



DIMENSIONS OF READER-TEXT RELATIONSHIP:

A STUDY OF WOLFGANG ISER'S RECEPTION THEORY

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Abstract: This paper aims at exploring the role of the Reception Theory in the field of literary criticism. The term, 'reception' refers to the way in which a person reacts to something. Iser's Reception Theory focuses on pointing the importance of the interactive relationship shared between the text and the reader. It emphasizes on the role of the readers and his interpretation in adding meaning to a literary text. Texts do not have meaning apart from the reader i.e. the reader and the text share an important relationship together in adding meaning to the text. The paper highlights the important aspects of the Reception Theory, incorporating its unique features with special reference to the renowned German critic, Wolfgang Iser.

Index Terms- reception, criticism, relationship, interpretation, meaning.

The term, 'Reception' refers to the way in which people react to something or someone. It is the act of receiving or getting something or the way it is received. Reception theory emphasizes on each and every reader's reception or interpretation in making meaning from a literary text. Reception Theory introduced the concept of reader's involvement and how a text and a reader converge in a process of literary experience and the production of meaning. In literary works, the message is transmitted in two ways, in that the reader receives it by composing it. One must search for structures that would enable him to describe the basic conditions of interaction, for only then he shall be able to gain some insight into the potential effects inherent in the work. Iser states:

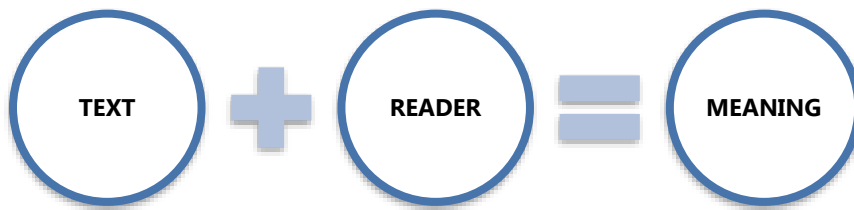
Reception theory was a reaction to what appeared to be a stalemate in literary studies. Instead of asking what the text means, I asked what it does to its potential readers. (311)

A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory explains that, "Iser takes a phenomenological approach to Reception Theory and he decontextualizes and dehistoricizes text and reader." (27) As he highlights,

...the literary work cannot be completely identical with the text or with the realization of the text by the reader, but in fact must lie halfway between the two.

This suggests that the Reception Theory defines literature as the process of how the reader and the text interact with each other. It emerged as a revolutionary way of looking at a text and the literary criticism. One of the major features of Reception Theory is that it proposes an interaction between the text and the reader, instead leaving the reader with absolute freedom.

Iser is of the view that meaning does not solely reside in the text but it is the result of the reader's interaction with the interpretation of the text. Texts do not have meaning apart from the reader i.e. the reader and the text share an important relationship together in adding meaning to the text. The text remains incomplete without the reader. The reader is not passive being just the recipient of ideas included in the text by the author. He is active in giving meaning to the text. Iser enunciates that, "the reader's life experiences, his personality, social and cultural background, education and personal taste influence his reading of the text." (Iser, 59)



While explaining this relationship between the text and the reader Iser enunciates:

When the subject is separated from him, the resultant spontaneity is guided and shaped by the text in such a way that it is transformed into a new and real consciousness. Thus each text constitutes its own reader... This structure pinpoints the reciprocity between the constituting of meaning and the heightening of self awareness which develops in the reading process. (Iser, 157)

The 'Reception Theory' takes reading to be a creative and constructive process. It emphasizes on the reader's active role in making any text or script and therefore epitomizes those teaching practices which stress personal response.

According to Iser, "Each text constitutes its own reader." (Iser, 157) The reader's communication with the text is the dynamic process of self correction as it gets altered and edited whenever it is read by different readers. Iser is of the view that not more than one reader can understand and analyze the text like some other reader as the view points and the ways of reading and analyzing the text will always vary from one reader to the other reader. The process of reading and presenting the results can never be the same in the case of two readers even while reading the same text.

It focuses on the analyses of the readers, as they interpret the meanings of a text, based on their respective cultural background and their life experiences. A reader's response to a text is the joint product of the reader's own 'horizon of expectations' and the confirmations, disappointments, refutations and reformulation of these expectations. Since the linguistic and aesthetic expectation of the readers change over the course of time and since, later the readers and critics have access to the text as well as its criticisms, there develops an evolving historical tradition as a continuous dialectic between the text and the horizon of the successive readers. The literary text does not possess any inherent meaning or value but the meaning arrives from the relationship that the reader and the text share.

