RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE ROLE OF READER IN READER RESPONSE THEORY

Dr. RACHNA DAVI

Email id: rachnasinghnayak@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This research paper presents a detail description of reader response theory and the role of the reader in the creation of the meaning and how different types of reader fill the gaps in the text. The relationship between reader and text is highly valued; text does not exist without a reader. It is rather like the question of whether a tree falling in a forest makes a sound if no one is around to hear it. A text siting on a shelf does nothing. It does not come alive until reader and text are joined.

Keywords: Reader Response Theory, Role and types of reader, Relationship between reader and text

Dr. RACHNA DAVI

Reader response criticism is a literary critical theory. It is promoted and developed by a variety of literary theorists and critics. Depending on the person advancing the concept, the theory may take on any number of nuanced meanings. Generally speaking however, reader response criticism suggests that a text gains meaning by the purposeful act of a reader's reading and interpreting it. The relationship between reader and text is highly valued; text does not exist without a reader. It is rather like the question of whether a tree falling in a forest makes a sound if no one is around to hear it. A text siting on a shelf does nothing. It does not come alive until reader and text are joined.

Reader response theory arose in large measure as a reaction against the new criticism, or formalist approach. Reader response critics see formalist critic as narrow, dogmatic, elitist, and certainly wrong headed in essentially refusing readers even in place in the reading interpretive process. While reader response critics see themselves, as Jane Tompkins has put it, "willing to share their critical authority with less tutored readers and at the same time to go into partnership with psychologists, linguists, philosophers, and other students of mental functioning" (223). Reader response theory presents the role of the reader in interpreting texts. It disagrees that there is a solitary, fixed meaning integral to every literary work. Because all readers bring their own emotions, concerns, life experiences and knowledge to their reading, each interpretation is subjective and unique.

Richards is the forerunner of reader response theory. It is based on philosophic grounds. The emergence of reader response theories in the field of literature teaching has shifted the exclusive emphasis on the text, while acknowledge its importance, to an emphasis on the reader. It was Louise Rosenblatt who began the march to a transactional theory of reader response, which emphasizes a mutual interaction between the reader and the text in the process of creating and recreating meaning. Texts do not come into existence alone nor do they acquire their meaning or invoke feelings unless they are read by a reader. Without a reader texts are no more than marks can a page.

I also would like to define what is meant by the term literary text, and what is meant by the objective of it. According to Terry Eagleton, the definition of literary text is the peculiar use of language. Literature is said to transform and intensity ordinary language, deviating from the everyday colloquial tongue. According to Wolfgang Iser, a literary work has two poles; the aesthetic and the artistic. The artistic pole is the author's text, and the aesthetic is the realisation accomplished by the reader. Hence, the literary work can not be considered as the actualisation of, or identical to, the text, but is situated somewhere between the two. Iser speaks of the text as a virtual character that can not be reduced to the reality of text or to the subjectively of the reader, and it derives its dynamism from the vitality. Readers passing through the various perspectives offered by the text relate the different views and patterns to one another.

Structuralism and modernism endeavour to explore the care and the central meaning of the text. They regard an author as God and elevated a text to the heights of canonial states. On the other hand, postmodernism celebrates indeterminacy, open-endedness, marginality, and individualism. Deconstruction opened the door for the multiple signification of a text by regarding meaning as slippery. Reader response theory further contributed to postmodern poetics and pedagogy by regarding interpretation of literature as something which is related to the experience and background of the individual readers. It believes that a text cannot mean the some to all the individual reader who have different backgrounds, tastes, traits, experiences, and knowledge and therefore the interpretation of the text is differ from one reader to any other reader.

Reader was always presented in the history. He was ignored by its critics or theorists. He was beside the literary curtain. If we go back to the history, we find that all the writers and the critics talked about the reader directly or indirectly. In other terms, if we talked about critics, they have readers in their mind in passive way. It means the concept of passive reader was always presented in the history of literature. Now, we cannot ignore it. Plato is the first and foremost literary critic. He says that, "poetry is a bundle of lies". (91) It makes people immoral, emotional and sensitive. In this way, Plato talks about immature reader and Plato's immature reader is replaced by Aristotle's mature and sensitive reader. Aristotle says that tragedy is the part of human beings which arouse 'pity and fear' in audience. Aristotelian's reader's means mature reader. Then we discuss Horace who is famous for his concept 'Decorum'. It means he also has a reader in his mind. He talked about sophisticated reader.

