
Literature in 280 Characters: How Instagram and Twitter Are Redefining Literary and Cultural Narratives

Aiswarya K Nair

Assistant Professor, Dwaraka Doss Goverdhan Doss Vaishnav College, Chennai

Mail ID: aiswaryanairprof@gmail.com

Article Received: 13/04/2025**Article Accepted:** 15/05/2025**Published Online:** 17/05/2025**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.18.05.300

Abstract: The digital age has revolutionized how literature is created, consumed, and shared. Social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter have emerged as transformative spaces for literary narratives. It has reshaped traditional literary norms and fostered new cultural narratives. This paper explores how these platforms, with their interactive features, have given rise to innovative literary forms such as *Instapoetry* and *Twitterature*. By analyzing prominent examples from creators like Rupi Kaur and trending Twitter threads, the study examines how brevity, visual aesthetics, and immediacy have redefined literary expression. Social media platforms combine visuals and text to amplify emotional resonance. Their concise format challenges writers to create impactful micro-narratives. Both platforms democratize literature, allowing marginalized voices to engage with global audiences. They also help challenge dominant cultural discourses. The role of these platforms in activism and cultural movements, such as *#MeToo* and *#BlackLivesMatter*, further highlights their ability to bridge literature with socio-political advocacy. The paper also considers the challenges posed by social media literature, like its perceived lack of depth and commercialization. By adopting a qualitative approach, this paper analyzes specific case studies, hashtags, and audience engagement metrics. It aims to understand the interplay between technology, literature, and culture. The findings show the significance of social media platforms in paving the way for a future where technology and creativity intersect. This research aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on digital humanities by highlighting the impact of social media narratives on literature and cultural studies.

Keywords: Digital Literature, Instapoetry, Twitterature, Cultural discourses, Social media.

Introduction: Technological advancements have lately influenced the growth of literature as it has now shifted from its traditional print to digital media. The invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg around 1450 marked as the turning point, which enabled the mass production of books. The business of printing further helped in democratising the knowledge that had so far existed only among the elite. This innovation facilitated the widespread ability to read and write and the birth of various literary genres. However, as

society grew, the advancement of digital technologies in late 20th and early 21st centuries marked a drastic change in the literary world. And the rise of internet paved the way for other new modes of narration that led to the discovery of digitals. This development also changed the ways of content delivery while widening the confines of the structures of narration. The Internet enabled the creation of interactive and non-linear writing experiences. Micro-literature has been brought into the literary genre through social media - a way of using platforms like Instagram and Twitter. Forms like Instapoetry and Twitterature have come to exist with the emphasis on brevity and immediacy on these platforms. Today, writers are penning short but powerful stories that reach the minds of people around the globe. In addition to this, visual elements on Instagram make words more emotive, and the limited characters on Twitter require authors to portray their emotions with depth.

The objective of this paper is to discuss how Instagram and Twitter are changing literary and cultural narratives. It aims to understand how this evolution from print to digital mediums has influenced storytelling practices. We will look at the characteristics of micro-literature, the role of visual elements, and the impact of social media on narration. Further, it investigates how these platforms democratize literature and provide a voice to the marginalized communities. Through this investigation, we aim to contribute to a broader understanding of digital humanities and the future of literature in the digital age.

This study adopts a qualitative approach, analysing case studies, hashtags, and audience engagement metrics from Instagram and Twitter. It delves into how such platforms redefine literary and cultural narratives. Some primary examples may include works of Insta poets, such as Rupi Kaur, and viral Twitter threads from creators like Teju Cole. This analysis would involve key hashtags such as #Instapoetry, #MeToo, and #BlackLivesMatter and their role in democratizing literature. Audience metrics, that is, likes, retweets, and comments, are then analysed for engagement. This methodology is seeking to bring forward the interplay of brevity, visuals, and social politics in literature from the virtual.