Wolfgang Iser presented his Reception Theory in a lecture in 1970, entitled, *The Affective Structure of the Text* and further enhanced it in his other works such as, *The Implied Reader* (1972) and *The Act of Reading* (1976).

In Germany Iser's theories reached beyond the field of literature and influenced the work in the arts and media studies. In the United States, Iser had a major impact on the field of literary studies with the publication of *The Implied Reader* (1972) and *The Act of Reading* (1978). He directed the attention of critics, most of whom, until then, had regard only for 'the text itself' to the role played by the reader in the interpretation of literary texts. Iser argues that all the texts contain gaps that the reader must fill from his or her own imagination and experience, meaning is made as the reader responds aesthetically to what is not there. Furthermore, to a large extent the text itself, constructs the reader who is implicit in its rhetorical structures. As Iser put the point later in a typical sentence, "The paradigmatic axis of reading is prestructured by the negations in the text." (Iser, p. 210)

In his work *The Implied Reader*, Iser explains that in considering a literary work, one must take into account not only the actual text but also "the actions involved in responding to the that text." He suggests that one might think of a literary work as having two poles i.e. the "artistic pole" which is created by the author. It is the writer's pole or how that writer wants the text to be interpreted. The "aesthetic pole" refers to "the realization accomplished by the reader" (Iser, 274). 'Artistic pole' refers to the text created by the author and the 'aesthetic pole' refers to the awareness and the realization accomplished by the reader. It refers to the text as realized or responded to, by the reader. It is the reader's pole or how the reader tries to interpret a given text. Iser believes that "through the conversion of the two poles the reader will enhance the text by allowing his intimate feelings to flow." Iser makes it clear that neither the writer's pole nor the reader's pole alone creates a perfect text. The virtual text and the actual work remains somewhere between the artistic pole and the aesthetic pole. An actual text is not only the reader's interpretation completely nor entirely the writer's intention. An actual text is a combination of the text and the interpretation of the reader. Iser insists on taking into account both the aspects of literary work i.e. the author's technique and the reader's psychology. Thus, Iser suggests the process of 'interaction between the text and the reader'.

One cannot identify the literary work with either the text or the realization of the text. It must lay "half way between the two" and in fact it comes into being only through the convergence of the text and reader. Iser highlights that reading is an active and creative process. It is the reading that brings the text to life, which unfolds "its inherently dynamic character" (Iser 275). Iser says,

If the author were somehow to present a story completely, the reader's imagination would have nothing to do, it is because that text has unwritten implications or gaps that the reader can be active or creative, working things out for himself. This does not mean that any reading will be appropriate. The text uses various strategies and devices to limit its own unwritten implications but the latter are nonetheless worked out by the reader's own imagination. (Iser, 276)

Iser points out that the connections between various sentences are not established by the work itself but are determined by the reader. The text produced by the response of the reader is termed as "virtual dimension" by Iser, which represents the coming together of the text and the imagination of the reader. What interest Iser is the question of how and under what conditions a text has meaning for a reader. In contrast to traditional interpretation, the widely practiced, digging-for-meaning approach, which has sought to

elucidate a hidden meaning in the text, he sees meaning as a result of an interaction between text and reader, as an effect to be experienced and not as an object to be defined.

According to Iser, the text that is created by reading is a product of our processes of anticipation and retrospection. He believes that in reading a text, a reader undergoes a process of organization similar to that undertaken by the creator of the text. In other words, the reader must recreate the text in order to view it as a work of art. This act of aesthetic recreation is not a smooth or linear process and it actually relies on continual interruption of the flow of the reading. As Iser says,

We look forward, we look back, we decide, we change our decision, we form expectations, we are shocked by their unfulfillment, we question, we muse, we accept, we reject. This is the dynamic process of recreation. (Iser, 288)

The basis for the connection and relation between the reader and the text are anticipation and retrospection. During the reading process, the work's efficiency is caused by its evocation and subsequent negation of the familiar i.e. the reader thinks that his assumptions are affirmed by the text and then he is led to see that these assumptions are overturned and "he enters the assumptions of the textual world itself, her orientation marking an expansion of her experience, which learns to incorporate unfamiliar perspectives" (Iser, 290). Reading, for Iser, reflects the way in which one gains knowledge and experiences the "unfamiliar world of the literary text", suspending his own ideas and attitude governing his personality.

