

## **READING THE READER: WOLFGANG ISER'S PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH**

**Dr Ravi kumar S. Kumbar**, Assistant Professor, Department of English Studies, Davangere University, Davangere-577007 : benakakumbar@gmail.com

**Keywords:** Reader Response, Phenomenology, Post structuralism, Hermeneutics

The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author. : Roland Barthes  
A literary work is not an object which stands by itself and which offers the same face to each reader in each period. It is not a monument which reveals its timeless essence in a monologue.

Hans Robert Jauss

In 1968, Roland Barthes declared the death of the author which was a radical departure from the earlier critical practices which revolved around the celestial figure of the author. The ideas of the second epigraph that I have taken were postulated a decade later. What lies in between the decade is the process of reading the reader – which this paper tries to explicate. Wolfgang Iser's "The reading process: a phenomenological approach" explains this process of reader's interpretation of a literary text and the various resultant effects on his psyche.

Commenting on New Criticism, Terry Eagleton opines that it converted the "poem into a fetish" (45). In other words, it fetishized the text. The reader response critics reacted to this aspect in their ideas about the text- reader relationship. Iser's essay "The reading process" published in 1972, points towards the dominant concerns of the European intellectuals of the period. A profound sense of disbelief towards authoritarian structures and ideologies was rampant at that time. It is in this context that Iser's essay gains importance as it gives utmost importance to the reader as opposed to the text.

Iser at the very beginning of the essay quotes Roman Ingarden and refers to the realization of the text by the reader – "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 actions involved in responding to that text". So, by referring to the "actions involved" in reading/responding to a text, Iser allows a greater initiative on the part of the reader. In fact he stresses that a text "takes on life only when it is realized" by the reader and the collusion of both the reader and the text "brings the literary work into existence". The realization of the reader constitutes the "aesthetic pole" which is counter to the "artistic pole" of the author ((In Lodge, et al 207).

The world created by the author of the work is "dynamic" because, in the process of interpreting a text, the reader "sets the work in motion, and this very process results ultimately in the awakening of the responses within himself. Thus, reading causes the literary work to unfold its inherently dynamic character". The author and the reader participate in the "game of the imagination" throughout (208).

He feels that the text allows an active participation of the reader in the reading process by posing riddles in the form of the "unwritten part". By this position, he draws our attention to the gaps and aporias of the text which offer a potential challenge to the reader. This sets the reader "into action" and the text affects him at the precise moment when he solves these problems. This encounter leads them into the interplay of imagination. He then sets out to describe this process of the interplay of imagination by enumerating the method of phenomenological analysis. Firstly, this kind of analysis looks at how the "sequent sentences act upon one another" because "they do not correspond to any objective reality outside themselves". These "intentional sentence correlatives" which portray the "world presented" in the text. Iser muses:

How is one to conceive the connection between the correlatives? It marks those points at which the reader is able to 'climb aboard' the text. He has to accept certain given perspectives, but in doing so he inevitably causes them to interact. When Ingarden speaks of intentional sentence correlatives in literature, the statements made, or information conveyed in the sentence are already in a certain sense qualified: the sentence does not consist solely of a statement. . . but aims at something beyond what it actually says. This is true of all sentences in literary works, and it is through the interaction of

these sentences that their common aim is fulfilled. This is what gives them their own special quality in literary texts. In their capacity as statements, observations, purveyors of information, etc., they are always indications of something that is to come, the structure of which is foreshadowed by their specific content. (208)

The text enables the readers to have certain “expectations” which vary from time to time and have a “retrospective effect on what has already been read”. This “potential multiplicity of connections” is caused by the reader through his actualization the three temporal dimensions of the text while reading. Here the reader’s “mind” and its “working” have been stressed by Iser (210).

This creative activity of discerning the temporal dimensions, the understanding of gaps and aporias lead to “the virtual dimension of a text” which enables the text to have its “reality”. This virtual aspect also is enabled by the “coming together of text and the imagination”. Thus reading activity becomes a “kaleidoscope of perspectives, preintentions, recollections”. Iser allows an active participation of the reader because he opines that the gaps, “twists and turns”, “frustration of expectations” and “blockage” inherent in a text call for a careful analysis by the reader (210).

**He clarifies his argument elsewhere thus:**

Focusing primarily on two points of intersection- between text and context and between text and reader- reception theory, as I have tried to formulate it, conceives of literature as a form of interaction. This conception goes against the aura surrounding autonomous art, as well as against the notion of literature as a representation of life; instead, by intervening in contextual realities, literature refracts life’s multifariousness. (Iser ‘Do I write for an audience?’ 312)

But in the entire process, the stages of “anticipation”, “retrospection”, and the “formation of the virtual dimension” transform the text into an “experience for the reader” as he feels (In Lodge, et al 212). The reader must move from his familiar world to the unfamiliar to experience the text. The “grouping together” of diverse elements of the text is also a part of the process in which the reader yearns for consistency (214).

**Further enumerating the experience of reading he says that:**

Without the formation of illusions, the unfamiliar world of the text would remain unfamiliar; through the illusions, the experience offered by the text becomes accessible to us, for it is only the illusion, on its different levels of consistency that makes the experience readable. If we cannot find (or impose) this consistency, sooner or later we will put the text down. This process is virtually hermeneutic. (215)

In order to arrive at a consistency in reading, which is challenged by the “polysemantic nature of the text”, we try to have “an individual configurative meaning”. The unfamiliar experience of the text will be made consistent by the reader’s “apprehension” of it – which in turn is incorporated into his “imaginative world” through the “illusion-building” process (215). Thus, the reader performs the “balancing operation” and “it is this that forms the aesthetic experience offered by the literary text” (216). Iser feels that as readers we all oscillate between the deductive and inductive methods to arrive at a “configurative meaning” and this indeterminacy is the driving force that motivates us to read a text (216). We actually “impart” to the text necessary vitality for, “We look forward, we look back, we decide, we change our decisions, we form expectations, we are shocked by their nonfulfillment, we question, we muse, we accept, we reject; this is the dynamic process of recreation”(217).

The author employs the familiar literary modes, themes and genres to organize the unfamiliar. These two are always pitted against one another in the text. The result of this encoding is that the reader is always “subjected to this same interplay of illusion- forming and illusion- breaking that makes reading essentially a recreative process”(218). So by the apparent evocation and negation of the familiar brings about the efficacy in the text.

In the peroratory part of his essay, Wolfgang Iser elucidates the effects of reading on the consciousness of the reader. When he says that we must “suspend the ideas and attitudes that shape our own personality before we can experience the unfamiliar of the literary text” he reiterates the

‘dissociation of sensibility’ idea (219). But during this process of the suspension of his own self, the “reader becomes the subject that does thinking” (220). This suspension of self and its transformation are affected by all texts. These ideas of Iser are not entirely new but certainly differ in their postulation in a very lucid and scientific manner. Finally we may note his remarks on his practice: If a theory of aesthetic response concerns itself first and foremost with the concretization of a text – that is, the text’s realization in the reader’s consciousness – it nevertheless alerts us to certain human dispositions that are worked on in that process. While reading, we are transposed to a realm outside our bodily experience, having the illusion of leading another life. We are with and simultaneously outside ourselves, and we obviously enjoy such a doubling. (Iser ‘Do I Write for an audience?’ pp 312-313)

**WORKS CITED :**

- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. OUP: Blackwell, 1996. Print.  
Iser, Wolfgang. “Do I write for an audience?” *PMLA*, Vol.115, No.3 (May, 2000). Pp 310-314  
Lodge, David, et al. *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. Delhi: Pearson Education, 2007. Print.