwise fossilised or remediated. Electronic literature comprises literary media objects, practices and environments that often yet not exclusively require the reader’s active participation. The choice of these interfaces, or platforms, is materially decisive and can range from computer screens, touchscreen interfaces, VR/AR/XR environments to projections on non-digital surfaces like walls, skin, foliage, water, fog, and even spider webs. These hybrid materialities give rise to posthuman phenomenologies of entanglement between animal, human, plant, inanimate matter and the algorithmic and analog processes, data and protocols connecting them. Thus, literary mediality as reflected in e-lit exceeds the medialities of print culture and bookishness<sup>4</sup> and gives way to new conceptions of “the literary” as verbal-material arts, broadly conceived.<sup>5</sup>

2 Alex Saum-Pascual. “Teaching Electronic Literature as Digital Humanities: A Proposal”. *DHQ: Digital Humanities Quarterly*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2017, par. 3. <http://digitalhumanities.org/8081/dhq/vol/11/3/000314/000314.html> [accessed 7th December 2022].

3 Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin, Dave Ciccoricco, Jess Laccetti, Jessica Pressman and Hans K. Rustad. “A Screed for Digital Fiction”. *electronic book review*, 7 March, 2010. <https://electronicbookreview.com/essay/a-screed-for-digital-fiction> [accessed 7th December 2022].

4 See Jessica Pressman. *Bookishness: Loving Books in a Digital Age*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020.

5 See for example N. Katherine Hayles. *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*. Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary, 2008; John Cayley. *Grammalepsy: Essays on Digital Language Art*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2018; and more recently Bronwen Thomas, Julia Round and Astrid Ensslin. “What Is Literary Media?”. In: *The Routledge Companion to Literary Media*, edited by Bronwen Thomas, Julia Round and Astrid Ensslin. New York: Routledge, forthcoming.

Whether or not e-literary participatory activities in the sense of “medial reading”<sup>6</sup> can still be called “non-trivial”<sup>7</sup> in an age of lean-back social media, touchscreen black-boxes and AI-supported WYSIWYG interfaces is a moot point. After all, Aarseth’s concept of ergodicity arose from a context in which print was still the mainstream of literary culture, preceding the advent of Web 2.0, smartphones, and ubiquitous AI. Today’s generation of emergent readers are increasingly struggling with the material queerness of the codex. They are flocking towards screen-based, mobile and/or wearable transmedia that integrate the semiotic and sensory modalities and multiliteracies of originally analog modes like writing, speech, print, sound, still and moving image, with the added complexities of algorithmic logic, machine learning and procedural feedback.<sup>8</sup> What is clear, then, is that electronic literature lends itself to a host of comparative lenses, theories and tools that collectively reflect the posthuman literary condition.<sup>9</sup>

Viewed from a comparatistic angle, electronic literature can be studied at different tiers of symbolic engagement. Firstly, e-lit is conceptually and pragmatically multilingual. It is becoming increasingly widespread amongst non-Anglophone communities around the globe, and its multiculturalism and multilingualism are reflected by the recent collections of the Electronic Literature Organization, as well as its multilingual and non-English archives and databases, prominent examples of which include the ELMCIP (Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice), I ♥ E-Poetry, Arquivo Digital da PO.EX, Hermeneia, Literatura Electrónica Hispánica, Lit(e)Lat, and NT2. The database integration project, CELL (Consortium on Electronic Literature), is currently being reconceptualised as a more inclusive and streamlined initiative with a shared search engine and a metadata ontology that has the potential to reach beyond dominant European and American languages and to embed newly added collections and

6 See Alice Bell and Astrid Ensslin. *Reading Digital Fiction: Narrative, Cognition, Mediality*. New York: Routledge, 2023.

7 Espen Aarseth. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, p. 1.

8 See Jason Hawreliak. “The Procedural Mode”. In: *Approaches to Videogame Discourse: Lexis, Interaction, Textuality*, edited by Astrid Ensslin and Isabel Balteiro. New York: Bloomsbury, pp. 227-246.

9 See Kiene Brillenburg Wurth. “The Material Turn in Comparative Literature: An Introduction”. *Comparative Literature*, vol. 70, no. 3, 2018, pp. 247-263.

databases for instance from Africa (MAELD and ADELD), India (dra. ft), and Arabic countries (AEL).

While ideologically commendable, such inclusive efforts of making e-lit more “global” often face culture-specific realities that complicate the logistics of integration: in China, for instance, the term e-lit equates to mainstream “web literature” or “network literature”<sup>10</sup> and refers to “almost [all literature] that appears on the internet including for example micro-blogging on the social media platform Sina Weibo”.<sup>11</sup> Anchored in networked communality, Chinese e-lit approximated the Western third generation concept<sup>12</sup> from the beginnings of the Web as a popular medium and gravitated towards the web novel as “web-based genre fiction”.<sup>13</sup> More recently, the pay-for-content Qidian model has benefitted Chinese web novelists financially and existentially, and led to a professionalisation of Chinese e-lit,<sup>14</sup> a trend that runs counter ideologically to both the avantgarde spirit of Western “artisanal” e-lit as a critical art movement,<sup>15</sup> and its non-commercial, third generation yet still experimentally inclined popularisation.<sup>16</sup>

The African Electronic Literature Alliance & African Diasporic Electronic Literature community (AELA & ADELI) in turn defines e-lit culture-specifically, as “any digital-born literary work imbued with African themes, happenings, happiness, cultural colours, world-view, heritage, storytelling, virtual, mixed, augmented and extended reality (VR, MR, AR and XR) created either by Africans or robots using programming language, digital tools (hardware and software

10 See Jin Feng, “Internet Literature”. In: *Literary Information in China: A History*, edited by Anatoly Detwyler, Xiao Liu, Christopher Nugent, and Bruce Rusk. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021, pp. 569-575.

11 Jinghua Guo. “Electronic Literature in China”. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, vol. 16, no. 5. <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss5/14/> [accessed December 7, 2022].

12 See Leonardo Flores. “Third Generation Electronic Literature”. *electronic book review*, 7th April, 2019, doi: 10.7273/axyj-3574.

13 Yanjun Shao. “Producing Chinese Web-based Literature: the ‘Qidian Model’”. In: *The Routledge Companion to Literary Media*, edited by Bronwen Thomas, Julia Round and Astrid Ensslin. New York: Routledge, forthcoming.

14 *Ibid.*

15 See Kathi Inman Berens. “Third Generation Electronic Literature and Artisanal Interfaces: Resistance in the Materials”. *electronic book review*, 5th May, 2019, doi: 10.7273/c8a0-kb67; and Scott Rettberg. *Electronic Literature*. Cambridge: Polity, 2019.

16 Flores, *op. cit.*

applications), 3D reality modelling, Artificial Intelligence, and/or using digital platforms and devices as its reading media”.<sup>17</sup> Importantly, thus, in an African and African diasporic context, the significance of affect, performativity and cultural heritage add a decisively situated and embodied component that is not reflected in definitions from Anglo-American and European e-lit scholarship.