The Evolution of Digital Literature

From Gutenberg to the Algorithm: Transition from print media to digital reflects a more extensive societal transition in the narration, distribution, and consumption of stories. In the print age, books and periodicals were the primary formats that played a significant role in crafting cultures. As time went by, this two-dimensional and one-way mode of narration shifted to more fluid and participatory formats with technological development. Traditional structures were disrupted in the advent of digital literature with immediacy, collaboration, and accessibility. The early forms of e-literature, hypertext novels, questioned linearity, inviting readers to navigate stories in non-linear ways. In contrast to print, which was based on passive consumption of content, digital platforms facilitated active engagement with the reader who could comment, share, or even co-create narratives. The proliferation of smartphones and social media then brought literature straight into people's lives. From being limited to libraries or bookstores, stories could now fit within the palm of a hand, blending harmoniously with modern readers' everyday routines. The focus became access, making

literature available to all, even the most remote and marginalized communities. Algorithms were applied to the digital landscape as gatekeepers: curating the content on the premise of user preferences and thus transforming the way literature reaches its audience. Storytelling, therefore, took on a new form: more concise, visually engaging, and instant. Platforms such as Twitter and Instagram became incubators for breaking literature in accordance with the fast-paced habits of the attention-deprived user. In return, it opened up the very definition of literature to include multimedia, interactivity, and user-generated content.

Defining Instapoetry and Twitterature: Instapoetry emerged as a distinct style within the online forum, where short text is merged with powerful imagery. Popularized by figures like Rupi Kaur, Instapoetry is deeply personal but universal in its themes of love, mental health, and resilience. Instagram's visual-first approach creates an intimate experience through imagery that helps to amplify the emotional resonance of the works. Social media has democratized poetry by using its viral mechanisms. In this sense, up-and-coming poets now directly address audiences across the globe. Conversely, Twitterature is based on brevity. It compels a writer to squeeze a story, reflection, or emotion into 280 characters of micro-narrative. The genre breaks all storytelling norms and considers brevity as a boon rather than a bane. For example, Teju Cole's *Small Fates* is a work in which he uses short, aphoristic tweets to tell layered stories based on real-life events. Viral threads on Twitter, where the story unfolds tweet by tweet, are another hybrid between long-form storytelling and short-form communication. Instapoetry and Twitterature are against the established norms but complete the existing frameworks of literature. They focus on accessibility and participation, making room for more extensive involvement in the literary culture. These forms are also examples of a digital society, which emphasises speed and interactivity over depth and complexity. The digital transformation of literature has led to new genres that embrace the unique constraints and affordances of social media. Instapoetry and Twitterature redefines storytelling for the digital age, demonstrating that literature, while evolving, remains a medium for expression, and cultural reflection.

Visual and Textual Synergy: The integration of visual elements on platforms like Instagram has redefined poetic expression. This fusion is exemplified in the works of poets such as Rupi Kaur, as she uses illustrations to complement her verses. Usage of visual elements enhance the reader's engagement and interpretation. In traditional poetry collections, the emphasis is predominantly on the written word, and the accompanying visuals only serve the role of an enhancer. The reader's experience is shaped largely by the text, as he has to use his imagination to visualise the emotions conveyed. For instance, classic poetry anthologies often present poems in a uniform format, allowing the words to stand alone. In contrast, Instapoetry makes use of the visual-centric nature of Instagram to merge imagery with text, creating a holistic artistic expression.

Rupi Kaur's poem from *Milk and Honey* illustrates this approach:

this morning i woke up with my heart dripping
and swelling with gratitude for the day you threw me out
when you left me on the side of the road

and i went on to chase the world
 can you believe i caught it
 how i held it in the palm of my hand
 and let it sing for me
 how i became the most alive
 the most on fire
 when i was thrown into grief
 i rose into greatness
 tell me
 did you hear about it. (Kaur, 45)

Accompanying this poem is a simple drawing of a woman with her eyes closed, with magic dust and stars over her, enhancing the beauty of the verse. The visual element serves not merely as decoration but as an integral part of the poem's meaning. It reinforces the themes of identity and societal expectations. This visual-textual synergy in Instapoetry allows for an interplay between image and word deepening the emotional Impact. The aesthetics of the visual element can set the tone, evoke specific feelings, and provide immediate context. This complements the brevity of the text. In a digital landscape where attention spans are limited, this combination ensures that the message is conveyed swiftly and memorably. Moreover, the accessibility of platforms like Instagram enables poets to reach a vast audience, transcending geographical and cultural boundaries. The visual appeal attracts users who might not typically engage with traditional poetry. This encourages a new generation of readers and writers to explore poetic expression. The integration of visuals with text in Instapoetry, as seen in Rupi Kaur's work, creates a powerful connection that enhances emotional resonance. By comparing this approach to traditional poetry collections, it becomes evident that the visual elements of Instapoetry offers a distinct and impactful space for literary expression in the digital age.

