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**Digital Realism: How Social Media and WhatsApp Culture Enter
the Narrative Structure of Indian and Pakistani Novels**



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Abstract

This paper examines how digital realism transforms the narrative structures of contemporary South Asian fiction, with particular focus on Fatima Bhutto's *The Runaways*, Ratika Kapur's *The Private Life of Mrs. Sharma*, and Arundhati Roy's *Azadi*. Using narrative criticism and digital culture studies, the analysis demonstrates how WhatsApp chats, online profiles, and social media activism are increasingly displacing older epistolary forms such as letters and diaries. The novels show how digital platforms operate as both narrative devices and ideological spaces: Bhutto's work highlights online radicalization, Kapur's novel explores intimacy and deception through texting, while Roy's hybrid prose situates social media within the political struggle for freedom and dissent. Collectively, these texts reveal how Indian and Pakistani fiction not only reflects but also structurally absorbs the fragmented rhythms and immediacies of digital communication. By foregrounding this shift, the paper contributes to emerging scholarship on postcolonial digital realism, arguing that South Asian fiction is at the forefront of global literary adaptation to the digital age.

Introduction

Background of the Topic

Over the last two decades, digital technologies have rapidly altered the cultural fabric of South Asia, particularly India and Pakistan, where the proliferation of smartphones and inexpensive internet access has reshaped modes of communication, social interaction, and political participation. Social media platforms, messaging applications, and online spaces have not merely become tools of communication but also serve as spaces where identities are negotiated, ideologies are contested, and narratives of belonging are produced. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are now firmly embedded in everyday life, providing both intimacy and surveillance, solidarity and fragmentation. For novelists working in English from South Asia, the emergence of this digital ecosystem has opened up an entirely new repertoire of narrative forms, motifs, and storytelling strategies. No longer do the epistolary letter, the diary entry, or the overheard conversation dominate the private sphere of fictional worlds. Instead, chat windows, forwarded memes, screenshots, and online gossip infiltrate the textual fabric of the novel, creating what may be described as a new mode of **digital realism**.

South Asian fiction has historically been marked by its close engagement with the socio-

political realities of the subcontinent—Partition, migration, gender inequality, authoritarian politics, caste hierarchies, and religious tensions. Writers from Salman Rushdie to Arundhati Roy, Kamila Shamsie to Mohsin Hamid, have drawn upon lived realities to frame narratives that are both locally rooted and globally resonant. However, the onset of digital culture has introduced a different axis of realism: the everyday mediation of relationships, politics, and radicalization through digital screens. Fatima Bhutto's *The Runaways* (2018) situates the radicalization of disillusioned youth not in the mosque or madrasa but in the online echo chambers of radical networks. Ratika Kapur's *The Private Life of Mrs. Sharma* (2015) foregrounds the intimacy and danger of online chatting, where a middle-class Delhi housewife's fantasies and betrayals unfold largely through digital interactions. Arundhati Roy's *Azadi* (2020), though a collection blending essays and fiction, situates digital technologies at the heart of contemporary politics—surveillance, troll armies, WhatsApp rumor-mongering—thereby blurring the line between political essay and fictional narrative. Together, these texts exemplify how South Asian writers are beginning to weave digital culture not merely as a backdrop but as an essential narrative mechanism.

Problem Statement / Research Gap

Despite the centrality of digital culture in contemporary South Asian life, literary criticism has been slow to theorize its impact on narrative form. Much scholarship on South Asian novels continues to focus on postcolonial identity, diaspora, feminism, caste, or nationhood—issues undoubtedly vital, but often analyzed through frameworks forged in the pre-digital era. While there exists a growing body of work on digital media in cultural studies and sociology, there remains a critical gap in studying how **narrative fiction** absorbs and represents digital culture. Specifically, the question of how chat windows, WhatsApp gossip, online radicalization, and Instagram politics reconfigure **narrative structures, voice, and intimacy** in the novel has not been systematically explored in South Asian literary studies.

This lacuna is significant because digital technologies do not merely alter the content of narratives (what stories are told) but also their **form** (how stories are told). Just as the advent of the printing press reshaped narrative dissemination, or the epistolary form once reflected the intimacy of letter-writing, today's digital ephemera—the chat message, the viral video, the WhatsApp group—shape the very grammar of narration. Without addressing this shift, literary criticism risks overlooking a crucial transformation in the South Asian novel's engagement with realism and representation.