The Chinese and African vignettes show that there is a need to consider electronic literature as electronic literatureS, calling for broader and more malleable, socio-economic and affective analytical frameworks. This need is reflected in the queered, upper-case plural suffix “S” that not only underscores the political nature of plurality but also, perhaps more importantly, its non-conformity with normative and often American- and Eurocentric aesthetic, academic, and curatorial values and standards.

## ELECTRONIC LITERATURE AS COMPARISON LITERATURE

Electronic literature has been framed as born-digital-translated “comparison literature”:<sup>18</sup> unequivocally multimodal and transmedial, it spans, combines and juxtaposes multiple semiotic modes and/or technological platforms, including combinations with analog objects like books or textiles.<sup>19</sup> This platform pluralism requires readers to constantly rebuild and refigure their transliteracy competencies<sup>20</sup> and to develop strategies of queering the tools of both reading and writing. Furthermore, many works are published multilingually either from the outset or with new language versions added subsequently. Prominent examples include Serge Bouchardon’s *Hypertensions: A Trilogy*, David Jhave Johnston’s *Sooth* (both English and French) and, during the Flash era, Kate Pullinger’s

17 MAELD & ADEL, <https://africanelit.org/> [accessed January 2, 2023].

18 Rebecca Walkowitz. “Comparison Literature”. *New Literary History*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2009, pp. 567–582.

19 See Astrid Ensslin, “Transmedial Unnatural Spatiality and Postdigital Dystopicalization in *The Pickle Index*”. In: *Digital Narrative Spaces: An Interdisciplinary Examination*, edited by Dan Punday. New York: Routledge, 2022, pp. 20–35.

20 See Saum-Pasqual, *op. cit.*

episodic *Inanimate Alice* (English, French, German, Italian, Spanish and Afrikaans). However, surface multilingualism only accounts for a small part of e-lit's multilayered polyglossia. In fact, it interlaces the symbolical codes of computation and representation including "interface, interactive design, and programming code".<sup>21</sup> These intersecting tiers must be read together, comparatively and complementarily, and especially so if they manifest as posthuman "creoles"<sup>22</sup> epitomised by codeworks that combine machine code and natural language on the user interface (as seen in works by Talan Memmott and Mez Breeze), or generative poetry that emerges as a collaboration between human coder-writer and machine algorithm – whether in JavaScript, GPT-n or LSTM (Long-Short-Term Memory) neural networks.<sup>23</sup>

The inclusion of media as material, technological, socio-economic and political ecologies in the framework of comparative literature has been the decisive factor in its "material turn".<sup>24</sup> The case of electronic literature, which is inextricably linked to the "cultural contexts and political practices that enable the very processes of computing and comparing"<sup>25</sup> is exemplary in drawing attention to the dangers of studying language and text in isolation. In e-lit, text becomes "technotext"<sup>26</sup> in the sense that it demands critical reflection on and scholarly engagement with its textualised algorithmic processes and their underlying ideological biases; their social and commercial embeddings in media networks and network protocols; and their material, situated and embodied contexts of production and consumption.<sup>27</sup> The demise of Flash as the technological basis of hundreds of works of electronic literature published between 1996 and 2020 – many of them award-winning – has been a case in

21 See Pressman, "Electronic Literature as Comparative Literature", *op. cit.*, p. 250.

22 N. Katherine Hayles. *Writing Machines*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002, p. 50.

23 A prominent example of a generative JavaScript poem is Nick Montfort's *Taroko Gorge* ([https://nickm.com/taroko\\_gorge](https://nickm.com/taroko_gorge) [accessed December 2, 2022]). For examples of GPT-n e-lit, see works by David Jhave Johnston, and for an LSTM example, see Yingzhao Ouyang, "Generative Poetry with LSTM", *Towards Data Science*, July 29, 2020. <https://towardsdatascience.com/generative-poetry-with-lstm-2ef7b63d35af> [accessed December 7, 2022].

24 Kiene Brillenburg Wurth. "The Material Turn in Comparative Literature". *Comparative Literature*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2018, pp. 247-263.

25 Pressman, "Electronic Literature as Comparative Literature", *op. cit.*, p. 252.

26 Hayles, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

27 See John David Zuern. "Remedial Materialism: What Can Comparative Literature and Electronic Literature Learn from Each Other?". *Comparative Literature*, vol. 70, no. 3, 2018, pp. 295-316.



point. Indeed, the medium-specific constraint of inbuilt obsolescence has given rise to entirely new and groundbreaking forms of curatorship and preservation that collectively constitute the state-of-the-art of digital heritage management in literary arts.<sup>28</sup>

Within materially informed comparative literary studies, e-lit has been examined diachronically and synchronically in ways that both embed and transcend linguistic, ethnic, and material concerns. From a historical perspective, there have been several attempts at periodising the development of e-lit since its early, pre-Web days. These attempts generally follow Hayles' separation into first and second generation electronic literature, with the introduction of Web-based technologies and practices marking the point of transition.<sup>29</sup> The aftermath of this bipartite generational concept has been tackled variably, for example from a platform-aesthetical and phenomenological angle,<sup>30</sup> with a focus on the role of the machine code as co-authorial agent,<sup>31</sup> from the perspective of transformations in readerly roles and textuality,<sup>32</sup> and in terms of a change in community practices towards popular communication platforms and user-generated formats.<sup>33</sup> Collectively, these approaches trace important trends and movements and their implications for contemporary, medium-specific theories of author, reader, and textual media ecologies.

At a synchronic level, scholarship has moved along multiple interdisciplinary and transmethodological angles. The increasingly visible intersections between e-lit studies and Digital Humanities have been documented in terms of datafication, distant reading and visualisation,<sup>34</sup>

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28 See Stuart Moulthrop and Dene Grigar, *Traversals: The Use of Preservation for Early Electronic Writing*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017.

29 See N. Katherine Hayles, "Deeper Into the Machine: The Future of Electronic Literature", *Culture Machine*, vol. 5, 2003, <https://culturemachine.net/the-e-issue/deeper-into-the-machine/> [accessed December 7, 2022].

30 See Hans Kristian Rustad, *Digital litteratur*, Oslo: Cappelen Damm akademisk, 2012.

31 See Astrid Ensslin, *Canonizing Hypertext: Explorations and Constructions*, London: Continuum, 2007.

32 See Urszula Pawlicka, "Towards a History of Electronic Literature", *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, vol. 17, no. 5, <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss5/2/> [accessed December 7, 2022].

33 See Leonardo Flores, "Third Generation Electronic Literature", *electronic book review*, April 7, 2019. <https://electronicbookreview.com/essay/third-generation-electronic-literature/> [accessed December 7, 2022].

