INTRODUCTION

“This is the story of Rita, who carries a vital piece of information on which depends the future of India. It is written by RoGue, but controlled by you. The author keeps landing her in trouble and only you can save her. After each chapter, predict what RoGue’s going to do next and upset his plans. Suggest an alternate course for the story, via comments, and fight the author. Download Chapters I-XV and start playing.”

The above quotation is an online introduction to a novel titled Cloakroom at the following website: http://cloakroom.blogspot.com/2004/11/cloakroom-chapter-11.html (retrieved, July 7, 2008). Cloakroom is widely regarded as India’s first cell phone novel or mobile phone novel, a kind of writing that seems to have been largely

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ignored by the established literary world but that has been gaining widespread popularity among the youth, especially young users of the internet in places like Japan, China, and India.

In previous chapters, particularly in Chapter 3, I discussed new forms of reading and writing, such as practiced by students in their everyday academic studies, where I documented a growing preference for online course materials over hardcopy materials, e-books as against print books, etc.

In this chapter I discuss an even more radical consequence of these new forms of reading and writing on the literacy and literary world. As shown in the quotation above, instant messaging, such as text messaging, is taking the idea of a novel to new heights. While the traditional novel as we know it, is a product of, presumably, many years of laborious writing and imagination by a single individual, the author, and delivered to the reading public as a carefully edited and published product by editors and publishers, the “novel” as produced through computer-mediated instant messaging is a radically different sub-genre or even a different genre altogether. It is interactive, instantaneous, as seen by the call to readers to get involved in the developing plot, and it is thus read as it is written!

In this chapter I present the outlines of the cell phone novel, how it started, and what its main features are. I then do a case study of how prevalent this phenomenon of cell phone novel is among students. The next section concentrates on the outline features of the Cell phone novel. This is then followed by the survey. I finally conclude the chapter with some implications and consequences of the cell phone on established literary writing and on the general reading habits of young people.

OUTLINE FEATURES OF THE CELL PHONE NOVEL

Background

The anatomy of the cell phone or mobile phone itself has transformed greatly, from heavy brick-shaped mobile phones with a small screen showing only the dialing number, a few years ago, to the minuscule objects that we know them today to be. Today, mobile phones are more than just tools to make phone calls, indeed the BlackBerry today is a whole mobile office database! They are portable multifunctional assistants which can play music, take pictures, surf websites and even read books, and yes, novels, cell phone novels, the topic of this chapter.

The cell phone novel or mobile phone novel is a relatively new and increasingly popular trend, mainly in Japan but spreading to many places like China and India. One may argue that reading books on a mobile phone is not that peculiar. With our mobile phones or PDAs (personal digital assistants), we can use the pre-installed
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