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## **Institutionalised (ab)use of Interpretation: A Call for Reforming the Academic Use of Reader Response Practices in the Indian Literary Academia**

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### **Abstract:**

Reader-response criticism or theory is considered a paradigm that empowers the reader to read and interpret the text independently. In addition, the rationale behind reader-response theory is the premise proposed by Stanley Fish, which is that the object, including the literary text, is constructed by the subject or a group of subjects or interpretive communities. Specifically, Reader Response thrives on the dichotomy between object and subject by implying no pure objects or subjects. Considering the phenomenon mentioned above, it implies that the subject determines the object. In the literary context, it opines that the reader attributes meaning to the text. Positioning the reader as the fulcrum of literary analysis provided the impetus to unearth diverse narratives and interpretations otherwise evaded for several socio-political reasons. While no scepticism is involved in acknowledging the significance of reader-response theories in revolutionising literary reading, there lies a critical concern regarding its viability and vitality in the academic context in facilitating effective interpretive activity: Firstly, In test-based and biased academia, reading is generally viewed as means to achieve examination success. Since ‘success’ in conventional mainstream assessments is possible *sans* reading the literary text, actual reading is a rarity. In such a scenario, when the reader is not born, the reader’s

response is exposed as a pretence. Secondly, Since the phenomenon called interpretation offers the license to put forth one's perspectives, more often than not, it showcases the arrogant ignorance of teachers and learners with their lack of literary, socio-cultural and political awareness and an abundance of 'induced wisdom.' Such skewed interpretations and shallow use of the liberty to interpret can only be considered an 'institutionalised abuse.' Therefore, this deliberation on the educational use of Reader Response theories becomes pertinent. This reflective paper encourages diverse reading practices and postponing forced interpretations fostered through examinations and assessment activities. Facilitating diverse and continuous reading will, in turn, hone the critical interpretive potential of the readers rather than lending 'interpretative autonomy' to ignorant and arrogant readers in the name of reader response. In addition, this paper lists a few suggestions for revitalising the vitality and credibility of reader response in the Indian literary studies milieu. Therefore, this paper serves two purposes: a critique and a call for reform.

**Keywords: reader response, interpretive communities, institutionalised abuse, arrogant ignorance or ignorant arrogance, induced wisdom.**

### **Introduction**

Reader response as a theoretical approach argues that the reader breathes meaning into the text (Larsen 638). Reception theory (*Rezeptionsästhetik*) and reader-response criticism view the reader as a vital cog in the process of interpretation (Newton 187). In Taylor's words, the reader reads and makes meaning. The approach per se gains momentum from the emergence of phenomenology, the study of how we understand the world and hermeneutics, a theoretical approach to textual interpretation. The pioneer of phenomenological analysis, Edmund Husserl, propounded that the object of proper philosophical analysis is the content of consciousness and not the objects in the world (Husserl). In other words, the human mind is the origin of all

meanings. In turn, Reader response theory uses this proposition to assert that the reader's mind responds to the text to create meaning.

### **The Promise and Challenges of Reader Response Theories**

The researcher's point of disagreement with the fundamental propositions of reader response theory and its academic viability begins by questioning Husserl's idea. Despite agreeing with the phenomenon that the contents of consciousness facilitate the process of understanding the world, one cannot deny that the objects of the world influence the contents of consciousness. Husserl's student Heidegger observed this grey area and stated that the world affects the individual's understanding of the world itself (Sutherland). Shifting the discussion towards interpretation, people can interpret the world if they can understand the word. The word here implies the language. Language constructs thoughts, for one's language is an acquired system fostered by the environment that implies the 'world'. Thinking on these lines leads to the fear that the linguistic incompetence of readers can cause severe damage to the overvaluing ambitions of reader response theory as an academic approach. Hence, it is pertinent to introspect on the question: Can we consider a misinterpretation due to linguistic incompetence as an 'interpretation' under reader response?