34 See for example Scott Rettberg, "Electronic Literature as Digital Humanities", in: *A New Companion to Digital Humanities*, edited by Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens and John

critical making,<sup>35</sup> as well as digital-born pedagogies and literacies.<sup>36</sup> The need for dynamic archiving, taxonomies and folksonomies has been addressed by studies on preservation and curation,<sup>37</sup> with a specific emphasis on the role of the editor and their responsibility “for reconciling novelty, lived cultural experience, and technical know-how”.<sup>38</sup> Other transmethodological approaches have considered digital-born fiction as an object of transmedial narratology, interrogating, expanding, transforming and replacing concepts and tools originally developed for other media.<sup>39</sup> Concepts of communities and creative networks united by constraint of production, circulation and/or reading rather than ethnicity or language have underscored new theories of electronic literature as world literature.<sup>40</sup> These community- and praxis-centred approaches also include new forms of improvised, networked writing, or “netprov”.<sup>41</sup> Finally, synchronic approaches have engaged with critical concerns shared with other areas of cultural production and representation, including

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Unsworth, Chichester: Wiley, 2016, pp. 127-136; Jill Walker Rettberg, “Visualising Networks of Electronic Literature: Dissertations and the Creative Works They Cite”, *electronic book review*, July 6, 2014, <https://electronicbookreview.com/essay/visualising-networks-of-electronic-literature-dissertations-and-the-creative-works-they-cite/>; and Urszula Pawlicka, “Visualizing Electronic Literature Collections”, *CLC Web: Comparative Literature and Culture*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2016. <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol18/iss1/3/> [all accessed December 7, 2022].

35 See for example Lai-Tze Fan, “Critical Making, Critical Design”, *electronic book review*, Sept 12, 2021. <https://electronicbookreview.com/gathering/critical-making-critical-design/> [accessed December 7, 2022].

36 See for example Saum-Pascual, *op. cit.*, and Astrid Ensslin, *Canonizing Hypertext*, *op. cit.*

37 See for example Luis Pablo and María Goicoechea, “A Survey of Electronic Literature Collections”, *CLC Web: Comparative Literature and Culture*, vol. 16, no. 5, 2014. <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss5/6/>; and Heiko Zimmermann, “New Challenges for the Archiving of Digital Writing”, *CLC Web: Comparative Literature and Culture*, vol. 16, no. 5, 2014. <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss5/7/> [both accessed December 7, 2022].

38 Maya Zalbidea, Mark C. Marino and Asunción López-Varela. “Introduction to New Work on Electronic Literature and Cyberculture”. *CLC Web: Comparative Literature and Culture*, vol. 16, no. 5, 2014, p. 3. <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss5/1/> [accessed December 7, 2022].

39 See Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin and Hans K. Rustad, *Analyzing Digital Fiction*, New York: Routledge, 2014; and Astrid Ensslin and Alice Bell, *Digital Fiction and the Unnatural: Transmedial Narrative Theory, Method and Analysis*, Columbus, OH: Ohio State U.P., 2021.

40 See Joseph Tabbi, “Electronic Literature as World Literature; or, The Universality of Writing under Constraint”, *Poetics Today*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2010.

41 See Rob Wittig, *Netprov: Networked Improvised Literature for the Classroom and Beyond*, Amherst, MA: Amherst College Press, 2022.

for example climate justice, gender, and the sexed body.<sup>42</sup> Some of these critical frameworks have recently begun to leverage critical community co-design methodologies to design and develop social justice-oriented works of e-lit in more applied contexts.<sup>43</sup>

Our argument starts from Zalbidea, Marino and López-Varela's optimistic hypothesis that e-lit "is developing in every corner of the world where artists explore the possibility of literary expression using computers (and the internet)".<sup>44</sup> While this is arguably true, the circumstances under which computer-based literary expression is happening differ significantly and site-specifically and thus lead to a plurality of communities of practice that operate according to sometimes radically different value systems and material parameters. These diverse parameters can throw into question the very notion of what a computer is and can be, given specific conditions of access and technological infrastructure. We therefore question the Anglo-/Eurocentric bias underlying the discourse of comparative literature as electronic literature. The skills-based approach hailed by numerous Western scholars ultimately caters to a range of technopositivist, ableist and accessibleist assumptions that take able-bodied as well as socially and technically enfranchised norms as their starting point and circumvent the ontologies and epistemologies of the cultures and communities they construct as their object of inclusion, or the "other".<sup>45</sup> Pressman conscientiously draws on Radhakrishnan in observing that "comparisons are never neutral: they are inevitably tendentious, didactic, competitive, and prescriptive",<sup>46</sup> and

42 See for example Scott Rettberg and Roderick Coover, "Voices from Troubled Shores: Toxi•City: a Climate Change Narrative", *electronic book review*, Nov 4, 2018. <https://electronicbookreview.com/essay/voices-from-troubled-shores-toxicity-a-climate-change-narrative>; Maya Zalbidea and Xiana Sotelo, "Electronic Literature and the Effects of Cyberspace on the Body", *CLC Web: Comparative Literature and Culture*, vol. 16, nr. 5, 2014. <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss5/12/> [both accessed December 7, 2022]; and Carolyn Guertin, "Cyberfeminist Literary Space: Performing the Electronic Manifesto", In: *Electronic Literature as Digital Humanities*, edited by Dene Grigar and James O'Sullivan. New York: Bloomsbury, 2021, pp. 80-91.

43 Examples include projects like Writing New Bodies (Canada, UK, New Zealand and Germany), You & CO2 (UK), and Byderhand (South Africa).

44 Zalbidea, Marino and López-Varela, *op. cit.*

45 See Anandita Sharma, "Comparative Literature: Its Emergence, Challenges and Suggested Developments", *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2021, pp. 376-380.

46 Pressman, "Electronic Literature as Comparative Literature", *op. cit.*, p. 251; see R. Radhakrishnan, "Why Compare?". *New Literary History*, vol. 40, 2009, p. 454.

she draws attention to the power asymmetries inherent in comparisons between languages and communities. However, she intuitively aligns her argument with a general tendency in Western scholarly discourse to semiotically erase the uncomfortable persistence of Euro-/American-centricity in community management as well as in standards and values of curatorship, data management, creative practice, and scholarship.

To mention a recent example, the ELO's latest collection of international e-lit works, compiled in the *Electronic Literature Collection 4*, shows clear American- and Anglocentric patterns. Whilst overtly following diversifying and inclusive objectives and representing a far greater ethnic and linguistic diversity than its forerunners (31 languages as opposed to 12 in *ELC3*, and 4 in *ELC2* and *ELC1*), the *ELC4* continues to show an overwhelming preponderance for works in English and by authors from the US, Canada, Mexico, the UK, and Australia. Whilst this may be motivated by more visible creative activity in the overrepresented regions and language communities, it paints a skewed picture of editorial preferences and/or selection criteria that might not reflect the very situated constraints facing unselected artists and projects. It is not our intention to dismiss the significant, predominantly voluntary labour and the superb scholarly, technical, and practical expertise underlying the development of this and other key resources provided by the ELO. Like its forerunners, the *ELC4* is and remains a key reference work and one of the e-lit communities' major collective achievements. Yet we feel it is important to draw attention to the ongoing asymmetries in creative and scholarly practice and the need to explore alternative value systems and situated practices in order to open the field to otherwise underrepresented work. Ultimately then, the binaries of English/non-English and inside/outside North America (and now also Mexico) remain pervasive. They lead to continued marginalisation and exclusion, despite the ELO's concerted and well-intentioned efforts to become less normative and more inclusive and representative of unsettling differences.