Iser enunciates that the reader needs two essential aspects in order to acquire a successful relationship with the text i.e. anticipation and retrospection, taking the text as a living event and making it something real. The readers absorb the unfamiliar aspect in the text through the process of identification. As he says,

In the act of reading, having to think something we have not yet experienced does not mean only being in a position to conceive or even understand it. It also means that such acts of conception are possible and successful to the degree that they lead to something being formulated in us. (Iser, 257)

Iser in his work, *The Implied Reader*, has taken the example of George Poulet's essay, *Phenomenology of Reading* (1969) as he insists that in reading, it is the reader and not the author, who becomes the subject and does the thinking. Even though the text consists of ideas thought out by the author, in reading one must think about the thoughts of the author and place our consciousness at the disposal of the text. According to Poulet,

Consciousness is the point at which the reader and the author converge and the work itself can be thought of as a consciousness which takes over the mentality of the reader, who is obliged to shut out his individual disposition and character. (Iser, 293)

The reading process incorporates the process of experience in general i.e. the aesthetic dimension of a literary work is located in the act of its recreation by the reader, a process that is temporal and also dialectical, as it allows the assumptions of the reader to interact with those of the text, yielding knowledge not only of the text but also of the reader himself.

Iser acknowledges and even insists that the potential text is infinitely richer than any of its individual realizations and that the reading process will vary from individual to individual, he also urges that such variations can occur only within the limits imposed by the written as opposed to the unwritten text. In his another significant work, *The Implied Reader*, Iser elaborates his important concept of the "implied reader."

According to *Collins Dictionary*, "the Implied Reader is the hypothetical reader that a work is addressed to, whose thoughts, attitudes etc, may differ from that of an actual reader."

According to *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, "the term 'implied reader' refers to the reader who creates the text for themselves, whereas the actual reader receives certain mental images in the process of reading, however the images will soon be coloured by the actual reader's existing stock of experiences. (Selden, 93)

Iser points out that when the critics talk about literature in terms of its effects, they invoke two broad categories of a reader i.e. the "real reader" and the "hypothetical reader" (Iser, 27). The former refers to an actual reader whose response is documented whereas the hypothetical reader is a projection of all the possible realizations of the text. According to Iser, "an implied reader is a hypothetical figure who is likely to get most of what the author intended." (Iser, 27)

An 'implied reader' is the one who can understand what the author has written and also is able to understand the complexity of things such as the metaphors which are used by the author in his books. The implied reader is also someone who is able to create text by himself. On the other hand, the 'actual reader' is someone who has a problem trying to get through the book and is unable or struggles to understand the complexity or things such as the metaphors which the author has made use of within that particular piece of writing. Actual readers also receive mental images while reading but in the end these images will be replaced by the existing stock of the actual reader's experience. Therefore, the 'implied reader' and the 'actual reader' are two very different types of readers, who perceive a work very differently and understand and analyze it in a completely different manner.

The main problem Iser observes with this approach is that any reconstruction of the real reader depends on the survival of documents from their era or their time of existence and the further one goes back in history, such documentation becomes sparse and therefore, he must reconstruct the real readership of a text from the text itself. On the other hand, Iser points out that the hypothetical reader or the ideal reader is often nothing more than a creation of the critic's mind.

While analyzing responses to a literary work, Iser says, "We must allow for a reader's presence without in any way predetermining his character or his historical situation." (Iser, 34) It is this reader, who is somehow lifted above any particular context,

whom Iser designates as the 'implied reader'. He defines the implied reader as "a textual structure anticipating the presence of a recipient without necessarily defining him." (Iser, 34)

Iser considers the concept of the implied reader as one of the most significant elements in Reception Theory. As he states,

This term (implied reader) incorporates both the prestructuring of the potential meaning by the text, and the reader's actualization of this potential through the reading process. It refers to the active nature of this process. (Iser, 22)

Iser explains that there are two aspects of the concept of the implied reader i.e. the reader's role as a textual structure and the reader's role as a structured act. By the first one, Iser refers to those elements in a text that help a reader to actualize the unfamiliar or the new textual material. As Iser gives an example,

"In a novel, there are four main perspectives, those of the narrator, characters, plot and the fictitious reader. The meaning of the text is generated by the convergence of these perspectives which occur during the reading process. During this process, the reader's role is to occupy the shifting perspectives that are to some extent prestructured and then to fit these various viewpoints into a gradually evolving pattern." (Iser, 35)

The second aspect of the concept of the "implied reader", according to Iser, is the reader's role in bringing together the various perspectives offered in the text, the text itself does not bring about this convergence. Therefore, Iser sees "textual and structures act" as the two aspects of the "implied reader".

