



# **Orality and Orality: Manifesto of the Unwritten II**

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# On the Unwritten Speech Communities

- Last year, at the *Sahitya Akademi* Symposium on Unwritten Languages, I had raised this issue: Is it a curse for the dialects to remain unwritten? If so, what does it entail?
- I am beginning to revise my question that would push me to the other extreme now: Is it or isn't it a boon for dialects and speech varieties to remain largely spoken? That is because spontaneity and originality lied only in the Oral, and not when we pin it down to writing.
- Must all “languages” be chiselled, polished, perfected, and written down, removing all traces of spontaneity and outbursts of instant thoughts of the indigene? Is that the ultimate height that a Speech could strive to achieve? (Ghalib: *To be consumed by ocean is the droplet's ecstasy*, or *Ishrat-e qatraa hai daryaa m̃e fanaa ho jaanaa*)
- I had then stated that members of Unwritten Speech Communities would be able to feel how painful it could be to remain confined to orality only when they knew what the Written World could achieve, which one could not, otherwise.
- Whereas it is also true that the joy of being able to put out our thoughts on visual & virtual spaces is incomparable, or that having one's own feelings or wishes expressed graphically has a tremendous “value” or potential in a material world is realized by more and more languages that are slowly coming into the orbit of the literate world.



# Writing - a Technology? A Tool for Oppression?

- **Could 'Writing' be called the destiny of Speech, or was it only a 'technique' of rendering the Spoken Word as it appeared “to have been evolved from an extension of *Picture Signs* : signs that directly and iconically represented some thing or action and then the word that bore that meaning” (*Encyclopedia Britannica*).**
- **Here the assumption is that a time comes when a given Speech Community resorts to the technology of Writing that replicates – albeit inaccurately, what is being said, or what could have been said – something that would otherwise remain submerged under the millions of thought particles in our mind.**
- **But philosophers such as Rousseau were highly suspicious of ‘Writing’ as they thought it to be “an instrument of oppression because its various powers and capacities were exercised by the few at the expense of the many.” (Christopher Norris: ‘Derrida and Orality: Grammatology revisited’ <http://www2.lingue.unibo.it/acume/acumedvd/zone/research/essays/norris.htm>).**



# From Saussure to Derrida Via Plato

It is not surprising that Saussure would take a position that writing has a corrupting influence on speech, and hence in his scheme of things, *the Oral* has primacy over *the Written*. After all, in chronology, speech comes before writing as there is no recorded instance of a culture that developed writing before it was able to speak and communicate through spoken sounds.

- In his classic essay 'Plato's Pharmacy,' Derrida argued that Plato had a deep mistrust of writing, influenced by his teacher Socrates, who made a virtue of writing nothing. Once again, the basis of their belief was that the written word had a corrupting influence on spoken language and, through that, on the "truth-seeking exercise of human reason".



<https://lillith19702004.wordpress.com/2011/10/20/platos-pharmacist-thoth/>

Exactly opposite to this is Derrida's position in *Of Grammatology* where he **first admits** that speech/writing opposition was central to all binary distinctions - between nature and culture, philosophy and literature, reason and rhetoric, concept and metaphor, male and female, and **then claims** that spoken language would always presuppose the possibility of writing which is destined to be the only way human speech passes through, from being natural to being 'cultural'.

# Melody & Harmony

PARALLEL TO 'ORALITY' AND 'WRITTEN' LANGUAGE



Since Rousseau dabbled into music as well, he observed that that the French music of his day had become unduly elaborate, ingenious, complex, and 'civilized' (artificial), whereas the Italian music of the time was still close to heart, full of passion, spontaneous, and authentic with intense vocal gestures.

The binary distinction Rousseau was hinting at was between being 'Melodious' and 'Harmonious.'

In fact, Melody had no need of harmony, and good music -- authentic music -- is, at all times, pure melody, with no need of the 'dangerous supplement' of harmony, just as authentic spoken language has no need for the 'dangerous supplement' of writing. Harmony is a mere supplement, added to the otherwise self-sufficient nature of melody, so that -- at a certain point in its historical development -- music took this path toward artifice, corruption and false sophistication.

- That is exactly what has happened to the Written Words that had grown out of Spoken or Oral Literature.