Our notion of electronic literatureS ventures deeper than the semiotic plurality of languages, codes, and cultures. It brings into relief the specific political and cultural constraints within which e-literatureS emerge, and which give rise to idiosyncratic creative practices, curatorial creativity, and communal imaginaries. In their postcomparative plurality, e-litS can develop unique and inherently untranslatable practices and processes,

from ideation, design, development, and dissemination of works to their curation, preservation, and analysis. Thus, postcomparative e-lit scholarship will reflect and foreground culture-specific logistics, social concerns, epistemologies, and schools of thought without imposing otherworldly standards and presuppositions.

We argue that, despite the best of intentions, universalist, potentialist and transcendentalist notions of world literature,<sup>47</sup> as well as more recent debates of situated, materialist platform comparativism ultimately subscribe to colonialist dispositifs. Even Tabbi's conciliatory, Oulipian-inspired proposal to see world literature as "a [collective and collaborative] reading and writing practice [under constraint], not as a list of texts",<sup>48</sup> glosses over the political stakes, the material and institutional (rather than artistic) constraints and the emergent practices growing out of grassroot e-literary communities in the Global South. It sidelines the fact that the assumption of universal, "shared keywords and metatags"<sup>49</sup> is as utopian as any other Digital Humanities tools and formats that are based in Western categories and epistemologies.<sup>50</sup> We argue that postcomparativist scholarship needs a more destabilising approach that takes "equivalence" rather than "comparison" as a starting point<sup>51</sup> and accounts for the specific historical, social and material context/constraints within which decolonial e-litS emerge and thrive - in all their idiosyncrasies and heterogeneities. Importantly, such an unruly, decolonial approach reflects and embraces linguistic and culture-specific means and modes of expression, datafication, and creativity, even and especially if they deviate significantly and unsettlingly from Western conventions and regimes.

Furthermore, what is crucial for a postcomparativist paradigm is a collaborative, ultimately feminist and intersectional approach to "doing" e-literary scholarship across its various *tertia comparationis* (e.g., languages, codes, cultures, media and their materialities). Such an approach counters

47 See Tabbi, *op. cit.*, drawing on Christopher Prendergast. *Debating World Literature*. London: Verso, 2004; and René Wellek, "The Crisis of Comparative Literature", in: *Concepts of Criticism*, Yale, CT: Yale University Press, 1963, pp. 282-295.

48 *Ibid.* p. 23.

49 *Ibid.* p. 34.

50 See Roopika Risam, *New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis, and Pedagogy*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018.

51 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. "Rethinking Comparativism". *New Literary History*, vol. 40, no. 3, p. 612.

not only ethnocentric single authorship but also the ableist and accessible implications it often engenders. Postcomparative scholarship is committed to decentralised, mutual learning that does away with “epistemic violence”.<sup>52</sup> Our collaboration aims to materialise such an approach, bridging not only ethnic divides but also those of gender, age, and career stage. In doing so, it does not assume a comparative centre in the sense of a stable epistemological basis. Instead, it embraces difference<sup>53</sup> as a starting point and pervasive concept reflected in the what *and* the how of scholarly praxis. In all this, we remain acutely aware of our privileged status as en-abled members of the academic class and of the continuing dilemma facing the digitally disenfranchised subaltern, whose voices we can only tentatively capture and represent. Furthermore, we both use English as a second language of academic communication and are mindful of the blurring of culture-specific affect and epistemological connotations this compromise entails.<sup>54</sup> Our postcomparative discourse engages intensely and profusely with the dynamics of the cultural ecology and the “perspectival subject”<sup>55</sup> under investigation: e-lit in India, which we phrase deliberately as an alternative to deterministic connotations of “Indian e-lit” and leverage as a vignette of e-litS scholarship.

Our postcomparative approach moves us beyond posthumanist dehumanisation and towards a more *co*-relational idea that dismantles the widely overrated and socially fraught agency of things. It centres interspecies, *co*-agent care whilst continuing to recognise and critically engage with material embeddedness and entanglement. We examine the case of e-lit in India through a review of existing research and other nascent activities in the academic space, seen less in territorial, geographical and thus spatial dimensions and more as a social imaginary that operates within cultural and political constraints and whose literary networks operate idiosyncratically while still being informed by American- and Eurocentric theories and practices. Attempting to provide a comprehensive history of e-lit practice in India would of course

52 Sharma, *op. cit.*, p. 379.

53 Linda Gordon, “On Difference”. *Genders*, vol. 10, 1991, pp. 91-111.

54 See Konrad Ehlich, “The Future of German and Other Non-English Languages of Academic Communication”, in: *Globalization and the Future of German*, edited by Andreas Gardt and Bernd Hüppauf. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2004, pp. 173-186.

55 Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, p. 454.

be beyond the scope of one paper. Therefore, we concentrate on how the self-identified term 'e-lit' has found expression among Indian academics – self-identified because literary phenomena included under this highly inclusive label can range from single digital-born and digitised works to entire collections and archives. At the same time, terminological tensions should not be treated as mutually exclusive binaries but as fluid, overlapping signifiers.

### VOCALISING E-LIT IN INDIA

In the past few years, India has been experiencing its own emergence of digital literary arts based in a unique media and institutional ecology. E-lit in Indian academia has been emerging in conjunction with Digital Humanities and Game Studies and has seen a distinctly less siloed, internally regulated and conceptually exclusive development than its cognates in Europe and North America. In an attempt to develop a discourse regarding the development of a supposed site of inquiry away from the hegemonic discourse, our epistemic positions as co-authors, practitioners, researchers and members of specific communities must be accounted for within the framework that we are trying to espouse. Hence, we must critically reflect back on the self and acknowledge its implicit biases while also mentioning the work done. Hence, we imagine the act of historicising e-litS in India in three distinct parts: a) Contexts, b) Situatedness, and c) Beyond. We use the following sections to talk about the work in electronic literature in India and the ambitions that keep dotting its emergent landscape, zooming in on specific aspects of this landscape that co-author Samya Brata Roy has been witnessing and contributing to first-hand. In doing so, we temporarily shift our combined authorial voice to Samya's uniquely situated one and return to bivocality in the final part of this essay.



## CONTEXTS

Acts of historicising are always perspectival. Hence, they cannot and should not claim to be definitive and instead need to frame their positionality in the broader discourse as deliberately incomplete – not in the sense of rigour but in terms of points of view. All forms of identity and intersectional questions, including academic backgrounds and epistemic, methodological preferences, factor into our lived experiences and determine how we construct the field around us. This epistemic humility underscores the following review and autonarrative case study.