Iser acknowledges that it is the reader's own competence that will enable the various possibilities of meaning and interpretation to be narrowed down. It is the reader who provides a 'code or a symbol' that will govern his communicative relation with the text, rather than there being a pre-existing 'code' between the text and the reader already. As Iser says, "In the latter case, literature would have nothing or at least nothing valuable, to communicate." (Iser, 230)

In his reading process, Iser presents his objection against the classical norms of interpretation and the implications of this norm. According to Iser, the main aim of the conventional, classical interpretation was to uncover 'a single hidden meaning' within the text. Meaning was considered as 'representative', having a direct reference to the outside world and therefore, the literary work was considered to be a vehicle for the expression of truth. Beyond this, interpretation aimed to instruct the reader as to the text's meaning, value and significance. Such a model of interpretation promoted the treatment of a literary work as a document, testifying to the characteristics of its era and the disposition of its author.

According to Iser, consistency is essential to the very act of comprehension and "the very fact, acknowledged in the modern theories, that a reader cannot grasp a text all at once obliges him to engage in the process of "consistency building" to make sense of the text." (Iser, 15) The meaning of the text is not formulated by the text itself but it is a projection of the reader. Therefore, as a reader one must recourse to the classical values of symmetry, harmony and totality, values that enable him to construct a frame of reference against which he can make the unfamiliar elements accessible. Iser enunciates,

The fragmented or the disjointed nature of the literary work, leaving many blanks, gaps and connections for the reader to work out, conditions 'consistency building' throughout both the writing and the reading process. (Iser, 17)

So, in the historical terms, the task of the critic has altered i.e. instead of explaining how a text, with all its qualities of harmony, order and totality contains a hidden meaning, he should now acknowledge the 'consistency building' as a structure of comprehension, depends on the reader than the work. So, the critic must explain not the work itself but the conditions that bring about its various possible effects. In the other words, what is needed is not instruction passing from a critic to a reader in the meaning of the text but an analysis of the reading process.

The distinguishing feature of literature is that it deals with the conventions in a different manner. These literary conventions are the defining features of the particular genres like fiction, poetry, prose, drama etc. Literature tells us something about reality by ordering its conventions so that they become objects of our reflection. It is the familiar territory on which text and reader meet to initiate communication. The repertoire consists of all the familiar territory within the text. Iser writes,

Through the repertoire, the literary text reorganizes social and cultural norms as well as literary traditions so that reader may reassess their function in real life. (Iser, 72)

The repertoire assumes a dual function in Iser's model i.e. it reshapes the familiar plan to form a background for the process of communication and it provides a general framework within which the message or meaning of the text can be organized. The repertoire includes mostly elements that have been traditionally considered as content. As Iser says, "They encompass the immanent structure of the text and the acts of comprehension thereby triggered off in the reader." (Iser, 86)

Some American critics like Norman Holland, (1927) are of the view that Wolfgang Iser in any of his works does not refer to "an actual reader actually reading," to which Iser replied in one of his interviews that his aim was to construct such a model of activities that would be basic to the text processing.

Iser propounds that the work of literature is the text and the reader's response i.e. when considering a literary work one must examine not only the text but the response it evokes in the reader. The phenomenological theory lays stress on the idea that in considering a literary work, one must take into account not only the actual and original text but also, in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text. So, a work of literature is inherently dynamic. The changes occur depending on the reader. This is important in holding the attention of the reader. The text changes during reading as the reader modifies it according to his experience of it. A text

comprises of sentences. These serve to create the world within a work of fiction. All sentences offer ambiguity or fluidity, a meaning and it is through these that the reader may become an active participant in the reading process. It is through these sentences that the content of the text comes across. The reader thus actively predicts what is to come, modifying his expectations as he encounters new sentences. These sentences also have retrospective importance to the reader i.e. he modifies his views about the prior events based on the new ones.

The same text has a different impact on different readers. It engages the imagination and creativity of the reader. This attribute is the essential ability of the text i.e. the 'coming together of the text and the imagination of the reader' and this is created by the anticipation and the retrospection on the readers' part.