Research Questions / Objectives

The present study is framed around the following research questions:

1. How do South Asian English novels incorporate digital culture—such as WhatsApp chats, online radicalization, or Instagram gossip—into their narrative structures?
2. To what extent are digital platforms displacing traditional narrative devices such as letters, diaries, or overheard conversations in Indian and Pakistani fiction?
3. How do these digital modes alter representations of intimacy, politics, and subjectivity in the novel?
4. What theoretical frameworks from narratology and digital culture studies can help us understand this transformation of form and content?

By answering these questions, the study aims to critically examine how South Asian fiction negotiates the realities of digital modernity and whether we can identify a new aesthetic mode of “digital realism.”

Significance of the Study

The significance of this research lies in its attempt to bridge literary studies with digital culture studies, thus offering an interdisciplinary perspective on South Asian fiction. First, the study contributes to the evolving field of postcolonial literature by highlighting how postcolonial subjects are now reimagined within the circuitry of digital platforms. The diasporic migrant or the marginalized citizen of the nation-state is increasingly mediated through the smartphone, the chat app, or the viral hashtag. Ignoring this mediation risks producing an anachronistic literary criticism disconnected from contemporary experience.

Second, by focusing on narrative form, the study extends the conversation beyond thematic analysis to the structural and stylistic innovations triggered by digital culture. Are WhatsApp chats functioning as twenty-first-century equivalents of the epistolary novel? How do fragmented notifications, abrupt online conversations, or the fleeting temporality of “status updates” translate into literary temporality and narrative pacing? These questions not only expand our understanding of the South Asian novel but also contribute to broader debates in world literature about how fiction adapts to new technological environments.

Third, this study has cultural significance. In both India and Pakistan, digital culture has emerged as a double-edged force—mobilizing political dissent but also spreading disinformation, enabling intimate connections while fostering alienation. By examining how literature absorbs these contradictions, the study reveals how fiction both reflects and

critiques the lived realities of South Asian digital modernity.

Brief Methodology

The methodology of this research is primarily qualitative, drawing upon **narrative criticism** and **digital culture studies** as its dual framework. Narrative criticism allows for a close reading of how plot, character, temporality, and form are reshaped by digital motifs within the novel. Attention will be paid to shifts in focalization (who speaks in the novel and through which medium), temporality (the rhythm of chats, notifications, and online timelines), and textuality (the incorporation of screenshots, chat transcripts, or email-like dialogues).

Digital culture studies, on the other hand, provides the theoretical vocabulary to situate these narrative techniques within broader socio-cultural practices. The study will engage with scholarship on online intimacy, digital radicalization, surveillance culture, and social media politics in South Asia. In doing so, it will draw upon thinkers such as Sherry Turkle on online identity, Manuel Castells on network society, and recent South Asian scholarship on WhatsApp disinformation and digital authoritarianism.

The texts chosen for analysis—Fatima Bhutto’s *The Runaways*, Ratika Kapur’s *The Private Life of Mrs. Sharma*, and Arundhati Roy’s *Azadi*—have been selected for their explicit engagement with digital culture, while also representing different facets of Indian and Pakistani realities. The analysis will combine close textual reading with contextual examination of digital practices in South Asia, thereby ensuring that the novels are read both as literary artifacts and as cultural documents of their time.

In sum, this study proposes to examine the emergence of **digital realism** in South Asian fiction, focusing on how the everyday infiltration of WhatsApp, online radicalization, and social media gossip transform the narrative structures of Indian and Pakistani novels. By situating literary analysis within the larger cultural shifts of digital modernity, the research not only fills a critical gap in literary studies but also redefines how we understand realism in the twenty-first-century South Asian novel.

Literature Review

The emergence of digital realism within South Asian fiction has sparked growing scholarly interest, though the field remains under-explored compared to Western literary traditions. With the infiltration of social media platforms, WhatsApp messaging, online dating applications, and the political reverberations of digital culture, South Asian writers have begun to reimagine the narrative form itself. This section critically surveys the available

scholarship, situating global perspectives on digital culture in literature, identifying Indian and Pakistani contributions to this debate, and highlighting the absence of comprehensive studies on narrative structures shaped by digital platforms. The review concludes by locating the theoretical framework—narrative criticism informed by digital culture studies, supplemented by postcolonial approaches—that will guide the current study.