Democratization of Literature: Social media, including Instagram and Twitter, has radically democratized literature. It gives the marginalised voices a chance to take over the traditional mediums like publishers and editors. They promote inclusivity and provide space for diverse narratives. They challenge dominant cultural norms as well. Democratization, thus, makes consumption of literature interactive, visual, and participatory.

Socio-Political issues and Amanda Gorman: Amanda Gorman can be a prominent example of how one can amplify power through social media. She became a literary and cultural icon after her performance of *The Hill We Climb* at the U.S. Presidential Inauguration in 2021. Gorman gained over 3 million Instagram followers within a month of her performance. It also made her books surge to the top of bestseller lists on Amazon and other outlets. "For there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it. If only we're brave enough to be it" (Gorman 5). This excerpt became widely quoted, with over 100,000 shares on Twitter alone. This shows how her work moved away from the traditional literary sphere. Gorman also used Instagram and Twitter to further engage her audience, posting socio-political issues. This case demonstrates how social media brings together creators and their audiences in ways that traditional publishing cannot.

Climate Activism and Greta Thunberg: Greta Thunberg's climate activism shows that social media can disrupt hegemonic discourses. Thunberg gained global fame due to her direct and emotional tweets, criticising the lack of action from political leadership on climate change. Her viral tweet regarding the 2019 United Nations Climate Summit - "You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words" (@GretaThunberg, Twitter, 2019) garnered millions of retweets and widespread media conversations all over the globe. Thunberg's posts often has stark realities combined with concise language to enable her message across a global spectrum. For example, in a recent tweet in European heatwaves in 2023, she called out corporate companies: "The climate crisis is here, now, and it's fuelled by the inaction of governments and corporations. Your profits today are costing us our future." (@GretaThunberg, Twitter, 2023).

Indigenous Storytelling and Digital Platforms: Platforms such as Twitter have enabled Indigenous peoples to confront colonial histories, and highlight their traditions. The hashtag #IndigenousStorytelling has become a means for bringing out narratives that highlight the resilience and wisdom of indigenous people. One notable example is the viral thread by Twitter user @NotoriousCree (James Jones), who uses humour, history, and personal anecdotes to educate audiences about indigenous culture. In one thread, he shared a story about traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) and its role in sustainable living: "Before colonization, our ancestors thrived because they respected the land. TEK isn't just 'folk wisdom'; it's science. Colonial systems ignored this, and now we're all paying the price. Learn from us." (@NotoriousCree, Twitter, 2022). Jones's posts often combine traditional indigenous practices with modern environmental issues. Similarly, Instagram accounts like @IndigenousClimateAction use visual storytelling to advocate for environmental justice, blending visual with concise captions.

Hashtags: The Power of Collective Narratives: The role of hashtags in amplifying marginalized voices is prominent. Hashtags serve as digital archives for collective action. It creates a space for narratives that might otherwise be not noticed. Hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and #Instapoetry have emerged as powerful tools for amplifying voices that often go unheard, fostering global conversations and solidarity.

The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, created in 2013, gained significant attention on incidents of police brutality. A Pew Research Center study revealed that #BlackLivesMatter was used over 47.8 million times on Twitter between May 26 and June 7, 2020, after global protests sparked by George Floyd's murder (Anderson et al.). Writers, activists, and artists used this hashtag to share poetry, essays, and real-time updates.

The #MeToo movement, was initially coined by Tarana Burke in 2006 and popularised on Twitter in 2017. It sparked a global awareness about sexual violence. According to Twitter analytics by UN Women, the hashtag had over 19 million uses in its first year. It had regional adaptations like #YoTambien in Spanish-speaking countries and #BalanceTonPorc in France. Through #MeToo, authors such as Roxane Gay gained further recognition as her discussions found resonance in the movement. Gay tweeted that Sharing women's stories of survival is powerful and that it helps others know they are not alone. The tweet also added that it is devastating because it shows how pervasive sexual violence is.