Further Longinus is the prominent critic in the literature. He gave birth reader response approach and famous for his theory of *Sublimity* in literature. According to him, a work of art has five sources of *Sublimity*, it transport the reader / audience. If we talked about critics and theorists like Plato, Aristotle, Longinus, Horace and Cicero, all have reader in their mind. So we can say that reader has an important role in literature. Without reader a text is like a blank page. The text has no existence in itself.

The reader brings to the text a host of experiences, characteristics, qualities, emotions and ideas that interact with the message embedded in the text and conveyed through the medium of words to produce or create the meaning of the message. Because each reader brings different individual experiences, the reshaped text's meaning or each reader's response to it is unique and cannot be duplicated. As Rosenblatt said:

> The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of the past events, present needs and preoccupations and a particular mood of the movement, and a particular physical condition. These and many other elements in a never to be duplicated combination enter into the reader's relationship with the text (31)

It is very essay to say that it is the reader who breathes meaning into the text. Roland Barthes, one can declare that the author is dead and the reader is the author / creator. But, there are a whole lot of questions to be answered before we privilege the reader; if we make the reader the centre, we are only shifting the centre from one transcendental centre to another.

According to Wimsatt and Beardsley, the meaning of a text is contained in the text, and it is not the product of the author or reader. For example, the essays, "The international Fallacy", and "The Affective Fallacy", both are the most uncompromising texts forwarded by the proponents of the school. Wimsatt and Beardsley said:

IJELR
www.ijelr.in

he international Fallacy is confusion between the poem and its origins ... It begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychology causes of the poem and ends in biography and relativism. The affective Fallacy is confusion between the poem and its result... It begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological efforts of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism. The outcome of Fallacy, the international or the Affective is that the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgement, tends to disappear. (34)

But the reader responses critic react it. Stanley Fish, an exponent of reader response theory, in *Is There a Text in This Class*? He said that interpretation is not the art of construing but of constructing. Interpreters do not decode poems; they make them. He would say that a work is not an achieved structure of meanings. Far from it, it is the result or the outcome of the evolving process of reading. The work has no independent existence. Rather, it is the experience of the reader who opens it up. Reader response critics believe that what the text does is what matters, not to believe what the text is. They are sure of their ground that the readers do not merely consume the texts passively; instead they are actively involved in constructing a meaning out of it.

So, we can say that the text is nothing in itself. The reader is only one who can say what the text is; in a sense, the reader creates the text as much as the author does. The reader response rejects the autonomy of the text and the concentrate on the reader and the reading process, the interaction that takes place between the reader and the text.

Therefore, the main conflict within this theory is between those who believe the individual is key to interpretation and those who believe he is irrelevant. This gives rise to different forms of reader response criticisms and different methods in which they are used some noted individualist theorists are David Bleich, Michdel Steig, Walter Slatoff, Jafferey Berman, David Willbern and Robert Rogers. Finally, the most common uniformity is Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jawss, Michael Riffaterre, Gerald Prince, Norman Holland and Stanley Fish as having major significance in the movement.

Wolfgang Iser is a German critic. He is important for his contribution in reader response theory. There are two famous works *The Implied Reader* (1974) and *The Act of Reading* (1973). In which, he tries to explain how texts set up certain requirements for the reader. Iser claims that there are four main perspectives that are important in the production of the meaning of the text who are the narrator, the character, the plot, and the fictitious reader. The reader is labelled as such because the author must have some audience in mind when writing the text, and because each reader is different there is little if any, chance that the actual reader and the imagined reader are the same person.

The reader is bringing his or her own creative viewpoint to the text during the reading process; different reader will inevitably have different interpretations of the text's meaning. Even if the reader tries to find more than one meaning of the text, "The total potential can never be fulfilled in the reading process". In spite of, all interpretations are united in the fact that they can all be verified, or justified, by certain, aspects of the text. In other words, there is no wrong interpretation, even if the reader derives a meaning from the text that the author had no intention of conveying. Iser directly contrasts the two types of interactions in *Prospecting From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology.* Iser said:

An obvious and major difference between reading and all forms of social interaction is the fact that with reading there is no face to face situation. A text can not adapt itself to each reader it comes into contact with. The partners in dyadic interaction can ask each other questions in order to ascertain how far their images have bridged the gap of the inexperienceability of one another's experiences. The reader, however, can never learn from the text how accurate or inaccurate his views of it are. (32)

The reason for a multitude of different readings being considered equally valid lies not only in the uniqueness of each reader, but also in the nature of the text itself. Although it is clear that acts of comprehension are guided by the structures of the texts, the latter can never exercise complete control, and this is where one might sense of a touch of arbitrariness. However, it must be born in mind that fictional texts constitute their own objects and do not copy something already in existence. For this reason they can not have the total determinacy of real objects, and indeed, it is the elements of indeterminacy that enable the text to

communicate with the reader, in the sense that they induce him to participate in both the production and the comprehension of the work's intention .