Global Scholarship on Digital Culture and Narrative Form

The relationship between technology and narrative has long been a subject of critical investigation in Western literary studies. Hayles (1999), in *How We Became Posthuman*, explored how digital interfaces altered both reading practices and conceptions of subjectivity, while Murray (1997) emphasized how new media storytelling blurred the boundaries between authorship, reader, and interactivity. These foundational works established that literature cannot remain untouched by technological transformations.

More recent scholarship emphasizes that digital platforms are not merely thematic inclusions but structural disruptions. Kirschenbaum (2008) analyzed the materiality of digital texts, showing how electronic forms alter narrative temporality and aesthetics. Walkowitz (2015) linked globalization with digital communication, noting that contemporary novels often simulate the fragmented flows of digital life. Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), with its PowerPoint chapter, and Eggers' *The Circle* (2013), allegorizing surveillance capitalism, exemplify how form bends to capture digital culture.

However, these debates are primarily Euro-American. South Asia is largely absent from mappings of “digital literature,” despite the region's rapidly growing digital ecosystem and its vibrant literary production.

South Asian Fiction and the Digital Turn

The intersection of digital culture and South Asian fiction is an emerging but understudied field. Nayar (2016) notes that Indian novels often foreground tensions between traditional values and digital modernity, with early criticism centering on cybercrime and online anonymity. More recent analyses shift toward everyday digital practices such as chatting, texting, and online dating.

Ratika Kapur's *The Private Life of Mrs. Sharma* (2015) has attracted commentary for its portrayal of middle-class womanhood mediated by online flirtations. Mukherjee (2017) argues that the novel integrates texting as a structural scaffold, suggesting that online chat is supplanting the confessional diary or letter in South Asian traditions. Fatima Bhutto's *The*

Runaways (2019) has been studied in the context of radicalization, with Raza (2020) pointing out how WhatsApp groups and digital propaganda function as narrative engines, mapping characters' ideological transformations.

Arundhati Roy's *Azadi* (2020), a hybrid of fiction and essays, situates India's political crises within the digital ecosystem of trolls, hashtags, and online activism. Bhattacharya (2021) notes that Roy demonstrates how digital spaces are not merely communicative platforms but deeply political terrains, collapsing boundaries between fiction and nonfiction. Despite these contributions, most analyses remain scattered, focusing on thematic concerns—radicalization, feminism, political activism—without fully addressing how digitality transforms the *form* of South Asian novels.

WhatsApp, Online Profiles, and the Evolution of Narrative Devices

Letters, diaries, and oral testimonies once structured South Asian fiction, providing spaces of confession and interiority (Ahmad, 1992). Today, WhatsApp chats, Facebook posts, and Instagram feeds serve similar narrative functions but with altered implications. Where diaries once signified private reflection, chat messages suggest simultaneity and surveillance; where letters dramatized absence, digital communication enacts perpetual presence.

Rao (2019) observes that digital platforms shift the temporality of narrative, aligning it with the immediacy and fragmentation of online life. Yet systematic scholarship on WhatsApp and online profiles within South Asian fiction is minimal, representing a notable research gap.

Pakistani and Indian Perspectives

Within Pakistani criticism, digital culture has been more frequently studied in media and communication than in literary analysis. Dad (2018) emphasizes the sociological impact of WhatsApp gossip on political mobilization, yet this discourse rarely crosses into novelistic studies. Pakistani literary criticism continues to prioritize themes of postcolonial identity, Islamism, and diaspora without engaging deeply with digital culture.

In Indian criticism, feminist readings dominate. Devika (2019) explores how online chat in novels like Kapur's reflects both the liberating and disciplining effects of patriarchy. However, broader theoretical syntheses that interrogate how digital devices restructure South Asian realism remain scarce.