This demonstrates how hashtags act as platforms for solidarity and personal literary expressions.

Similarly the hashtag #Instapoetry has garnered millions of posts, with creators like Rupi Kaur using Instagram to redefine modern poetry. As of 2023, #Instapoetry had over 7 million uses on Instagram, with Kaur's *Milk and Honey* selling over 3 million copies globally, largely due to her online presence (NPR).

Kaur's poem that has got the most shares and likes was retweeted several times
 "How you love yourself
 Is how you teach others
 To love you".

Similarly Greta's use of hashtags like #FridaysForFuture created a movement that empowered young voices. It inspired global climate strikes, and challenged dominant economic discourses. By linking data with personal narrative, Thunberg effectively bridged the gap between activism and cultural discourse.

The democratisation of literature has transformed marginalised voices through social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter. The participatory nature of social media has also turned it into a space where readers and creators engage directly through likes, comments, and shares. Viral posts and hashtag movements enable collective storytelling, as they make literature more inclusive and dynamic. Another area where digital media have been significant is in promoting works of emerging writers by getting them international fame. Social media challenges dominant cultural narratives by encouraging engagement with marginalized voices. They directly challenge governmental and corporate negligence, reframing certain issues as urgent. Meanwhile, indigenous voices on platforms like Twitter and Instagram reclaim narratives long suppressed by colonial histories, emphasising the importance of cultural preservation. Social media posts are instant and viral, and these stories can reach the world, cutting across all boundaries. Activists and storytellers create powerful counter-narratives and awareness through the use of hashtags, concise language, and visuals. Social media redefines what meaningful participation in public discourse means. As these platforms evolve, they are critical to the amplification of voices challenging the status quo.

Challenges of Social Media Literature: Social media has transformed literary narratives, offering both opportunities and challenges. The challenges can be brought under three primary concerns: the balance between depth and brevity, the commercialisation of literary content, and issues surrounding plagiarism and authenticity.

Depth vs. Brevity: Social media sites tend to promote short, concise messages. Such brevity makes it easier to consume and share information at a fast rate, but such brevity has also raised controversy over the profundity of works created in those spaces. Proponents argue that the limitations placed on platforms like Twitter and Instagram result in rather simplistic

stories. For example, the word count on Twitter may be too limiting for complex plots or themes, causing complex ideas to be oversimplified. Similarly, Instapoetry has been criticized in that some perceive it as passing thoughts thrown on paper. However, critics argue that brevity can distill deep emotions just like traditional poetic forms such as haikus. Haikus capture deep reflections within a 17-syllable structure; therefore, brevity does not necessarily exclude depth. Similarly, Twitter threads, despite being segmented, can unfold complex narratives if carefully crafted. The richness lies in the creator's ability to convey that within the limitation.

Commercialization: Social media literature has intersected with commercial interests and, as a result, people are discussing how market dynamics affect the artistic integrity. Instapoets like Rupi Kaur have reached the pinnacle of commercial success: works like *Milk and Honey* sold millions of copies worldwide. It has given way to merchandise, book deals, and an enormous following on social media. This commercial success, however, has been attacked. Some feel that the need to be marketable may compromise the depth and quality of the poetry, choosing to publish content that will appeal to mass audiences over more nuanced or challenging works. Commercialisation democratises literature in the sense that it makes literature more accessible but raises questions about the commodification of art. The pressure to produce content that garners likes and shares may influence creators toward favouring trends over authenticity, thereby diluting the literary value of their work. This prompts a re-evaluation of how market forces shape creative expression in the digital age. While Kaur's work resonates with readers on its merits of relatability, critics claim it reflects a shift toward commodified, easily digestible content that thrives on social media algorithms. The appeal of Kaur demonstrates the power of social media platforms transforming poets into influencers by combining the two disciplines—arts and branding. Critics such as Rebecca Watts called the work ‘a degradation of poetic craft as such commercial success often motivates less complexity’ (Watts 5). Conversely, many consider that the accessible quality of Kaur is spreading the medium out from an otherwise elite platform.