# Manifesto of the Unwritten II

- In 1909, Feb 20, the Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti penned 'I manifesti del futurismo', or 'Futurist Manifesto' where – at the turn of a century– he advocated rejection of the past to bring in modernisation & cultural rejuvenation – in celebration of speed, machinery, violence, youth and industry.
- The calm and composed life of the '*bhadralok*' in India penning insipid poetry far removed from reality, or a relaxed civilized existence of the gentry in Europe perpetuating its colonial rule in different parts of the world before 1900 AD - gave rise to this text.
- The Futurist Manifesto said things in 1909 when one could neither imagine the two World Wars nor the Russian Revolution, but this was an attempt to push the limits of literature to accept industrialization, speed of change, and sudden onslaught of all-around progress, and emerge as a platform to absorb all these changes, and help man pass through all variations and tribulations.
- Unfortunately, it also eulogised the hygienic properties of wars and violence through which cleansing and purification happen. Demolition of all things past including libraries and museum, and fighting all forms of cowardice are peculiarly blended with this manifesto.
- A question: Would the new Manifesto of the Oral Literature like to create new genres and narrative structures in defiance of the ways known so far in the written world? Also, since all unwritten languages give primacy to speaking or emitting meaningful noises, all their creativity have to do with deployment and manipulation of noises and performances accompanying them, what could one say about the art and aesthetics of noises?

# Writing: The Question of Origin



- **If the Cultural World believes that Writing and Harmony are indeed the ultimate products, and all thinks Spoken and Sung were nothing but amateurish attempts at creativity associated with the Indigene, the Aborigin and the Primitive, one could then argue that even if Writing was a chance discovery of human beings that arose from Man's creative urge, after this technology is discovered, it was put to erase one curse of the Oral – namely, the 'Rapid fading.'**
- **Derrida too thinks that somehow Writing has this ability to survive – something he said while commenting on Austin's 'Speech Act Theory' in 1971: Writing survives and thrives, and manages to be relevant to or communicate with members of the linguistic community beyond the writer's lifetime.**
- **Writing was also Man's attempt to rid himself from the second curse of 'Groundedness,' as an oral text was 'grounded' – bound by both vertical and horizontal dimensions. Writing thus mysteriously wins over the Spatial and Temporal limitations of Speech.**

# Is 'Written' Superior to the 'Spoken'?



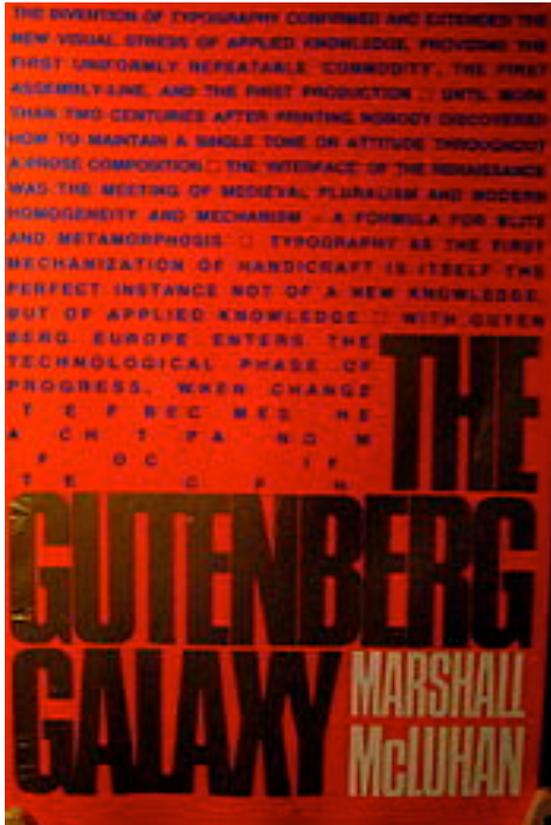
- **The sophisticated and the elite think this is true. But in the Indian tradition, the belief that a Warrior-King could sacrifice his life but could not compromise with his oral promise (प्राण जाय पर वचन न जाय) makes us believe otherwise.**
- **Many others, however, believe that it is only the Written and Formalised Agreements or Promises that could be trusted.**
- **But the problem with the written Text is that often there are none to respond to any queries or doubts or counter-questions. There would be none to resolve when the written word has multiple interpretations, whereas Spoken Performance or Parole being spontaneous, one has all the means of asking questions and clarifications.**
- **Derrida appeared to be saying that writing is in some sense prior to speech – of course not historically, chronologically, or developmentally prior but prior in the sense that spoken language presupposes the possibility of writing, that the potential for writing – along with many of its structural characteristics – is built into the very nature of language from the outset.**