Research Gaps

Several critical gaps emerge from the above survey:

1. **Form vs. Theme:** While digital themes are analyzed, little attention is paid to narratological impact.
2. **Comparative Analysis:** Few studies compare Indian and Pakistani novels together.
3. **Theoretical Integration:** Digital culture studies and postcolonial criticism are seldom synthesized in analyzing fiction.
4. **Everyday Digitality:** The banal aspects of digital life—family WhatsApp groups, memes, casual gossip—are underexplored in literary studies.

This paper addresses these gaps by analyzing how digital platforms not only influence *what* South Asian novels narrate but fundamentally alter *how* they narrate.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This study draws from **narrative criticism** to examine how structures such as plot, temporality, and perspective are reshaped by digital devices. It also engages **digital culture studies**, drawing on Castells' (1996) *The Rise of the Network Society* and Turkle's (2011) *Alone Together*, to understand how digital networks reshape subjectivity and sociality.

Simultaneously, it applies **postcolonial theory**, recognizing that South Asian digital realism emerges within histories of colonial communication (letters, telegrams, print) and uneven technological modernities. Bhabha (1994) and Chakrabarty (2000) remind us that postcolonial modernity is hybrid and translated, producing unique literary forms of digital realism.

By synthesizing these frameworks, the study demonstrates how WhatsApp chats, Instagram posts, and online profiles function as new epistolary devices in South Asian fiction, simultaneously democratizing voice and producing new exclusions.

In short, the surveyed scholarship reveals that while global criticism has examined digital realism in depth, South Asian fiction remains under-theorized in this regard. Existing work touches on radicalization, feminism, and politics but often overlooks the structural transformation of narrative form. This study contributes to the field by analyzing how digital culture—particularly WhatsApp and social media practices—reconfigures the narrative architecture of Indian and Pakistani novels, situating this within postcolonial modernity and global digital culture.

Research Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative and textual research design, grounded in narrative criticism and digital culture studies, to investigate how digital realism enters the narrative structures of contemporary South Asian fiction. The aim is to understand not only *what* is represented about digital culture but also *how* platforms such as WhatsApp, online chat windows, and social media profiles restructure narration, voice, temporality, and form.

Nature of the Study

This is a **qualitative study**, focusing on interpretative textual analysis rather than statistical or empirical generalization. South Asian fiction, particularly in its contemporary manifestations, lends itself to qualitative methods because it reflects layered cultural, political, and aesthetic engagements with digital modernity. By adopting a textual approach, the study interrogates how literary works absorb and transform the discourses of digital life into narrative devices, tropes, and structural choices.

The study is also **comparative**, drawing on three novels/works from India and Pakistan—*The Runaways* by Fatima Bhutto, *The Private Life of Mrs. Sharma* by Ratika Kapur, and *Azadi* by Arundhati Roy. Comparative methodology is justified here because digital culture does not respect national borders: WhatsApp gossip circulates as easily in Karachi as in Delhi, and Instagram activism links Lahore to New York. At the same time, local inflections of digital culture—such as state surveillance, censorship, or patriarchal negotiations—demand contextualized readings. Thus, the comparative dimension allows both cross-regional commonalities and specific cultural divergences to surface.

Selection of Texts

The three chosen works are neither arbitrary nor exhaustively representative. Instead, they exemplify distinctive ways in which digital culture permeates narrative structure:

1. **Fatima Bhutto's *The Runaways* (2019):** This novel dramatizes how online spaces, particularly propaganda channels and WhatsApp-style interactions, catalyze radicalization among disillusioned youth. It is an ideal case for examining how digital communication reshapes character arcs and plot trajectories in Pakistani fiction.
2. **Ratika Kapur's *The Private Life of Mrs. Sharma* (2015):** Here, online chatting is central to the protagonist's desires and betrayals. The text demonstrates how everyday digital exchanges supplant traditional narrative devices like diaries or letters, making it a key text for analyzing intimacy, temporality, and voice in Indian urban fiction.

3. **Arundhati Roy's *Azadi* (2020):** While hybrid in form, combining essays and fiction, *Azadi* foregrounds how India's political and cultural crises unfold in digital arenas—Twitter trolls, WhatsApp rumors, viral hashtags. Roy's work expands the methodological scope, enabling an inquiry into how digital politics not only enters fiction but blurs the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, narrative and commentary.

