

‘Lost water! Remains Scape?’: Transformation Waterscapes in Coimbatore from past to present through digital poetry

Both digital humanities and digital literature are originated through an experimentation with computers in the West. Digital Humanities began with Robert Busa’s experimentation with computers for creating Index for Thomas Aquinas’ works. Similarly electronic literature was born when Christopher Strachey and Theo Lutz using computer to experiment the creative works in mid-twentieth century (Funkhouser 37). Later both fields were established through supports from the institutions, funding schemes, courses and programmes and other academic and research activities of the scholars in these fields. But these may look two distinct fields based on their fundamental approach towards creativity as one is producing creative works and another is applying creative method to study works of humanities disciplines. However, electronic literature is part of digital humanities and even it can be visa versa which can be explained in two ways. For example, 1. digital humanities can adopt the creative practice for building its method, organization and production. Electronic literature can be a more instrumental approach of DH for widening its praxis. 2. Since digital humanities investigates both digital born and digitized materials by using digital technologies, such approaches can be deployed to critically analyse the digital born creative works.

The best example we can think of for interlinking the e-lit and DH is the Story writing machine in the novel Vendor of Sweets by R.K. Narayan (Narayan 74). It was published in the mid-20th century. The writer introduces a machine which can provide a formula for the story by clicking a few buttons of themes like love, revenge and hate and the interesting part is once the story is ready, the author can again use the machine for the text analysis of the story which is of course one of the cutting-edge features of digital humanities nowadays. What we are trying to say is that as this story writing machine, both the creative practice and scholarly practice of elit and DH have more affinity and capable of blurring the boundaries between humanities disciplines. Such interlinking has been established in the western countries. For example, the annual conference of electronic literature organization provides a space for both the performance of creative works and scholarly production of electronic literature. Similarly, some of digital humanities conference and workshops offer platforms for digital artists and researchers. However, in India we have some specific issues to deal with such as our education system rigidly follows the conventional mode of teaching and researching which resulted in lack of advanced computer literacy for humanities scholars and students and lack of arts and humanities literacy to the computer science students. Computer literacy is understood as a fundamental tool to obtain a job and not to explore/create literature and art.

The digital poetry ‘Lost water! Remains Scape?’ is written in Tamil by the environmental poet Mohamed Rafiq and in English by Shanmugapriya T, the co-author of this paper. It is created using 2D and 3D environments, and photos in Blender and Adobe Animate software. The 2D and 3D environments reflect the narrative about the ecosystem of waterscapes in the past and the photo animations represent the current situation of the water bodies in Coimbatore, the southern region in South India. This digital poetry is created based on the findings from our AHRC-funded project ‘Digital Innovations in Water Scarcity, Coimbatore, South India’. This interdisciplinary project investigates the changed waterscape in Coimbatore, South India across

150 years by using range of materials and activities including studying historical maps and satellite imagery, and conducting interviews with local farmers, activists and NGOs. This digital poetry is an endeavour to bridge gap between digital literature and digital humanities. The questions we ask in this paper are how can the adoption/integration of digital literary method be an effective agency and actor to represent the environmental objects and disseminate the findings for targeted audiences? How can tools and methods contribute to the digital humanities and digital literature grounded in materials from the global south? The main aim of this paper is to explore the digital literary method as an effective agency to communicate the research findings to the broader public.

Reminiscence is the primary theme of our digital poetry. It will be mediated through text, animations and images. Waterscape is an imperative source and forms a conducive ecological community in every villages of the region Coimbatore. It is a primary source for drinking, irrigation and other economic and cultural activities. However, the forgotten waterscapes due to drought, dereliction and climate change have become conduit of drainage waters, and garbage dumping areas. The photos that have taken during our field visits depict the current condition of waterbodies among which most of them are in dreadful state. On the other hand, the oral testimonies of the local farmers illustrate a different situation of waterscapes a few decades ago. They narrated how they were blessed to have had a healthy waterscape in the past. They also told us that there were particular flora and fauna that belong to the region had been destroyed and some of the specific species such as Noyyal Otter had gone extinct. The interactive 2D and 3D environment of digital poetry will provide a revisitation to such lost waterscapes created based on the oral testimonies. It will also portray the current condition of waterscapes through photo animation and text narration. This digital poetry will be disseminated to students, scholars, activists and the general public through our academic and NGO partners and local schools and colleges. Feedback and some of the interviews conducted will be made available via the project website.

1. Historical map: The below image shows the British India historical map and the shiny element represents the rivers and tanks in the region. This stage is divided into four layers based on the segregation of the Coimbatore region: Coimbatore, Erode, Tripur and Karur. Each layer visualizes the river and the disappearing and shrinking tanks in the district. The red colour represents disappeared tanks and blue colour is shrinking tanks. The poem and the text are implanted in the arrow images. They will pop up when the user/player moves the cursor near to them.
2. 3D environment of the river: The 3D digital animations of embodied features of waterscape such as the flowing water, fish, butterflies and trees portray the beautiful landscape of the river once Coimbatore had in the past. This animation will provide a revisit to the past and the poetry will arouse the emotions and reimagines the waterscape through both the rhetoric visuals and words. Apart from this, this will provide some intriguing details about the rivers and tanks in the region which are extracted from the ethnographic study, historical texts and literature. For example, how 30 historical tanks and 23 anicuts of Noyyal river were created during the Chola period to store its surplus water and to avoid flooding in the region and how this marvellous engineering

technique in the past kept the ground water level high. The rivers Cauvery and Bhavani confluence at the place Kooduthurai in Erode; however, the locals believe that another river called Amirtha nathi is also joining with these rivers underneath the rivers.

3. 3D environment of tanks and channels: This animation illustrates the function of the tank system in the early period. The poetry and texts that appended with the tanks narrates the functioning of the tank system in the past and how that has a connection and creates a cultural landscape in the local custom. For example, most of the local Hindu festivals begin and end with bringing water from these tanks of what accentuate the pivotal of water in the cultural settings.
4. Photo animation: This stage has multiple layers of photo animation. The photos are taken and aggregated during the field visits to the rivers, channels and tanks. These pictures display the current condition of the water bodies along with poetry and details about the photo. The below image exemplifies the Panjapatti lake which is located in Karur. It is the third big tank in Tamil Nadu and the original capacity of this tank is 1820 acres but it is spreaded around only 1300 acres. The foundation of the tank began in 1837 and the construction was completed in 1911 during the British colonial period. It was a primary source to 18 villages in and around Panjapatti village. However, it has been dry for 16 years due to climate change and mismanagement of the water body. The tank is now silted by sand and utterly occupied by *Prosopis juliflora* plants.

References

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