In addition, it is vital to realise that the world's influence on a reader constructs an individual's knowledge. More often than not, individuals are convinced by this influenced knowledge disguised as 'wisdom', which they think is absolute and sufficient to frame their lives' philosophy. The researcher terms this as 'induced wisdom', which presents a fatal blow to the idea of the autonomy of a 'reader's response'. Possible reader response to a religious text would validate the former claim about the significance of 'induced wisdom' on independent interpretation. However, a reader's response, in its true sense, to a religious text is improbable. It is because an interpellation process on that particular religion that exposes followers to organised thoughts

and beliefs governs the reading of the religious text *sans* interpretation. The readers reverentially read in search of a specific meaning, mostly a blessing, and complete their reading at a point when they are convinced that they have encountered the meaning or message they intended to receive. In a similar process of unearthing meaning, Derrida perceived meaning as a myth. In the search for literary meaning, the point where one is convinced that the meaning is found is the point where the 'induced wisdom' intervenes in the text to defer the multiple meanings and narratives. Unfortunately, an influenced reader is never aware of the other meanings and perspectives, as in the case of a devoted religious reader. Hence, the bitter truth for reader response practices is that interpellation defeats interpretation. Literary readers face a similar fate, which affects religious readers, for induced wisdom also influences interpretive literary reading, thus drubbing and diluting the decoction of reader response criticism.

Following Heidegger, another German theorist, Hans-Georg Gadamer, recorded that literary meaning is further influenced by the historical situation of the interpreter (Malpas). Now, the question is, what is the credibility of an interpretation influenced by the historical context of the reader? Here, it is pertinent to put history in the accused's dock. To rip apart the absolute-ness associated with the history, Greenblatt and his colleagues' discourse on New Historicism stands at the witness dock. They would, in turn, contest the authenticity of history by arguing that the dominant narratives which shape historical narratives are produced and normalised by intrinsic power structures. The knowledge-power nexus further substantiates this argument (Foucault). Overall, it is evident that the historical context is subjective and is only a version among various other versions of a particular event or history in general. For that reason, it can be comprehended that the so-called historical context is also a product of interpellation and induced wisdom. It implies that an individual's reading based on the specific historical context of a text is not autonomous but autocratic.

Furthermore, Hans Robert Jauss opined that the degree of reception and appeal differs between readers from different generations (Jauss and Benzinger). The phenomenon can be observed in how digital natives reduced the so-called classic works of Da Vinci and Shakespeare to meme materials. Analysing the abovementioned change in perception, even technological shifts and changes can further influence reader responses. Will the reader ever be free to interpret?

It was Wolfgang Iser who made an honest attempt to liberate the reader from historical and other kinds of influence. He argued that a text does not reveal everything; there are gaps that the reader fills in to build meaning (Iser). If we presume that filling such gaps is the reader's response, the question is, what is the paste with which the reader fills the gap? Unfortunately, the reader must duly fill it with an amalgamated paste of induced wisdom, historical influence, and technological tools. The efforts of Iser were successful to an extent in drafting a law that would emancipate the reader, but in practice, the reader continues to be in the clutches of slavery. Hence, though Iser's proposal gave the reader a momentary respite, it confined them to this textual bondage. Reader Response Theory is the only theoretical framework that has empowered the reader to fill in these gaps (in)dependently.

The researcher finds Stanley Fish's argument more rational. He perceives the text as waiting to be extracted, waiting for a human touch to be resurrected, falling in line with the understanding that a reader's response is built upon the premise that its 'author/creator is dead' (Barthes). However, he lists specific requisites to be considered as a literary reader. According to him, they are not ordinary readers but 'informed readers' (Fish 141) and are part of various 'interpretive communities.' According to Fish, an informed reader is a competent speaker of the language on which the text is built, possessing semantic knowledge and exhibiting literary competence (141). As a critic of reader-response theory, I must cross-examine Fish by asking whether the 'extraordinary reader' with the above requisites is informed or indoctrinated. What

if the reader mistakes indoctrination for information? Will the interpretation of such a reader be independent?

Nevertheless, the researcher is coerced to stop following these lines of questioning because 'he is convinced' that he has understood the spirit of reader response theory. Therefore, the researcher believes that he has found meaning at this point. Whether the researcher's understanding is independent or indoctrinated is for another critic to read between the lines. After all, suspicion is the investment of a critic.

Meanwhile, while trying to critically understand these varied viewpoints of the proponents of reader-response theory, it is unavoidable to wonder whether they were pioneering the emergence of reader-response theory or listing concerns that contest the claims of the theoretical approach. However, it is significant to consider that they were making earnest efforts to plug the gaps in the reader-response approach to make it more viable. Failure to plug those gaps in the academic context leads to a state where a teacher of English studies laments the institutionalised abuse of interpretation in the name of reader response theory.