These texts were chosen because they do not merely reference digital culture as background detail but structurally integrate it into their narrative strategies. They collectively represent a spectrum—personal, social, and political—of digital realism in South Asian fiction.

Analytical Approach

The study employs a multi-layered **textual and narrative analysis**, drawing on several complementary methods:

1. **Close Reading:** A fine-grained analysis of passages where digital communication is explicitly represented (chat windows, online profiles, WhatsApp messages). The objective is to understand how these forms function structurally: as dialogue, as confession, as evidence, or as replacement for older devices like letters.
2. **Thematic Analysis:** Identification of recurring motifs such as digital intimacy, online surveillance, misinformation, and radicalization. This step connects textual details to broader sociocultural patterns, allowing the novels to be read as imaginative engagements with real-world digital practices.
3. **Discourse Analysis:** Following Foucault and postcolonial theorists, this approach interprets how digital communication in these novels reflects power relations—patriarchal control, state censorship, global terrorism networks, or grassroots activism. For example, WhatsApp gossip is not neutral chatter but a discursive field where authority, secrecy, and community are negotiated.
4. **Intertextuality:** Comparison of digital devices in South Asian fiction with older literary forms (letters, diaries, oral storytelling). This approach traces continuities and ruptures, showing how WhatsApp chat inherits functions of the epistolary form but also introduces new temporalities (instantaneity, fragmentation, group multiplicity).

Justification for Framework

The theoretical backbone combines **narrative criticism**, **digital culture studies**, and **postcolonial theory**.

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- **Narrative Criticism:** This framework is central because the study focuses on form—plot structures, temporal shifts, narrative voice, and epistolary substitution. By analyzing how digital devices function narratively, the research goes beyond thematic cataloguing to interrogate the aesthetics of digital realism.
- **Digital Culture Studies:** The analysis draws on Castells' (1996) concept of the “network society” and Turkle's (2011) exploration of mediated intimacy to frame how online communication reconfigures subjectivity. These insights are necessary to interpret why digital forms appear as they do in fiction and how they resonate with readers' lived experiences of digital life.
- **Postcolonial Theory:** Digital realism in South Asia cannot be read without attention to postcolonial histories of communication. Letters and telegrams under colonial rule functioned as surveillance tools and narrative devices alike. WhatsApp groups and Instagram posts similarly operate within power asymmetries shaped by globalization, authoritarian governance, and social hierarchies. Postcolonial theorists such as Bhabha (1994) and Chakrabarty (2000) illuminate how digital modernity in South Asia is hybrid, translated, and contested.

This combination of frameworks is justified because it allows a holistic reading: narrative criticism keeps the focus on form; digital culture studies contextualize the form in contemporary sociotechnical life; postcolonial theory situates both within longer histories of uneven modernity.

Reflexivity and Limitations

It is important to acknowledge the interpretative nature of this methodology. The analysis privileges close textual reading and theoretical synthesis over empirical validation. As such, it does not claim to represent the entirety of South Asian digital fiction but instead offers critical entry points through selected texts. A limitation is that digital realism also thrives in popular or regional literatures—Urdu digests, Hindi pulp, or serialized online fiction—which fall outside the current scope. Another limitation is the reliance on English-language texts, though justified for an international readership.

Nevertheless, the chosen methodology ensures depth over breadth. By focusing closely on a few representative works, the study demonstrates how narrative strategies shift under digital influence, while inviting future scholarship to expand the corpus and approach.

Analysis and Discussion

This section applies the study's theoretical lenses—narrative criticism, digital culture studies, and postcolonial theory—to the three selected texts (*The Runaways*, *The Private Life of Mrs. Sharma*, *Azadi*). I argue that these works do more than thematize online life: they reconfigure the grammar of the novel. Digital communication appears not only as content but as **narrative technology** that modifies focalization, temporality, authorial authority, and the epistolary functions that letters and diaries used to perform. Where previous scholarship has often emphasized *what* digitality represents in South Asian fiction (radicalization, gendered desire, political mobilization), the analyses below emphasize *how* the devices of digital life — chat windows, forwards, timelines, profiles — rework narrative architecture. The empirical claims about each text are supported by contemporary reviews and scholarship; wider sociotechnical context (WhatsApp's social effects, digital activism) is drawn from media and academic reports cited where relevant.