# The Curse of Iconicity: Writings on the Wall

- ❑ **As iconic expressions, writings have the burden of both hiding and expressing meanings. Rather than resolving the problem of ambiguity, the Written Texts are open to numerous interpretations – just as painted images are.**
- ❑ **Writings at times begin practicing brevity – much less symbols and signs for something that was spoken with so much of eloquence, as if the two are different performances.**
- ❑ **At other times, speech is minimal, and writing elaborates it with numerous *Tiikaas* & commentaries**
  - ❑ **The other curse of the written world is to remain tied to another text that has precedence, i.e. To be only "iconic" – not the real thing, to be "derivative" – or translative, not the original.**
  - ❑ **No wonder we use expressions such as 'transcript' or verbs like 'transliterate,' because '*Trans*-' as we know is a word-forming element that means "across, beyond, through, on the other side of, to go beyond," derived from Latin, and perhaps originally present participle of a verb \*trare-, meaning "to cross".**



# The Typographic Man



- ❑ Marshall McLuhan (1962) argues that several features that would define a Modern (so-called “Cultured”) Man has come from the invention of movable type as it allowed people to be re-invented.
- ❑ In some manner, it freed people from the “Delusion of the Variable,” and created a standardised automated homogeneous space to play with language, as according to him, *“the world of visual perspective is one of unified and homogeneous space. Such a world is alien to the resonating diversity of spoken words. So language was the last art to accept the visual logic of Gutenberg technology”*.
- ❑ He thinks that this move towards the Written was a cultural change that helped in the shaping up of the notions - democracy, capitalism, nationalism, dualism, domination of rationalism, automatisisation of scientific research, uniformation and standardisation of culture as well as alienation of individuals.
- ❑ The Four Epochs of History as described by McLuhan are:
  - ❑ 1. The Oral Tribe Culture
  - ❑ 2. The Manuscript Culture
  - ❑ 3. The Gutenberg Galaxy
  - ❑ 4. The Electronic Age
- ❑ The idea is that advancement of each epoch terminates the earlier stage, just as the advent of the print medium made an end of the Scribe or Manuscript tradition. The latter was established as the Oral tradition ended, etc.
- ❑ Teaching children Reading and Writing in Schools means an end of their Oral phase when they were to memorise, reproduce, sing or narrate from memory nursery rhymes, etc.

# **Let's be clear:**

## **Is War Against 'Illiteracy' a Battle Against 'Orality'?**

- **From President Nicolas Sarkozy to Prime Minister Modi, all public figures are against the “ills” or “curse” of Illiteracy.**
- **In a world, where trade, commerce and economy are dependent upon “the Written,” inability to handle reading and writing would surely deprive citizens from getting the benefits of various kinds.**
- **But one perhaps needs to make a difference between members of a largely literate linguistic community who have not had the opportunity to be schooled or taught how to read and write, and those who belong to a community that does not yet put their (spoken) language to writing.**
- **In the first case, one may be a fluent speaker of a written language who has no access to a large number of domains of language use only because of the lack of knowledge of its written conventions. The second group may contain members that are efficiently literate in the “Other-tongue” or in the Regional language(s) but not in their “Mother-tongue”, because their own language has never been put to writing. One could then say that they have only ‘Orality’ in their Mother-tongue but have ‘Literacy’ in some other languages**
- **It is not that their Mother-tongue does not have any creative potential. But it is just that all forms of creative expressions in their mother-tongue are in the Oral Literary form and not in the Written Discourse. Thus it is ‘Orality’ that dominates their domain of creativity.**
- **In this context, it would be good to look at works such as Erik Redling’s (2006) “Speaking of Dialect”: Translating Charles W. Chestnut’s *Conjure Tales* into Postmodern Systems of Configuration (Worzburg: Konigshausen & Neumann) that could contribute further into our understanding of the Spoken and the Written.**