Iser is of the view that when the consecutive sentences easily thread together, then the reading goes in continuity. But when a sentence does not make sense in the context of the previous one then the reader is forced to stop and consider it and make sense of it for the fluid reading to continue. "This blockage of sense in a story, this interruption of flow is an opportunity for the reader to be active and make sense of the sentence by filling in the gaps left by the text itself" (Iser, 270). One reading can never fulfil the potential of a text because of the variability in different readers' reactions to the same text. This is true also for the same reader reading a text twice. This difference in reactions is attributed to the changes that occur in the reader over a time but the text must inherently allow for such difference. The inherent interactivity of a text and the difference between the readings demands that the reader should contribute from his own experiences to the reading of the text.

Iser is of the view that, "the reader writes part of the story in his head" i.e. the author sets some guidelines for the reader but the reader fills in the blanks with his imagination. A literary work is therefore the sum of the text and of that which is not there in the text which includes the reader's imagination as he fills in the gaps. A literary text must leave room for the reader's imagination because without an active participation from the audience, the text remains dormant and inactive which makes reading a passive activity because of which it does not attract the reader's interest. Each time a reader reads a work of art, it can evoke a completely new meaning to him.

Iser points out that reading and analyzing a text in a process of eagerness and perception to know something new other than what the writer has mentioned in the text as the reader adds his own new dimension to it relating it to his experiences and views. To the words of Iser,

With the literary text we can only picture things which are not there; the written part of a text give us the knowledge, but it is the unwritten part that gives us the opportunity to picture things. (Iser, 261)

A literary text provides the reader with the enhancement of his understanding and knowledge which is the written part of a text whereas on the other hand, the unwritten part of a text which includes the blanks and gaps in it, the reader gets an opportunity and scope for making his imagination work by adding up that which is not there in text. Iser believes that the reader of a literary text can only picture things which are not there, the written part of the text gives him knowledge but it is the unwritten parts that give him the challenge to picture things.

Iser believes that the author intentionally leaves out certain gaps in the text so that the reader can use his imagination and build a connection and fill those gaps. Then only the work can progress to a more significant and meaningful level. The text is an extension of a reader's consciousness. According to Iser, without the element of indeterminacy and the gaps in the text, a reader cannot use his imagination and it is the reader who has to read and analyze the text in such a manner that he can add his own interpretation to it. He says that a good writer is the one that does not set the whole picture before his reader's eyes because if he does so he will lose him.

The reader seeks unity in a text. A text offers much potential. The reader must reconcile all the possibilities to get a clear unified sense of the text. The reader compares different parts of the texts to gain and achieve this consistency. He does this through the illusions that the text creates.

The literary work induces change in the reader. This induces a change in the reader. The division between reader and writer becomes blurred while reading a text, because the reader takes someone else's ideas and immerses himself in them.

"The phenomenological theory of art lays full stress on the idea that, in considering a literary work, one must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the action involved in responding to that text"(Iser, 256)

According to Wolfgang Iser, when a reader reads a work of art and tries to analyze and interpret it, he should not only consider the actual text and what the writer has written in his work but should also give importance to his own ideas and views regarding the text. It is important that the reader takes into account his own views with that of the writer as according to Iser, the meaning does not solely resides in the text but it is the reader who gives meaning to it by adding his own views and experiences. Literary text converts reading into a creative process allowing the reader to become implicated and involved in the text.

Iser argues that the text and its reader are the two inseparable entities. These components when combined together create the life of a piece of literature. This is true because it seems impossible for a text to be meaningful or reaching to anyone without an audience to receive the meaning. Reading is only enjoyable when it is active and creative and engages the reader's imagination. As Iser says, "Whenever the reader bridges the gaps, communication begins. Reading causes the literary text to unfold its inherently dynamic character."

A literary text is partly finite and partly an open ended entity as the text cannot be changed, it is fixed but new interpretations can be added to it. As a finite entity, it is self contained but as a verbal art form, it has a function of signification i.e. the unravelling of hidden implications. As an open- ended entity, it has indeterminacy i.e. spots of blindness and gaps which can only be concretised and realized with the receptive aesthetic activity of the reader. A literary text does not say all that it means but it has an area of blindness and silences to encourage the creative role of the reader.

Thus, central to the reading of every literary work is the interaction between its structure and its recipient. This is why the phenomenological theory (it is the philosophy of phenomenology which has drawn the attention of literary theorists) has emphatically drawn the attention to the fact that the study of a literary work should concern not only the actual text but also, in equal measure, the

actions involves in responding to that text. This theory aims at providing a framework that would permit an assessment and an evaluation of an actual reader's response to a text highlighting the relationship between the text and the reader.

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