1. Fatima Bhutto, *The Runaways*: Networks as Plot Engine and Shifting Focalization

Fatima Bhutto's *The Runaways* has been widely read as a novel about the social and psychological pathways to violent radicalization. Reviews and studies rightly emphasize the novel's ethical project of humanizing youth who join extremist causes — but an under-examined effect of Bhutto's method is formal: **online networks become the engine of narrative causality**. In the novel, recruitment, rumor, and communal belonging are mediated through digital channels that function like plot machines; in other words, the WhatsApp-style circulations and online propaganda do not merely appear as episodes but create the causal links that move characters from private disaffection to political violence.

Narratively, this produces two important changes. First, **focalization becomes distributed**. Traditional realist narration might restrict perspective to a single interior consciousness (the diarist, the letter-writer), but Bhutto's scenes of radicalization are told through interactions that are group-based, threaded, and simultaneous. The reader experiences evidence as forwarded messages, snatches of online propaganda, and group announcements; knowledge is diffused rather than confined to a single confessor. Genetteian terms are helpful here: the implied narrator's access to events is not mediated through a single internal focalizer but through networked nodes — a polycentric focalization that requires rethinking internal/external focalization distinctions in networked texts. Second, **causality and temporality are altered**. Online movements accelerate decision points: recruitment

messages, multimedia propaganda and gossip circulate in compressed time, producing abrupt character turns. The novel's chronology therefore relies on instantaneous connective tissue (forwards, viral posts), which literary realism historically created through slower epistolary or diary modes. This compression mirrors what media scholars describe as the network society: information flows reorganize social rhythms and produce political effects at speed. Reading Bhutto through Castells' and Turkle's frameworks clarifies why speed and network topology are not neutral backdrops but narrative determinants.

Finally, the book's use of group-text-like evidence invites questions of **authority and authenticity**: forwarded screenshots, unverified testimonies, and propaganda memes complicate the reader's stance. Where a diary or letter once claimed authenticity via private, singular address, networked artifacts demand a critical reading practice from the reader — turning the novel into a space of forensic literacy. Kirschenbaum's insistence on the materiality and forensic afterlife of digital traces resonates here: the fictional chat log is both text and trace, and Bhutto exploits that doubleness narratively.

2. Ratika Kapur, *The Private Life of Mrs. Sharma*: Intimacy, Performance, and the New Epistolary

Ratika Kapur's novel is commonly described as a diary-form study of desire and middle-class life, yet its narrative structure is deeply inflected by representational choices that mimic texting and online chat. Reviews note the diaristic voice, but a closer narratological reading shows how Kapur's book **moves the functions of the diary into the grammar of networked communication**: immediate responses, fragmentary confessions addressed to imagined audiences, and the self's performative curation (what the protagonist would put in a message, a profile, a status update).

Two mutually reinforcing effects are visible. First, the **private/public boundary blurs**. Traditional diaries assume a private audience (the self), but the chat-era diary is always potentially performative — written with the awareness of forwarding or screenshotting. Kapur's narrator fluctuates between confession and imagined response, which produces an anxious narrative voice that both reveals interiority and performs for an imagined public. Turkle's work on mediated intimacy — that online life reshapes how people perform and feel intimacy — offers a descriptive frame: the novel's confessions feel both private and deliberately presentable.

Second, Kapur foregrounds **temporal fragmentation**. Chat-like sequences are episodic and

sometimes elliptical, privileging the present-moment affect rather than continuous psychological development. The plot advances not through long reflective letters but via instantaneous decisions and short exchanges; narrative momentum is episodic, echoing the affordances of messaging platforms. Bourdon's comparative study of letters and the Internet suggests that audiences and rhetorical expectations change with medium; Kapur demonstrates that shift in form.

In sum, Kapur's text shows that **epistolary functions (confession, evidence, voice) survive in digital form but are redistributed** across performative statuses, truncated temporality, and audience-anticipation. This destabilizes the classic confessional authority without simply replacing it — instead the novel creates a new, ambivalent intimate rhetoric.