An early attempt at understanding e-lit in the Indian context was brought forth by Ritika Singh,<sup>56</sup> who talks about micro-stories in social media and their brevity. She mostly uses social media examples like *Terribly Tiny Tales* from Facebook and *@veryshortstory* from Twitter. Singh examines the use of devices such as planned spaces between words, colours, and enjambments in Twitter fiction to deliver the literary after-taste of “byte-sized” fiction. She explores the ramifications, requirements, and results of this form of brevity and their relation to the digital mode. She mostly looks at reasons and literary affordances that emerge out of this need for being brief. Yet she does not extend the conversation to include any infrastructural concerns or questions regarding platforms and their politics.

In a move to address this gap, Souvik Mukherjee<sup>57</sup> tackles platform-political and infrastructural questions from three perspectives: firstly, the Digital India Programme, which is “a flagship programme of the Government of India with a vision to transform India into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy”;<sup>58</sup> second, he traces the history of non-linear storytelling back to ancient India; and third, he examines the history of computing in India more generally. He traces ancient, nonlinear storytelling forms like *kavad*, which can very well be considered as precursors to e-lit. But he further explains that the reason why non-linear expressions have not converted to the digital mode can be due to a lack of awareness and collaboration. In this

56 Ritika Singh. “Based on Brevity: Fiction in 140 Characters or Less”. *Journal of Literature, Culture and Literary Translation*, vol. 1, no. 7, 2016, pp. 1-19.

57 Souvik Mukherjee. “‘No Country for E-Lit?’ – India and Electronic Literature”. *Hyperbizz: New Media Cultures*, no. 16, 2017. *hyperbizz.io*, doi: 10.20415/hyp/016.e08.

58 <https://digitalindia.gov.in/introduction/> [accessed December 7, 2022].



way, he explores the (non)beginnings of electronic literature in India and thinks through the larger implications of electronic literature in digital culture and Humanities teaching at large.

Shanmugapriya and Menon further build a theoretical argument extending Genette's paratext<sup>59</sup> and a generational typology of Indian Electronic Literature.<sup>60</sup> They advance the connection to India's past of non-linear storytelling even further, following Mukherjee's approach, by locating new literary practices and expressions in Indian digital spaces such as the SMS novel (first generation) and social media micro-narratives (second generation).<sup>61</sup> They use these ideas to open up important questions to ask if we can apply the same conceptualisation of two generations as given by N Katherine Hayles to the Indian electronic literature, with the first generation representing "pre-web, text-heavy, link-driven, mostly hypertext" works strongly indebted to print, and the second comprising web-based and often interactive multimedia from 1995 onward.<sup>62</sup> If not, they ask, how do we define the waves of Indian electronic literature and can the wave metaphor be applied in the first place? More generally, what even is electronic literature in India and is it recognised by the mainstream public, academia and research? These are some of the fundamental questions laid out by the pioneers that have informed our postcomparative approach.

In 2021, draft, an Indian collective of digital literary scholars and artists, became one of the partners of the 2021 ELO conference, which was held online because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The draft community exhibited<sup>63</sup> some works that they had developed and also came up with an archive of sorts called Excavating Electronic Literature (EEL). EEL is an interesting subject of inquiry in itself as far as its curatorial practices and infrastructural conditions are concerned. It does

59 See Shanmugapriya T, Nirmala Menon and Andy Campbell, "An Introduction to the Functioning Process of Embedded Paratext of Digital Literature: Technoeikon of Digital Poetry", *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2019, pp. 646-660.

60 See Shanmugapriya T and Nirmala Menon, "First and Second Waves of Indian Electronic Literature", *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2019, pp. 63-71.

61 See Shanmugapriya T and Nirmala Menon, "Locating New Literary Practices in Indian Digital Spaces", *Matlit*, vol. 6, Aug. 2018, pp. 159-174. *ResearchGate*, doi: 10.14195/2182-8830\_6-1\_11.

62 Leonardo Flores. "Third Generation Electronic Literature". *Electronic Book Review*, April 7, 2019, doi: 10.7273/axyj-3574. Also see Hayles, *op. cit.*

63 <https://eliterature.org/elo2021/> [accessed December 7, 2022].

not explain which e-lit it is collecting. The archive mentions games, collections, digital archives and other non-single-work entries in a list containing “e-lit”. Now the question arises whether I term them as e-lit: perhaps not. But I also should not rule out the possibility altogether as I am also not aware of the rationale behind the selection. Hence, what I should perhaps do now is to enquire about the intentionality behind the queer curatorial praxis. Can a database or a collection exist as an excel sheet? The dra.ft list shows that it definitely can. Hence, it challenges the obsession for having a much more elaborate infrastructure, which should exist according to need<sup>64</sup> and not for the fetish of replication.<sup>65</sup> However, for e-lit in India, I read this not just as a fetish but as an all too familiar anxiety of harking back to the print form. I briefly attempted to highlight these questions in my recent publication,<sup>66</sup> where I examine different forms of solo-writing that take place on platforms like Instagram and Facebook, where people combine graphics or backgrounds that resemble that of the type-writer font. Other than that, most blogs or spaces of online writing feature little or no algorithmic or procedural involvement. One might simply read it as a willingness to not experiment or having no awareness. But I extend the argument to feature how the fetish of print and its familiarity also causes a desire for replication.

Looking at pedagogy, Shanmugapriya and Sutton<sup>67</sup> ponder over the capabilities and potential that e-lit and digital arts, as a powerful source of media, have in general to tackle serious environmental issues by using the Tamil digital poem “Lost Water! Remainscape?” as a case study. Aligarh Muslim University recently organised a GIAN course titled “Digital Literatures and Literatures in the Digital”, which was primarily taught by co-author Astrid Ensslin, interspersed with individual talks and workshops taught by speakers from India. However,

64 See Alex Gil, “The User, the Learner and the Machines We Make Minimal Computing”, *Minimal Computing*, 21 May 2015, <https://go-dh.github.io/mincomp/thoughts/2015/05/21/user-vs-learner/> [accessed December 7, 2022].

65 See Brian Larkin, “The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2013, pp. 327–343 doi: 10.1146/annurev-anthro-092412-155522.

66 Samya Brata Roy. “Indian Solo Electronic Writing and Its Modernist Print Anxiety”, *electronic book review*, Jan. 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022, doi: 10.7273/sj5h-fa44.

67 See Shanmugapriya T and Deborah Sutton, “Electronic Literature as a Method and as a Disseminative Tool for Environmental Calamity through a Case Study of Digital Poetry ‘Lost Water! Remains Scape?’”, *electronic book review*, Feb. 6<sup>th</sup>, 2022, doi: 10.7273/8fce-9302.

this is not the first time e-lit has been featured as a part of pedagogy. Arjun Ghosh's NPTEL 12-week course on *Text, Textuality and Digital Media*<sup>68</sup> features one week on the topic of Electronic Literature, the video of which surfaced on youtube in 2018. Justy Joseph and Nirmala Menon, in their recent book chapter<sup>69</sup> "Electronic Literature in India: Where is it? Does it even exist?", explore the e-publishing landscape in India. They highlight how infrastructural support, amplified by the COVID pandemic, has catapulted digital expressions to the forefront. A full-fledged conference dedicated to "E-Literature"<sup>70</sup> scholarship and pedagogies in India took place at the time of writing, in January 2023, co-organised by Jamia Milia Islamia and Electronic Literature India. In these and similar events, a pattern becomes visible, which combines curated input from Western scholars with that of scholars from India, arguably in an attempt to shape its own, idiosyncratic postcolonial – albeit not yet decolonial – existence.