### **The Institutionalised Abuse of Interpretation in Academia**

What is a convincing reader's response? In the researcher's opinion, an effective reader's response is made by an informed progressive reader aware of the socio-political, cultural, and historical context and the ability to discern indoctrination and information. The informed reader also possesses the ability to read and reflect beyond interpretive control exerted by external influences. This viewpoint would rationalise the title of this writing, 'The Institutional Abuse of Interpretation'. In a context where interpretation is highly influenced by various sources, how shameful it would be to witness linguistically incompetent and creatively challenged individuals read (mostly abridged versions or summaries) or listen to a literary text without an understanding of its historical context, fuelled by the confidence gathered from the empowerment provided by academic circles and the institutional employment of reader response theory.

Is it not a sheer abuse of the liberty ensured in the name of interpretation? Can this practice be considered an act of empowering readers or enabling abuse? To analyse the magnitude of such abuse and shame and to find ways to restore the integrity of interpretation, a critique of the academic use of reader response theory in the educational context is long due. Hopefully, this paper does justice by reflecting on redefining and reforming reader response practices in the Indian academic context.

#### **Four Kinds of Readers Who Abuse Interpretation**

Discussing this specific problem in academia is based on two critical questions. Firstly, taking a queue from the idea of the ‘informed reader’ by Fish, the researcher would like to analyse who the literature reader is, especially in the Indian academic context. Secondly, how does academia abuse Reader Response Theory?

The following passages of this chapter will include discourses based on these questions and provide a few recommendations aimed at interrupting the institutionalised abuse of Reader Response Theory. In an attempt to categorise and contemplate the typical reader of literature in the Indian academic context, This essay identifies four kinds of readers who are involved in the institutionalised abuse of interpretation:

- i. The students of literature at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels who consume literary texts irrespective of genre differences as short summaries that are reproduced during their conventional mainstream examinations. They expose a curious concern about the Heresy of paraphrasing ideated by Cleanth Brooks. In the contemporary context, AI chatbots are vital in providing quick summaries to such readers.
- ii. The ardent aspirants of the National Eligibility Test for Teachers, a standardised computer-based test conducted to qualify postgraduates for the assistant professorship and junior research fellowship. An aspirant being forced to prepare to respond to 150 multiple choice questions without negative marking predominantly leads to students reverting to quickly learning facts



about literary texts. This fact, in turn, fosters rote learning and mushrooming of online and face-to-face coaching centres.

iii. The research scholars aim to write a dissertation or thesis on select literary texts, mostly involving a thematic study of the chosen texts. This academic activity is more of a rigorous extension of summary writing within the format prescribed for research writing and documentation. The documentation, citations, and formatting are done mainly as a ritual to obtain the academically recognised tag of research writing. In the contemporary context, to harness and streamline such haphazard research, research scholars are forced to choose a research tool, a theoretical approach using which the scholar should interpret selected literary texts. However, this ambitious critical reading is reduced to skimming and scanning the text to find instances referencing the chosen research tool.

iv. The final group of readers who are instrumental in legalising this pseudo-scholarship or reading are the teachers and trainers facilitating the three types, as mentioned earlier, of readers. Their reading is either deliberate due to incompetence, insincerity and laziness or forced practices facilitated and even encouraged by the requisites created by the flawed system. They find reader-response as an escape by leaving the crucial interpretation part for the learners to do independently under the pretext that they facilitate individual interpretations. It is a generally used strategy to 'cover-up' their ignorance in exhibiting a thorough understanding of the meaning-making process. Such escapism on the teacher's part stresses the learners because they are asked to interpret without being taught the nuances of interpretation. How can we ask the learners to interpret without teaching them how to interpret? On the whole, reader-response criticism, as an approach aimed at uncovering diverse ideas, fails at the hands of teachers who use it as a shield to conceal their ignorance. Hence, in this context, teaching becomes a mere act of impersonation. Coincidentally, cheating and teaching have similar letters in a different order.

The abuse carried out by these four kinds of readers is either due to conscious efforts to achieve easy success or an unconscious practice of following the bandwagon. Whatever the reason, such readers' responses can never be considered competent because it is evident that those readers produce interpretations without reading literary texts. Overall, the researcher perceives that the English studies in the Indian context, especially the assessment practices, do not favour the cause of effective reader response and interpretation. However, it has to be taken into account that this list does not include the minuscule minority of students, scholars, and teachers who make sincere efforts to read, interpret, write and teach literary texts with integrity and intellectual honesty.