Plagiarism and Authenticity: Social media also content introduces challenges related to plagiarism and authenticity. Viral poems are often shared without attribution, which does not give recognition for original creators. It can bring in challenges related to intellectual property and authenticity. Viral posts often circulate without proper credit, leading to instances where creators' works are shared widely without acknowledgment. For instance, several Instapoems have been reposted without credit across different platforms, which makes it impossible to trace back to the original creator. In 2020, author Najwa Zebian's writing was widely plagiarized in Instagram posts. A lifted excerpt from her poem reads: "These mountains that you are carrying, You were only supposed to climb" (Zebian, 23). This quote had appeared in multiple viral posts that had anonymous authors. This shows the difficulty of protecting intellectual property in the digital age, where reposts and edits obscure authorship. Although Instagram provides tools for reporting misuse, enforcement is still limited, leaving creators vulnerable to content theft. Some authors now watermark their posts or use services like Patreon. The remedy to this, however, would be that both platforms

and the creators undertake measures such as watermarking their content, employing digital signatures, and educating their audiences on why attribution is important.

Conclusion: The digital age has redefined the boundaries of literature and cultural narratives through platforms like Instagram and Twitter. New literary forms such as Instapoetry and Twitterature have emerged, characterized by brevity and visual integration. Democratization of literature through these platforms has enabled marginalized voices to reach global audiences, challenging traditional publishing norms and dominant cultural discourses. Using the social media space has amplified the level of activism of movements like #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter, with their literature serving a socio-political advocacy. Despite the potential of transformation, some of the issues that are not yet over with the depth versus brevity debate, commercialization, and the issues of plagiarism and authenticity continue to plague. While brevity offers accessibility and immediacy, it questions the profundity of social media literature. Commercialization of literature through social media has democratized literature but may compromise artistic integrity. The ease of sharing on social media poses threats to authenticity and intellectual property of creators. This development in the history of literature testifies to how technology plays off with creativity and makes something even better. While social media is altering literary expression, it opens doors for other aspects of culture to have an effective discussion regarding change in the social environment. It will still continue to change the literary platforms through adaptation into the digital sphere while keeping itself a channel of expression, reflection, and action toward greater change and involvement.

Works Cited:

- Anderson, Monica, et al. “#BlackLivesMatter Surges on Twitter after George Floyd’s Death.” *Pew Research Center*, 10 June 2020, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/10/blacklivesmatter-surges-on-twitter-after-george-floyds-death/.
- Carlin, Shannon. “Meet Rupi Kaur, Queen of ‘Instapoetry.’” *The Rolling Stone*, 21 Dec. 2017.
- CBS. “Bestselling ‘Instapoet’ Rupi Kaur on Feminism, Being a Woman of Color.” *CBS This Morning*, 26 Feb. 2018.
@rupikaur_. *Instagram*, www.instagram.com/rupikaur/.
- Gorman, Amanda. *The Hill We Climb: An Inaugural Poem for the Country*. Viking Books for Young Readers, 2021.
- Jones, James. “Before Colonization, Our Ancestors Thrived.” *Twitter*, 2022, twitter.com/NotoriousCree/status/1473086708196765698.
- “Rupi Kaur’s ‘Milk and Honey’ Sells Over 3 Million Copies.” *NPR*, 2018.
- Jones, James. *Twitter*, 2022, twitter.com/NotoriousCree/status/1473086708196765698.
- Simple Tweets of Fate: Teju Cole's Condensed News.” *NPR*, 9 Apr. 2012.
- Kaur, Rupi. *Milk and Honey*. Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2015.
- Smith, Clint. “America: The Place Where If You Kneel, They’ll Shoot You.” *Twitter*, 30 May 2020, twitter.com/ClintSmith/status/1266717105452410880.
- Thunberg, Greta. “You Have Stolen My Dreams and My Childhood.” *Twitter*, 23 Sept. 2019,

<https://x.com/gretathunberg?lang=en>.

Watts, Rebecca. "The Cult of the Noble Amateur." *PN Review*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2018, pp. 5-8.

Zebian, Najwa. *Mind Platter*. Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2018.