#### SITUATEDNESS

My introduction to e-lit happened unknowingly via creating narratives on the Internet a long time before discovering e-lit as a field. It happened when I started regularly experimenting in a humble WordPress blog titled *thepenarchist*,<sup>71</sup> which still remains active. It is very textual and nothing out of the ordinary, but it connected the dots for me when I actually discovered the field as it exists from its particular origin points which we have discussed in much detail. I wrote simply because I wanted to share it with others, and I wanted to discover why others write. When people write online, do they write just because they want to? Or is there something more to it? I wanted to go to the roots of it and uncover this question of intentionality. I was mostly keen on two areas: a) gender identity, and b) writing in English. The latter is an important consideration because to feature the multilingual ethos of the country would require a much greater range and support, which hitherto does

68 [https://onlinecourses.nptel.ac.in/noc20\\_hs74/preview](https://onlinecourses.nptel.ac.in/noc20_hs74/preview) [accessed January 4, 2023].

69 See Justy Joseph and Nirmala Menon, "Electronic Literature in India: Where is it? Does it even exist?", Nishat Zaidi and A. Sean Pue eds. *Literary Cultures and Digital Humanities in India*. Routledge. 2022.

70 <https://eliteraturejmi.wordpress.com/> [accessed January 4, 2023].

71 <https://thepenarchist.wordpress.com/> [accessed December 7, 2022].

not exist yet will be indispensable for a decolonial approach. Instead, my focus came to rest on gender identity. I wanted to know the extent to which people who identify as male, female, and non-binary differ in their intentionality of writing in the online space.

Following a grounded-theory approach, I designed an extensive text-based interview questionnaire with open-ended questions and went about amplifying it to collect my data for a total of one month (15<sup>th</sup> March to 15<sup>th</sup> April 2021). I used snowball sampling to collect my data by sharing it across Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter and asking respondents, in turn, to share it further. I ended up with 89 text-based responses from where I drew my conclusions. As most of my responses were open-ended in nature, I had to convert them to qualitative data to discover themes and patterns. In doing so, I did not have access to any qualitative data analysis software through my institution or privately, which is typical of pre-PhD /masters level research in Indian liberal arts and humanities spaces. While analysing the responses manually, I identified similar strands of affect (like boredom, self-improvement, catharsis, community, feel-good) as motivations for online writing, counted the presence of those strands in the responses and then tried to understand the reason behind the dominance of one response strand over another. Because the responses are subjective in nature and categorisation is subjective, the results will also be subjective, as is common in qualitative ethnographic research.<sup>72</sup> It is also important to note that my dataset is too small to allow any generalising conclusions. My intent here was to scratch the surface of the discourse, to understand how people in my sample are thinking about what we call e-litS, and to use the data to devise new questions for future research.

My data collection was driven by two survey questions: “How would you describe your gender and/or sexuality?” and “Why did you start telling stories/sharing creative work online?” I had laid focus on the works that were done by one single individual, which meant the possibility for the least amount of collaborative infrastructure. I wanted to reduce that possibility to an absolute minimum to see what possibilities emerge from such a minimalistic scenario. The types of creative works or texts that I mostly found were Instapoetry pages and WordPress blogs.<sup>73</sup> I

72 See Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, London: SAGE, 2021.

73 See Samya Brata Roy, *op. cit.*

purposefully left the questions open-ended so that the respondents could answer them freely, knowing that this would complicate analysis. In the process of analysing the data, I further subdivided the Gender question into three sub-categories for increased analytical clarity. Gender was thus broken into people who explicitly identified themselves as 'Male' (two respondents who identified as male declared that one of them was not sure about it, the other had non-binary leanings and one declared being 'Cis-Male'), 'Female' (one respondent had identified as 'Womxn' and another declared being 'Cis-Female' which has been included here for the sake of clarity – for which this disclaimer becomes crucial), and Other (people who did not explicitly identify with anything, or identified as 'Cis-Gender'). With the categorisation in place, the data (within a total of 80 valid responses) came to be as follows: 56 were female, 18 were male and 6 belonged to the non-binary spectrum. It is also important to note that, while many female respondents declared being heterosexual, bisexual, queer, etc., most of the male respondents identified as heterosexuals. The data regarding Sexuality, which has been obtained, is not enough to carry out further analysis and demands separate attention. I will thus stick to the question of gender identity for this article.

The next strand is that of understanding the intentionality behind writing online and seeing if it is related to the gendered lived experience. Within the total 16 male responses (20% of the dataset as a whole), I found a strong degree of consistency without much variation: aspects of sharing, creating a community feeling, pursuing a hobby, and just feeling good in general occupied an overwhelming 87.5% of the responses. The remaining 12.5% was shared equally within the emotions of self-improvement and tackling boredom, each having 6.25% representation. Looking at the male dataset as a whole, then, it is evident that the main drive behind their writing is to have a sense of community and feel good about doing so.

The equation changes when we study the female responses. Similarly, here also the respondents are talking about building a community and sharing with each other. This aspect of community building figures 42.62% per cent of the dataset as compared to the 87.5% in males. The other part is where things start to get interesting. The respondents talk about healing, venting and how writing online also has a therapeutic

side to it. I find this cathartic functionality to be vital and it features in a good 30.0%. Adding to the question of healing via venting, the most important discovery in this part comes in the aspect of freedom, oppression, inferiority complex and a desire to bring about change. Respondents speak about how the online space provides them with a much-needed platform where no-one will oppress them and through which, in turn, they can inspire change. Not only that, but some respondents also explain how this space helps them overcome the fear of public writing and anxieties of not being good enough. The theme of emancipation features in 18.1% of the dataset. It might seem insignificant as compared to other responses, but it is important to note how the act of defiance and speaking up against the gaze of the patriarchal forces can inspire a chain reaction, and that is why conversations must be amplified regarding the use of this mode as a tool for emancipation. If we talk about writing the body or expressing lived experiences, we can see directly via the data how it is being done in the online space where people who identify as women or females are taking up the metaphorical pen to write their selves.

By studying personal narratives, we can arrive at a better societal understanding regarding the online public sphere. Furthermore, because we are talking about online culture and writing in the online space, I think it is even more important to write about the act of writing. Writing about writing as a form of metatheory, and metapraxis helps in starting a discourse amongst like-minded individuals and bringing it into the fold of the Humanities departments in general. This is important because the Humanities, traditionally speaking, in their educational curricula and otherwise, have not always willingly embraced the online sphere and have only recently begun to integrate digital methods more systematically.<sup>74</sup> These conversations help amplify not only academic but also creative output, which can help promote notions of Digital Literacy.<sup>75</sup> We have been taught to read and write in print, but we

74 See Timothy Brennan, "The Digital-Humanities Bust", *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 15 Oct. 2017, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-digital-humanities-bust/> [accessed December 7, 2022].