Therefore, it is the indeterminacy of the text that, along with the reader's own unique imaginative process, enables the justifications of multitude interpretations.

Another prominent critic of reader response theory's Hans Robert Jauss, a German theorist. He used the term 'horizon of expectations'. Jauss said that texts are interpreted differently over the passage of time, and because of this, the reader understands it in a new ways. By declaring this, Jauss was stating that a literary text is not and never can be fossilized in its meaning. The objectivity of the text has been confiscated by the changing times. Jauss says, "A literary work is not an object which stands by itself and which offers, the same face to each reader in each period. It does not a monument which reveals its timeless essence in a monologue". (76)

In "Is There a Text in This class" Stanly Fish radically proposes that there is no meaning at all in the text but rather that the reader actually creates meaning in the process of reading. He talked about interpretative communities. According to him, 'interpretative communities' are made up of those who share interpretative strategies and he further says that there is more stability if reader belongs to the same interpretative community. There are other critics who have drawn attention to the personal context of the reader. In *Reading and Feelings*, David Bleich states that the role of personality in response is the most fundamental fact of criticism. By this he meant that personal elements come into play when a reader reads and his / her interpretation will always be influenced by his / her personal horizon of experience. Education, background, gender, race and age are just a few of the extraneous circumstances that may have an influence on how we respond to the text and create meaning.

According to Chatman the reader's role is more important than the text. He is famous for his chart. Chatman's *Story and Discourse* which distinguishes between real author, implied author, narrator, narrattee, implied reader and real reader. He explains the function of his analysis by a diagram

Narrative Text
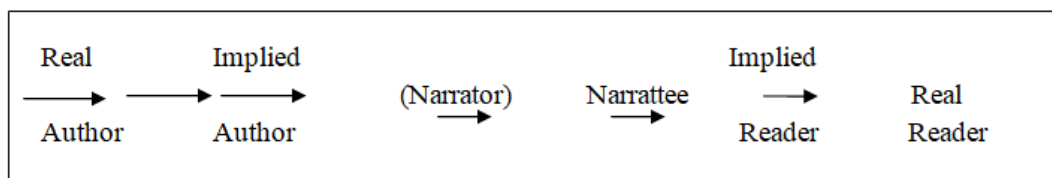
Chatman says that the real author and real reader are easy enough to grasp. They are living, flesh and blood persons who actually produce the text and read it.

All the critics and theorists analysis on the reader response theory and the role of reader is more valuable and thinkable. They have prominent place in literary criticism. Now we will talk about different types of reader who play an important role in creation of the meaning and text. Bennett cites a concise list provided by Elizabeth Freud:

the mock reader by Gibson, the implied reader by Both, Iser, the model read by Eco,   the super reader by Reffaterre, the narratee by Prince, the ideal reader by Cullur, the actual reader Jauss, the informed reader or the interpretive community by Fish, the virtual reader and the real reader by Prince, the resisting reader by Flatterly, the female reader by Chambers, the intended reader. (Walff, 15)

Firstly, we will describe the qualities of the implied reader. The Implied reader is a term used by wolfgang Iser. The implied reader gives full response the text. The implied reader embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its efforts. Predispositions lay down, not by an empirical outside reality, but by the text itself. But the implied reader has its roots firmly planted in the structure of the text; he is a construct and in no way to be identified with any real reader. Iser develops the idea of the implied reader as both a textual entity and a process of meaning production.

The Actual reader is usually defined as those flesh and blood individuals who buy, open and read any printed materials. The actual reader is concrete reality. He or she has specific habits, preferences, knowledge

and beliefs. Walker Godwin explains the actual reader that, "actual reader, however, frequently resist authorial roles, very often because they resent, disagree with, or feel confused by the ideals inherent in those roles". (101)

Now we talk about Authorial and Mock reader. The authorial reader is not a living person existing outside the text but a hypothetical, abstract, and generalised being postulated by, and existing solely with in the text, and to a significant extent, imposed on the actual audience. The authorial reader would also be considered in a progressive document as the unknown audience.