# Ong's Theory of Orality & Literacy

- **Walter j Ong (1982) in *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word*, says that the concepts of 'Orality' and 'Literacy' should be ideally understood historically - in terms of development of Oral Cultures into Written Cultures.**
- **Ong sets up a distinction between 'Primary Orality,' or "orality of a culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print," and "Secondary Orality" of today's "high-technology culture, in which a new kind of orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television, and other electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print."**
- **In that way, Writing may open wonderful worlds but the Spoken word still lives and resides – to which Writing keeps on referring to, directly or indirectly. From that point of view, Ong reverses the hierarchy of Speech and Writing, because according to his arguments, the natural State of Words is in their spoken form – uttered by a real person at a real time to another or more real human beings in a real setting.**
- **So, "though words are grounded in oral speech, writing tyrannically locks them into a visual field forever." Therefore, by contrast with natural oral speech, writing is completely artificial, from the dynamic & living entities, they become static & dead.**
- **The Orally-based thought and expression of pristine Oral culture and the Typographically based thinking are miles apart, as the Oral is additive, aggregative, redundant, and conservative, whereas the Written is subordinative, analytical, linear and could be radically original – completely divested from its original base culture.**
- **Therefore, Orality preceded Literality – both synchronically and diachronically. Viewed this way, the dialectal fictions or use of dialects in fiction may have to be looked into differently.**

# **Bilingualism and the Vertical Split of Text-Types**

- **As could be seen, The relationship between the Oral and the Written have been a matter of great concern from Plato down to Rousseau and Saussure, and from Derrida to Ong – each one making pertinent points but not presenting a total picture how we could relate and understand the relationship between Written Literature and the Oral forms of creativity.**
- **Add to that the fact that a very significant number of human beings can handle more than one speech variety or perhaps several written varieties as well. That further complicates the picture.**
- **Add to that also emergence of so-called L-varieties or Dialects of a major Standard Language as forms of creative expressions in the form of fiction or films. An Awadhi song or a spirited Magahi curse, or a Hadauti poem that may catch our attention even as we get used to insipid KhaRi-Boli writings, it is quite often the oral expressions that bring in radically refreshing feeling to all those who are exposed to them.**
- **And individual idiolects such as the sayings of Ramakrishna Paramhansa with full of abusive oral expressions and curses as recorded in typographic form by ‘Shri M’ – or the week-long Oral Epics in Maithili such as *Raja Salhes*, *Naika-Banijara*, or *Lorikayan* could be taken as the best examples of how Oral Texts could create a massive bonding among members of a speech community, and how each such text leaves open ample space to interpolate modern-day political stories or episodes from mythology to expand them further – something the live Javanese Puppet Epics keep doing all the time.**

# Memories of the Future of Oral Expressions

- Let me end this talk with an issue raised by the Jewish-American Poet-Translator Ammiel Alcalay (1999) in his *Memories of Our Future: Selected Essays 1982-1999* (San Francisco: City Light Books).
- Alcalay quotes Adonis to argue that all poetry (and perhaps, all writing) is reading of the world around and the things in it – reading of things charged with words, or of words tied to things. Here ‘Language’ is not a mere tool to communicate a detached meaning but is often a message itself (Recall McLuhan’s “The medium is the message”). Language here is so enmeshed with Meaning that it is inseparable from Thought, and a constituent of Human Consciousness. It could only be succeeded by Knowledge.
- At the same time, quoting the poet Jack Spicer, Alcalay says that the words around the immediate have this characteristics of getting shrivelled and decayed just as the flesh around the human body. Nothing – no “mummy-sheet of tradition” can stop this decay and degeneration. Only those objects and words that lead us across time would stick out to talk about the real thing.
- In fact, as Rethabile Marriet Possa (2011: 3) hypothesizes in her dissertation (‘The Place of Oral Literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Perspective on Basotho Proverbs’): “oral literature is not only assumed to be dynamic and resilient, but it is also perceived to be timeless.”
- She practically echoes the assumptions best explained in this statement of Shitemi (2009:87):  
**“Oral literature is art form that has withstood the weather and storms of time; and the ravages of the convergence and divergence of cultures, languages, lifestyles and environmental dynamism. However, oral literature, being part and parcel of modes of social expression, survives over time as a genre that aptly adapts to changes and challenges. These include creation, transmission, usage, preservation and emergent orientations that require expression and commentary.”**  
[Shitemi, N. 2009. Discourse on Semiotic and Functional Perspective of Narratology. The Journal of African Studies. Vol 2, No 8. pp78-108]