75 See PTI, "Vice President Naidu Calls for Mass Movement to Promote Digital Literacy – Times of India", *The Times of India*, Nov 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/education/news/vice-president-naidu-calls-for-mass-movement-to-promote-digital-literacy/articleshow/79448071.cms> [accessed December 7, 2022].

have not been given any training to express ourselves artistically in the digital space. If this is taken care of, people will likely build greater confidence in navigating the Internet without unnecessary anxieties about unexpected pop-ups and other algorithmic noise. Therefore, in the attempt to understand the gendered intentionality of online writing in India, two things emerge very clearly from the data at hand. Self-identified female individuals dominate online spaces when it comes to creative output. This presence has deep connections to the oppressive power politics that women in India face on a day-to-day basis, where writing emerges as an act of defiance and emancipation,<sup>76</sup> and the online writing space emerges as a medium with comparatively less judgement. Women in India are harassed regularly and more frequently online. But currently, the digital remains a determining factor for people, especially people who identify as females, to express themselves more freely and openly. Photos and other accessible means of visually static content draw attention and increase the chances of public sharing, commenting, and shaming. But when it comes to writing (expressing the self/body through words and not images), online spaces can be empowering in a patriarchal society where women writing does not get adequate and egalitarian attention (especially in a photo-based platform like Insta or even in a blog for that matter).

It becomes clear that self-proclaimed online writers in my sample use the Internet mostly to vent out or just share things with their communities. For more technical and material experimentation afforded by high-spec technologies like AR/VR or even generative works that will be undertaken by common people and not just professional coders, I think we still have some paths to traverse – paths that can only be built on the basis of increased public funding and more readily available educational means.

#### BEYOND

Building an archive or a multimodal work of art cannot be the creative endeavour of one person in most cases. My attempts started off with creating an entry or subdatabase for e-lit in India in the ELMCIP

76 See Travis M. Foster and Christopher Hager, "Review of Word by Word: Emancipation and the Act of Writing", *Journal of the Civil War Era*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2014, pp. 124-126.



Knowledge Base, but I very soon realised just how overwhelming this task was and that I would need an entire community of volunteers for a concerted yet simultaneously precarious effort. It became clear to me that representational diversity in user-edited databases like ELMCIP can only happen in egalitarian ways if funding is made available to compensate for the considerable resources this requires from notoriously disenfranchised individuals and communities. Even if digital artists in India want to create e-lit, they are often unaware of the prevailing discourses or resources, and because of this, the work often may not reach the intended audiences.<sup>77</sup>

The experiences that I will share are primarily born from the formation of Electronic Literature India,<sup>78</sup> the first space in India to facilitate discussions about e-lit in India. In an area as new and fluid as Electronic Literature, a community like this can serve two purposes: help early-career scholars like myself have a voice, discover new areas and form connections, and help popularise the discipline in itself as a possible area of research and collaboration. Meanwhile, it is nontrivial that my reference to ELitIndia is that of a Twitter page. Usually, one would expect there to be a website. However, the community runs primarily on WhatsApp, which cannot be cited as a source of existence, and is based in individualised, ad-hoc labour. Thus, in the absence of funded institutionalisation, we as a community have not been able to come up with a website as of yet. That will happen once we have more support and hands to distribute the labour. Community formation thus holds the tremendous power to cut through access barriers. However, one cannot also claim these spaces to be absolutely democratic as cultural capital and different forms of privilege and privileging will always find expression. Both creating a space and reaching the intended audience are very difficult tasks which are further amplified by the digital divide, gatekeeping, and myriad other factors. The information does not reach comprehensively and even when it does, it is impeded by financial, infrastructural, emotional, and social access barriers. Perhaps this has been one of the advantages of the online mode where people like me,

77 See Scott Rettberg, "Communitizing Electronic Literature", *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 2, June 2009; Mukherjee, *op. cit.*; and Shanmugapriya T and Nirmala Menon, "Infrastructure and Social Interaction: Situated Research Practices in Digital Humanities in India", *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2020.

78 <https://twitter.com/ELitIndia> [accessed December 7, 2022].



who consider themselves privileged enough to have a stable broadband connection and sufficient streaming capacity in their personal computational equipment, could attend events all around the world from their living rooms during COVID induced lockdown. Yet, to play the devil's advocate, there is still one aspect that is lacking – that of networking. In face-to-face events, people generally mingle with each other over food during breaks, and that is where the connections form. The connections become so intrinsic over time that one does not realise them to be connections in the first place. Some online events have tried, with great success, to have separate networking events that are just meant for hanging out. No matter what we can do, that element of organicity of face-to-face interactions can never be located here, primarily due to digital fatigue. Having someone to share one's vague and uninformed ideas with can form a steppingstone for greater things to come, which is all the more reason why networking and hierarchical communication in general should be taught.<sup>79</sup> The so-called venerable research rigour comes with time but that first push of acknowledgement (be it with criticism) becomes crucial, especially but not exclusively for early-career scholars. Thus, the lack of physical co-locatedness and other normative infrastructural determiners are significant factors in building and growing an e-lit community, or indeed any community, in India or elsewhere.

Therefore, while doing my study to find how gender and intention are connected to solo creativity online, I also had the notion of community formation at the back of my head. The people who are engaged in a similar work of sorts must benefit from a space where commonalities can be discussed. As a result, my questionnaire was hyperlinked to another where I asked the clickers to ponder if they would like to become part of such a community. Just under a quarter of my respondents signed up for such an endeavour. At that point, I decided to pool resources from other societies operating along similar lines to populate my group. I refer to this as “Communities of Communities” in a DHSI 2021 talk. DHARTI<sup>80</sup> (Digital Humanities Alliance for Research and Teaching

79 Ciula, Arianna, Michelle Doran, Jennifer Edmond, Paul Gooding, Lorna Hughes, Orla Murphy, Samya Brata Roy, et al. 2022. “Promoting Diversity and Inclusivity in Digital Humanities in Ireland and the UK”. OSF Preprints. April 6. doi: 10.31219/osf.io/63wdr.

80 <https://dhdharti.in/> [accessed December 7, 2022].

Innovations happens to be a DH body based in India) and DiGRA India<sup>81</sup> (formerly Games Studies India and now the India chapter of Digital Games Research Association) were two of the most prominent spaces that helped solidify the bedrock of Electronic Literature India.