### **The Cult of “Critical Appreciation”**

Even among genuine readers aiming at an actual reading of the literary text, a pseudo-intellectual notion prevails that literary reading is an appreciation of aesthetic techniques, narrative styles and use of rhetorical devices. The phrase 'critical appreciation' is a widely used expression in Indian academia and is an outward symbol of the colonial hangover. The term critical appreciation is an oxymoron since both criticism and appreciation cannot exist together. The colonial empire institutionalised it to ensure that the colonised were kept in awe of the culture and literature of the coloniser. Such institutionalisation has ensured that the readers are nurtured to appreciate the primarily approved and socially constructed rhetorical genius of a select few British writers and would, in a way, acknowledge and unconsciously internalise the themes and ideas through the convincing power of rhetorical brilliance. Therefore, the Greeks feared the power of rhetorics/sophists (Philip A.) Such an appreciation has extended its stronghold even in the digital age. Even educated individuals get carried away by rhetorical delivery in memes, social media narratives, advertisements and political narratives. The emotional reaction (appreciation) to such rhetorical strategies is perceived as readers' responses or interpre-

tations. These reactions are further shared without rationale, thus fostering information explosion and anxiety. Considering the phenomenon stated above, a pertinent concern is raised about the practice of reader response. Can we consider a literary reader's emotional reaction to rhetorical brilliance as an act of critical interpretation of the text? Unfortunately, most genuine literary readings facilitated by teachers in a colonial hangover are spontaneous reactions disguised as genuine literary criticism or interpretation.

After reflecting on the different types of literary readers and their institutionalised approaches toward their understanding of interpretation per se, the researcher wanted to revisit the predominant criticism of reader-response criticism with contemporary insights. The chief criticism against the reader's response is that it provides a skewed interpretation due to bias, prejudice and induced wisdom. It leads to a tendency where readers consider interpellation and indoctrinated information as wisdom that empowers them to interpret a text or an event independently. For example, the idea called 'fan criticism', the idea of fans critiquing their favourite works of art or the works of their favourite artists, cannot be validated due to its volatility or vulnerability fuelled by personal bias. Similarly, texts that are interpreted by their fans become an embodiment of fandom and admiration. Along the same lines, Janice Radway's *Reading the Romances*, a reader-response study among the readers of Mills and Boons Romances, provided a skewed viewpoint on what attracts the readers toward the romance genre. Taking this into account, the researcher attributes the success of popular literature, which subscribes to ideas that divert readers and consumers from the grave realities of life and render them indifferent to the perils of the real-life world, to the impetus provided by the responses furnished by ardent fan readers. It is no different from receiving reviews and ratings from a fanboy about a particular film star to deduce that the work of art is highly rated and received. If this activity is considered a subjective perspective dominated by personal bias, so is the process of reader-response interpretation practised by biased readers. It showcases and defends the commonsensical narrative

that the reader/receiver is always correct and constructs a rigid wall that stops the reader from accepting diverse ideas and deeper insights. The wall is inflexible because the biased reader is generally incapable of traversing the deeper surfaces of the text for multilayered meanings because of the lack of exposure to varied critical reading or inadequate institutional practice of criticism. This lack of critical thinking leads to developing a reading sensibility that cannot fathom diverse thoughts and ideas.

### **Reader Response as a Tool for the Culture Industry**

At this juncture, the researcher is forced to opine that reader response can be used as a ploy by the culture industry to feed the more extensive populace with texts that are insensitive to issues in social and political contexts, along with deceiving elementary or indifferent readers by branding them as critics for merely partaking in the interpretative process. Ironically, the empowering approach of reader-response is used to lower the readers' standards as they are compelled to become compulsive consumers of more such works of art to become inducted into 'the culture industry' (Horkheimer and Adorno). Thus, it creates a superficial demand, providing a larger market for popular literary texts to thrive and flourish. In addition, setting the standard low also enables a favourable ambience to promote 'commodity fetishism' (Marx and Ben 163-165).

### **Ignorance of Historical and Social Concerns**

Besides these concerns, the notion that reader response ignores the historical milieu and the varied contexts of textual production limits its scope and narrows its focus. This phenomenon lends credence to and substantiates the popular contemporary claim among the masses: 'history is boring'. It inflates the said syndrome further as readers need not be aware of the historical context of the text they respond to and interpret. However, it is crucial to read history under any domain of study because history repeats itself and only by reading history can one create history.