3. Arundhati Roy, *Azadi*: Hybrid Form and Political Digitality

Arundhati Roy's *Azadi* is a hybrid collection of essays and speeches that critics have read as urgent political commentary; for the purposes of digital realism it is valuable because it demonstrates how **political discourse and literary form collapse under the pressure of digital publics**. Roy's writing responds to, appropriates, and intervenes in online debates — she writes in an era where hashtag activism, viral video, and troll armies shape political visibility and risk. Reviews situate *Azadi* within contemporary Indian political crises, and the text often reads like an extended argument interacting with social media-driven publicness.

Formally, Roy's hybridization is instructive: the boundary between essay and witnessed report, between polemic and imaginative reconstruction, resembles how digital publics mix genres — tweets, threads, op-eds, and personal testimony coexist on the same timeline. The narrative consequence is an **erasure of firm genre boundaries**, which produces a literary voice that is simultaneously journalistic, testimonial, and rhetorical. This hybridity mirrors the networked public sphere where argument and fiction blend and where narrative authority must grapple with the rapid circulation and contestation of facts online. Castells' network society diagnosis helps explain how digital publics reconfigure what counts as political evidence and how writers like Roy respond formally.

4. Comparative Readings: What Unites, What Diverges

Across the three texts, several shared narrative tendencies emerge:

1. **Epistolary displacement:** Letters and diaries are not simply obsolete; their epistemic and affective functions reappear as digital artifacts (chat logs, forwards, profiles) that perform confession, evidence, and address in new ways. Bourdon's study of the

“Internet of letters” supports the idea that epistolary logics persist but transform with medium.

2. **Distributed focalization and polyphony:** Digital communication introduces multiple, often concurrent perspectives — group chats, comment threads, and feeds — producing a polyphonic text (in Bakhtin’s sense) where voices coexist, contest, and produce dialogic meaning rather than monologic authorial closure. This is visible in Bhutto’s network-driven chapters and in Kapur’s imagined audiences.
3. **Temporality and compression:** Messaging produces narrative leaps, abrupt decisions, and the sense of simultaneity. These temporal affordances change plot pacing and character formation across the novels; the novel’s realist temporality is compressed and interrupted by viral time.

However, divergence is also key. Bhutto externalizes network effects as causal engines of radical change; Kapur internalizes digital performativity as the grammar of intimacy; Roy politicizes networked publics and flattens genre boundaries. The differences are not merely thematic: they are formal responses to local configurations of politics, class, and censorship. This comparative view demonstrates that digital realism is not a single style but a cluster of formal adaptations to similar technological affordances shaped by differing national and social contexts.

5. Engaging Existing Criticism and the Contribution of this Analysis

Many critics have emphasized the themes of online radicalization, feminist mediations of desire, or political polemic in these works; reviews often read digitality as topical (what the books are *about*). But the emerging field of South Asian digital humanities has argued for attention to **how** digital culture reshapes literary form. This paper aligns with that turn and extends it: it insists that digital platforms produce **formal consequences** (focalization, temporality, epistolary transformation) that demand narratological attention. Works like *South Asian Digital Humanities* call for precisely this synthesis of media studies and literary analysis; my close readings operationalize that call by showing concrete narrative strategies in specific novels.

Where I part company with some thematic readings is in emphasis — I argue that understanding radicalization, gender politics, or political dissent in these novels requires attending to narrative technologies; otherwise one risks reading digitality as mere content rather than as a structural condition that shapes meaning-production itself. For instance,

explanations of radicalization that focus only on socioeconomic causes miss how the novel formalizes network contagion through literary technique; explanations of online desire that focus only on social mores miss how performative publics alter the voice of confession in the novel.

6. Significance: What this Analysis Adds

This analysis contributes three linked claims to scholarship on South Asian fiction and digital culture:

1. **Digital realism is formally transformative.** The presence of WhatsApp chats, social-media feeds, and forwards changes the grammar of narrative, not just its subject matter. Close narratological attention is necessary to capture those shifts.
2. **The epistolary tradition is being translated, not discarded.** Diaries and letters survive as rhetorical functions but are distributed across new digital forms that complicate questions of authenticity, address, and audience. Bourdon's comparison of letters and the Internet helps historicize this translation.
3. **Comparative, regionally attentive readings matter.** Although global theory (Castells, Hayles, Turkle) provides useful frameworks, the concrete narrative effects are shaped by regional socialities — censorship, state surveillance, gender norms, and the documented harms of WhatsApp misinformation — which means that South Asian digital realism has distinctive narrative patterns that deserve theorization on their own terms.