A community cannot exist in thin air; it needs one or more platforms to establish itself. Choosing a platform comes with its own set of affordances and politics based on positionality. I asked about the platform preference in the survey form itself, and WhatsApp emerged as a clear winner. When others hear that an academic community exists mainly on a personal messaging service, I expect them to raise eyebrows and ask me why. The simple reason is convenience. I have seen most academic and non-academic conversations happen, albeit with hiccups, on WhatsApp simply because it is one solution that a majority of community members have access to through their mobile phones, which remains the key digital technology in India, across urban and rural communities. Furthermore, there is no need to download another app. Platforms like Slack or Discord, which may work for many ELO members around the world, do not work here. Here, it becomes essential to locate the platform within the affordances of the masses to access it from various spaces owing to the digital divide that exists. If the space exists outside people's reach, it misses its purpose. However, choosing a perceptibly more democratic platform like WhatsApp does not come without its problems. We have had people sending unnecessary messages and not understanding the context of the group. There has been some amount of monitoring, and there is no way around it. Furthermore, if a space is accessible, that makes it disposable as well, which I think works as an advantage for us. Many people with totally different expectations found themselves out of place and very swiftly left. Initially, this may create a sense of it not being settled, but slowly it has come down to a more stable community of practice with a core intact. Needless to say, however, in this process of stabilisation, some fell by the wayside. But why is all this important for e-lit in India? We are very much at a field-setting stage for e-lit in India and thus getting the voices in one space becomes crucial now both academically and creatively. Once that is done, we can happily branch out and decenter, which must happen for a discipline to thrive beyond its own confines.

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81 <https://digraindia.com/> [accessed December 7, 2022].

Now that we initially had a solid group of scholars, academicians, practitioners, and students in ELitIndia, it was also important to showcase it. I remember it was the 29th of April 2021: International Day of DH, when Dr Dibyadyuti Roy gave me the idea to start the Twitter handle of the group. It attracted a sizable following. Ever since, I have made it a point to talk about Electronic Literature India at public events to gain greater visibility. It is not the same as talking about e-lit works and creative practices, but community formation is a central part of understanding the field. Hence, how I talk about e-lit is different from others: a lot of contextual, situated detail has to be unpacked to understand my perspective. Here I am very grateful to the Electronic Literature Organisation for their encouragement as well. However, does the responsibility of a community end at academics and academics only? Absolutely not. Once again, here I draw from first-hand experience during the second wave of COVID-19 and how it showed the immense power of what happens when people come together in times of distress. I call this a malleable feature of building ecosystems of support. During the second wave, we stopped all academic activities and just focused on standing by others. We were sharing statuses of vacant hospital beds, available oxygen cylinders and other existential matters, in the hope that perhaps we would be able to make a change. Aditya Deshbandhu and Sejal Sahni studied a similar phenomenon, where a WhatsApp group on fantasy cricket repurposed itself into a site of care and support.<sup>82</sup> As communities, we must not only know when to prioritise work but also when not to. Yet, after showcasing and garnering awareness, now is the time to conceptualise the next steps – steps that lead towards a decolonial set of practices based in their own protocols and platforms while productively drawing on its existing links with the rest of the world. The practice is necessarily rhizomatic in that it needs to begin to deviate diversely and in unruly manners from dominant discourses in order to build its own teachable theorizations. That said, even if the praxis is not hegemonically centred, the approach to pedagogy does unfortunately begin from there as a conscious effort to decolonise.

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82 Aditya Deshbandhu and Sejal Sahni. "Repurposing a WhatsApp Group: How a Fantasy Cricket Group Transformed into a Site of Care and Support during India's Second Wave of Covid-19". *Mobile Media & Communication*, 2022, doi: 10.1177/20501579221137998.

## CONCLUSION: TOWARDS POSTCOMPARATIVE E-LIT SCHOLARSHIP

Focusing on a network or a community is a personally situated way of talking about the rise of a discipline in a specific region and cultural context and in no way definitive in any sense of the term. ELitIndia does not have a website and just functions on WhatsApp and Twitter. Now, there are two questions we must ask: a) Does a website help? Yes; b) Is it absolutely necessary? Perhaps not. Not having a website should not render the community as an ineligible infrastructure of support. Sadly, however, that is where the normative beliefs lie. But, in order to create that, it would require several hours of labour that is beyond the capabilities of one person. We must come together for that. Also, the DHARTI 2022 conference<sup>83</sup> panel on “Literature and the Electronic in the Global South” was as successful as the conference itself. We had two fantastic speakers in Sutirtho Roy (a then masters student) and Praveen Sinha (a non-academic creative coder). Thus, while we did manage to break new grounds in terms of academic hierarchy and branching out of academia, one must also note that both speakers on the panel including the chair were all men. Some patterns can only be broken with time. Organisations and communities are important for the act of mobilisation but must allow for new voices to emerge by openly discarding their hegemonic roots and by proactively inviting underrepresented individuals to join, enrich and problematise its existing discourses. A discipline or field of inquiry can only thrive when we reach the act of decentering, which is where the postcomparative ethic is born.

Returning to bivocality thus, this essay has been an experiment for us – an experiment much along the lines of how writers and artists of electronic literature practise and understand their work: as an interrogation, transformation and ultimately subversion of a dynamic and entangled array of forms, platforms, protocols, technologies, as well as their political and socioeconomic underpinnings. For us, it was important to explore how a decolonial move away from Western-centric argumentation and univocality might manifest itself in a scholarly genre with such rigid

83 <https://dhdharti.in/dharti-2022-conference/> [accessed December 7, 2022].

institutional rules, standards and boundaries as the comparative literature essay. We have chosen an openly bivocal approach with deliberate stylistic diversity that is nevertheless embedded in a shared discourse and the need for dialogue and mutual, non-hierarchical learning. We introduced the concept of electronic literatureS as a postcolonial form of queering an allegedly global field of creative practice and scholarship. The truth is that the term “global” as hitherto used in the field glosses over socio-economic, infrastructural, social and institutional idiosyncrasies in a way that inevitably perpetuates hegemonic notions of the colonial core and its binary, collectivised Other.

Postcomparative e-literary scholarship does not just move beyond the fraught idea of comparing in the first place. It puts its posthuman actors in new and often complicated collaborative constellations that are co-relational in that they place humanitarian interests over posthuman ones. Such an approach comes with considerable challenges and the need for mutual compassion and patience. Full reciprocal understanding remains a utopian venture due to the very situatedness of each actor in the entanglement. Yet we have found this challenge to be refreshing and rewarding and hope it will help set the stage for e-literatureS as a broader, messier, and thus practically more inclusive field of literary scholarship.<sup>84</sup>

Astrid ENSSLIN  
and Samya Brata Roy,  
Universität Regensburg  
and IIT Jodhpur

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84 Acknowledgements: The Open Access version of this paper was generously funded by the Writing New Bodies project (SSHRC Insight Grant no. 435-2018-1036). For his contribution, Samya Brata Roy drew inspiration from the works of and conversations with scholars and creative practitioners like Barbara Bordalejo, Roopika Risam, Lyle Skains, Deena Larsen, P.P. Sneha, Dibyadyuti Roy, Nirmala Menon, Padmini Ray Murray, Shanmugapriya T, Souvik Mukherjee, Poonam Chowdhury, Zahra Rizvi and Sritama Chatterjee.