Walker Gibson is a prominent critic in the literary theory that describes in his essay "Authors, Speaker, Readers and Mock Readers", that there are different roles for reader and labels them mock reader. The role for the mock reader is to wear the appropriate mask for the text that they are reading. In relation to the reader roles, mock reader's role for audience who are willing to engage with the text and will understand it on the level as the author intended and audience who if they choose to engage with the text, may not accept the role of a willing reader or reject the message that the author had intended. Godwin posits his own version of Gibson's mock reader or Ong's fictitious reader in the authorial reader as opposed to the actual reader:

> As writers, we shape the actual audience's responses by inviting them to recall what the authorial reader is expected to know, to accept what the authorial reader is expected to believe to become what the authorial reader is expected to become, and this to read our writing in a manner appropriate and consistent with its genre and purposes. (Godwin, 10)

Further we discussed about Super and Informed reader. Michael Riffaterre talked about super reader. The super reader is like a palimpest of available textual commentary on the text which may include the author's statements or corrections, translations, and dictionaries. The super reader is another system, a system of intertextuality. All the responses of the text have recorded by super reader. The super reader is a collective term for a variety of readers of different competence that Riffaterre uses, "to discover a density of meaning potential encoded in the text". (160) He is famous for his collective consciousness.

The Informed reader has a great importance in reader response theory. The informed reader possesses literary competence. He possesses literary competence. He has all of the social, historical and semantic knowledge which is necessary to process the text. When he evaluates the text with his knowledge then he notes his reactions to the text. The focus of the informed reader's critical insight is not so much on the evolution of meaning within the text as it is on transformation of consciousness with the reader.

The Virtual reader is regarded as a real reader in reader response theory. The real reader presents an abstraction and diverse range of interpretation. The reader response theory also talks about resisting reader who rejects accepting the meaning of 'androtext'. A female reader is resisting reader. She does not accept what is written by male author in his text. Further, we talk about Marxist reader, who rejects a good poem on Taj Mahal because it is laboured by number of labourers or lower class people. So we can say that reader response theory has different types of reader, and play their role in different way. Any critics and theorists can not ignore their importance in the text.

After discussing several issues related to the role and types of reader, we come to this conclusion that every reader plays an important role in the creation of meaning and in the fillings of gaps in the text. It depends on the reader's expectations and desire how he creates meaning of the words in the text At last, it can be said that the reader is absent when the writer writes, and the writer is normally absent when the reader reads. In present scenario, the whole contemporary theory deals with the reader or gives an important place to reader in comparison to author in the creation of meaning.

Works Cited

Rosenblatt, Lousie M. *Literature as Exploration* .United Kingdom : Morden Language Ass Of Amer, 1996. Print.

Wimsatt, William and Munroe C. Beardsley. "The Affective Fallacy". *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. David Lodge. London: Longman, 1972. 34. Print.

Iser, Wolfgang . *The Act of Reading :A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978. 24. Print.

Iser, Wolfgang. *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989. Print.

Fish, Stanly. "Is There a Text in This Class?" *The Authority of Interpretive Communitie s*.Ed .David Martin. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980.n.p. Print.

Gibson, Walker. "Authors, Speaker, Readers and Mock Reader". *Reader response Criticism from Formalism to post- Structuralism*. Ed. Tomkins Jane. London: John Hopkins University Press, 1988. 1o. Print.

Jauss, Hans Robert. "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory". *New Directions in Literary History*. Ed. Ralph Cohen. London: Routledge and Regan Paul, 1974. 76. Print.

 Bleich, David . *Subjective Criticism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins university Press, 1978. Print.

Chatman, Seymour. *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Lndon: Cornell university Press ,1993. Print.

MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Paper. 7th ed. New Delhi: East- West Press, 2009.Print.

Author Bio – Note

Dr Rachna Davi has completed her Ph.D from University of Lucknow. She did research on the topic "***Postmodernism in Select Plays of Marina Carr***". Along with her research, she has also taught as an Assistant Professor at Baba Saheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University and Rajat Girls Degree College, Lucknow, India. She did M.Phil in English Literature from University of Lucknow, India and Masters in English Literature from M.J.P. Rohilkhand University Bareilly, India. She did research and wrote dissertation on the topic "**Parsi-Pakistani Perspective in the Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa (with special reference to** *The Crow Eaters* **and** *Ice-Candy-Man***)**" during M.Phil program.

She has keen interest in research in Irish Literature, Indian writing in English, and Contemporary Social Issues. Her research works and articles have been published in some of the well known journals and books. She has also presented papers in national and international seminars / conferences. She is a natural writer and poet. Apart from English Literature, she also has interest in writing Hindi poetry. She is overwhelmed by contemporary issues related to women condition in Society and her Ph.D research work on Irish Playwright Marina Carr focuses on the contemporary issues related to women such as domestic violence, incestuous relationship and rape.