5. Conclusion

The entry of digital realism into South Asian fiction represents a profound shift in both narrative structure and thematic preoccupations, signaling how deeply technology has permeated the private and public spheres of life in India and Pakistan. This study examined three representative texts—Fatima Bhutto's *The Runaways*, Ratika Kapur's *The Private Life of Mrs. Sharma*, and Arundhati Roy's *Azadi*—to investigate how digital platforms alter narration, how social media interactions reshape character consciousness, and how WhatsApp and online culture replace traditional epistolary forms such as letters and diaries. By deploying narrative criticism alongside digital culture studies, the analysis illuminated the multiple ways in which social media enters fiction not merely as a motif but as a structuring principle of plot, voice, and temporality.

One of the central findings is that digital platforms operate as both narrative devices and

ideological sites. In *The Runaways*, online forums and encrypted chats are not passive tools of communication but active agents in shaping radical subjectivities. Characters do not just inhabit the internet; their identities are mediated, fractured, and reconstructed through it. This resonates with wider postcolonial anxieties about globalization, alienation, and fractured belonging, showing how digital networks often become spaces of both empowerment and vulnerability.

In contrast, Ratika Kapur's *The Private Life of Mrs. Sharma* illustrates the micro-social dynamics of digital realism. WhatsApp exchanges and text messages form the central scaffolding of the protagonist's secret life, underscoring how digital platforms blur the boundaries between intimacy and deception, domesticity and modernity. Unlike earlier South Asian novels where letters or diaries functioned as vehicles of confession, the immediacy of chat messages generates new modes of self-expression—fragmentary, coded, and at times performative. This demonstrates how digital narration redefines the rhythm of fiction: staccato conversations replace long reflective passages, suggesting a structural evolution of the novel itself in response to technological change.

Roy's *Azadi* expands the scope of digital realism into the political sphere. Here, social media is represented not only as a cultural tool but as a political battlefield, where hashtags, viral videos, and online mobilizations constitute part of the lived reality of dissent. Roy's hybrid style—fusing essayistic commentary with fictional textures—demonstrates how the digital inflects literary form itself, collapsing genre boundaries. Her work underscores how literature now exists in constant dialogue with online discourse, reflecting the transformation of public intellectualism in the age of Instagram activism and Twitter revolutions.

Together, these novels highlight how South Asian fiction is not simply documenting the digital revolution but retooling itself to accommodate new linguistic registers, new temporalities, and new epistemologies of truth and identity. This confirms the research hypothesis that digital platforms are increasingly displacing older epistolary conventions, with chat windows, online profiles, and social media timelines now functioning as repositories of memory, confession, and political engagement.

The originality of this study lies in its comparative focus on Indian and Pakistani texts, demonstrating that while the cultural and political specificities of each country differ, the intrusion of digital media produces strikingly parallel disruptions in narrative form. While critics have previously noted the thematic representation of technology in South Asian fiction,

less attention has been paid to how digital platforms alter narration at the structural level. By foregrounding the role of WhatsApp chats, text messages, and online forums as narrative scaffolding, this research contributes to an emergent field of inquiry into digital realism within postcolonial literature.

Future research could expand in multiple directions: a broader survey of South Asian novels and short stories engaging with digital culture; comparative studies with African or Latin American literatures undergoing similar digital transformations; or more theoretical inquiries into how digital realism challenges the ontology of the novel itself. Interdisciplinary approaches that combine literary criticism with media studies, sociology, or anthropology could further enrich our understanding of how digital technologies reconfigure human relationships and cultural expression.

In conclusion, South Asian fiction today reveals that the digital is no longer an external backdrop but an embedded texture of lived experience. WhatsApp gossip, Instagram politics, and online radicalization are not simply narrative motifs but foundational forces that reshape plot, character, and form. In reflecting—and critically interrogating—this transformation, contemporary Indian and Pakistani writers position themselves at the vanguard of global literary innovation, showing how the novel remains a living, adaptive form in the digital age.

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