### **Revitalising Reader Response: A Call to Action**

This academic discourse will only be complete by making a few suggestions on revitalising reader responses within educational contexts. It is germane to define the roles of a teacher in facilitating reader response criticism. Theoretical approaches and literary texts (audio and visual) should be blended so that different kinds of text reading can be demonstrated in the class and reflected in the assessment modules. Teaching interpretation skills should be an integral part of literary and cultural studies. Interpretation should not be taken for granted. It is essential to encourage varied reading and expose learners to reading before forcing them to interpret the text by employing over-ambitious questions during the examination. Forced interpretation due to examination requirements is considered a liberated reader's response. It is an elaborate farce, and this absurdity can be avoided by postponing the act of interpretation. While reading from varied sources, aspiring literary scholars will be empowered to differentiate between indoctrination and education per se. Focusing on reading *sans* forced interpretation will aim to hone information processing skills, a prerequisite for a scholar in the post-truth era. Possessing such a skill will enable them to confront their induced wisdom at different levels. This approach aims to create lifelong readers who can challenge their perceptions to become more rational. They consciously contest personal bias and hence reduce the chances of being misguided in the world of massive information explosion.

To summarise, it is apposite to realise that an instance of a reader's response is inconsequential without an informed reader. Unfortunately, the rigorous academic context fails to produce such readers. On the contrary, test-biased teaching and learning orchestrate an institutionalised abuse of the autonomy, authority and credibility of the idea called interpretation. Therefore, teaching and honing critical interpretation skills and significantly developing reading-oriented assessment strategies that would complement, inform and contribute to the reading and the subsequent response process is crucial. Moreover, the reader's response and not the reaction is

vital to the interpretation process because reaction as an emotional entity patronises the abuse of the meaning-making process. Response, on the other hand, calls for intellectual discourse. Based on these deliberations on the academic use of reader response theories, the researcher lists a few suggestions and recommendations to revitalise authentic reader responses in Indian academic contexts. The suggestions are classified under three sections as follows:

### **i. Enhancing Interpretation Skills**

- a. Effectively and explicitly teach interpretation skills by emphasising how to analyse texts, identifying authorial intent and formulating own interpretations using the socio-cultural context of its production and consumption. The act of interpretation can be autonomous, but literary education should not consider Teaching-learning interpretive techniques as an autonomous entity.
- b. Engage the readers with multiple critical frameworks by introducing them to various critical lenses ranging from Plato to PostHumanism and beyond to broaden their understanding of the texts and facilitate diverse perspectives.
- c. Promote active reading practice by encouraging students to annotate, question and discuss texts while reading rather than passively consuming information. To ensure active reading, it is crucial for the learners should be obliged to engage with primary sources that include original texts and historical documents firsthand rather than relying solely on secondary sources

### **ii. Fostering a Culture of Inquiry**

- a. Embrace open-ended discussions by creating a classroom environment where students feel comfortable sharing their interpretations and debating diverse viewpoints without fear of judgment and bias.
- b. Relate literature to contemporary social-cultural concerns by exploring literature's social, political, and cultural contexts to encourage readers to consider the text's relevance to their lives and the world around them.

c. Rejuvenate the power of critical questioning by doing away with the institutionalised fear of suspecting and questioning existing narratives to evolve counter and alternative narratives to the existing dominant worldview.

### **iii. Shifting the Assessment Focus**

a. Envisioning and executing a move beyond standardised testing by supplementing or replacing multiple-choice questions in the eligibility tests with open-ended prompts that encourage critical thinking and in-depth analysis.

b. Emphasis process over product by assessing learners based on their engagement with the texts throughout the course, such as through the use of portfolios, journaling, class discussions, projects, and term papers, rather than solely on final written exams.

c. Employ diverse learning-oriented assessments, such as presentations, podcasts, creative writing, and critical essays collaborating with AI tools, to cater to various learning styles and encourage multifaceted interpretations.

Incorporating these suggestions by aligning them with the academic process and outcomes, the academia can inspire readers to hone independent critical reading and beyond academic requirements, which, in turn, will revitalise the significance of readers' responses and will ensure the vitality, authenticity and credibility of readers' autonomy in interpretation, primarily, in the academic context. Furthermore, it is pivotal for scholars in the future to occasionally pose such pertinent questions to themselves and their academic contests on the viability of readers' responses. Studies should be made on specific literary texts, contexts, reading strategies, teaching modules, and assessment practices, especially in the ever-evolving artificial intelligence-dominated academic contexts, constantly shaping the reading, reflecting, and responding processes. Necessarily, the resounding appeal is to abandon the illusion of reader autonomy curated by institutional abuse and foster a landscape of informed, critical interpretation - the future of literary understanding, interpretation, and discourses depends on it.

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