



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Understanding Readers, Texts and Reading Practices**

**<sup>1</sup>Dr. Muhammad Arif Khan <sup>2</sup>Dr. Shahid Hussain Shahid**

1. Assistant Professor, Department of English Language & Literature, Institute of Linguistics & Humanities, Gomal University, Dera Ismail Khan, Pakistan.
2. Associate Professor, Lahore Leads University, Lahore, Pakistan.

**\*Corresponding Author:** [sultanulaarifeen@gmail.com](mailto:sultanulaarifeen@gmail.com)

**ABSTRACT**

This research attempts to understand the apparently simple but complex relationship between readers and texts and various reading practices in terms of meaning making. What prompted this research was the idea that knowledge, experiences, and expectations of readers as well as what texts embody, consciously or unconsciously, interact with each other and a new text consequently comes into being. This alludes to the power of both the readers and texts. With this in the background, this article attempts to investigate the relationship between readers and the text. The study is conducted through close reading and articulates that there are different kinds of readers like surface readers, informed readers, educated readers, ideal readers, the optimal readers, implied readers, intended readers, effective readers, proficient readers, less-able readers and critical readers. The impact of this difference in readership can result in differences of interpretation, understanding and meaning making of the texts. Hence, it is recommended that the interaction between the readers and texts needs to be taken seriously and no reading practice be given preference over another.

**KEYWORDS** Context, Kinds of Readers, Reader, Text

**Introduction**

There was a time when readers had passive roles in reading texts as they would be more receptive to what text would say, but readership changed with the passage of time. With reference to the roles of readers in reading process, both in the past as well as the present, Das (2014) highlights two significant views, the first is about the limited or passive role of the readers as he says, "Throughout the centuries, it becomes apparent, usually either the book or the author has been conceived as the guide to the reading process. The reader has tended to remain in shadow, taken for granted," and the second view suggests readers as active participants in meaning making process because the "recent studies have shown that every reader is the source of his or her interpretation of a text and this meaning is a product of the transaction of his or her personal associations with the text." The comprehension process, therefore, for Mckee and Carr (2016) is "an active process of constructing meaning whereby a young reader builds meaning . . . by interacting deeply with the text . . ."

One of the aims of this study is thus to show that reading activity is not static as it is mental, emotional, and re-creative because the text is embedded in life. This study further poses a challenge to the surface readers and readings by inviting active engagement of the readers with texts. The texts, especially literary ones, despite being the reflections of life, true or fictitious, also happen to be the events which occur within the minds of readers. But such a deep engagement with texts comes only through close reading which is intense, evaluative, synthetic, analytical, interpretive and hence critical. Furthermore, this study is qualitative, historical, interpretive, and synthesizing in nature and has a scope for social sciences and arts and humanities, especially for literary studies, as these are deeply rooted in real life.

## **Materials and Methods**

This is a library research; hence, different sources of knowledge like books, articles and other sources related to the key words of topic have been explored and analyzed through 'close reading' method. This methodology has of late been receiving special attention because of its vastness. For example Duck (2018) focuses on the importance of 'close reading' for English teachers and class rooms by stating that " The phrase might seem to be self-explanatory, but in fact its usage over time – what it is taken to mean in practice – has shifted to a degree that warrants taking stock of its current utility." Similarly, Nicholson (2017) highlights the importance of close reading, though in the field of theatre and performance, but what he says can equally be applicable in other fields of social inquiry too. He writes:

Yet in this dangerous post-truth era, there is a need to re-assess the importance of close reading, not as a means to uncover 'universal values', but to pay detailed attention to the political and cultural significance of the 'texts, images, language and experience' that we encounter and consume as researchers, as practitioners and in everyday life. Close reading can reveal the tensions and contradictions in a text, and it can illuminate moments of experience by placing them in the context of other cultural, artistic or social practices.

Of importance here is the 'tensions and contradictions in a text' which invite the attention of the critics in different fields of inquiry. This study too thus tries to explore and analysed the tensions and contradictions which involve close reading practice and through this process it attempts to focus on the reconsideration of the role of readers and texts. As regards the importance close inquiry into texts Fisher and Frey (2013) too opine that "Close reading has received a great deal of attention over the past few years."

## **Results and Discussion**

This qualitative study reveals that in the past attempts were made to control the readers' perceptions of the texts; but recent scholarship has shown that readers' understanding of the texts cannot be confined to the preconceived reading notion and protocols because every reader comes to texts with his or her own unique experiences of life. It further shows that a text is not an event in the void; it is first of all an event of life and secondarily it is an even in the mind of a reader too and by this virtue it is as dynamic and alive as is a reader. But thus important shift in the practice of reading results from 'close reading' which is quite helpful in emancipating the minds of readers towards a better understanding of textual events. This approach towards reading needs to be encouraged and prompted, especially, at higher levels of education in almost every discipline.

It can hardly be disputed that there is diversity in readership – in terms of understanding – even when a single text is the subject of scrutiny – as, Miller (2004) believes "what actually happens within a given person's mind and feelings when he or she has "learned to read," and reads a given page, differs more than one might wish, or expect, from person to person." Miller (2004) further says "the work comes alive as a kind of internal theater that seems in a strange way independent of the words on the page." Going a step further in elucidating the process of reading, Miller (2004) comments:

Reading, like being in love, is by no means a passive act. It takes much mental, emotional, and even physical energy. Reading requires a positive effort. One must give all one's faculties to re-creating the work's imaginary world as fully and vividly as possible within oneself.

It is equally difficult to deny the views of Schoening (1999) who says "there are many interests that readers bring to fiction." These interests may be personal or impersonal and may include political, apolitical, social, psychological, secular, religious, departmental,

institutional, and various other influences with varying degrees. So a reading activity may be driven purely by any one of these factors or others which are not mentioned here or it may contain the influence of all of the mentioned factors. The pleasure factor which is usually known as aesthetics cannot however be ignored but that too cannot be said to have been free of the mentioned influences as fiction is more or less true image of the society it is created in, so its influence on the readers can't be overlooked.

The truth factor is though challenging and debatable but there is no denying the fact that the literary texts borrow their raw material from the thick or thin realities that either prevail in a given society or are the products of some highly influential event. And that the authors give those events shapes according to their understandings, knowledge, information, likes and dislikes. It is equally important to realize that a fictional work may not necessarily highlight the dominant perspectives of any given locality or society that need one's attention the most. Some marginal events may also be brought to the limelight that may have the potential to shape or reshape the prevalent opinions, or norms of the society. Time matters a lot in this respect. These attributes of literary texts exert their influence on readers as well. This points to another fact that one event and its fictional description may not necessarily yield similar type of influences on different readers.

Thus, the interaction between the readers and fictions where appears to be a conscious activity, it is, simultaneously, an interaction between the readers of the real world and the fictional world. Both these worlds, more or less, exert their influence on each other and the readers are not exceptions. This influencing principle thus keeps resulting in emancipatory changes of various sorts for the writers, the fictional stuff, the readers and the critics. These changes are of the thoughts, perspectives, ideas and ideologies but they are the products of the readings which are close in nature. The closeness is not just the attribute of the readers but it encompasses, equally, the character of the writer as well as the critic. The readers and the critics may or may not be the two faces of the same coin but the reading practice plays a crucial part in the understanding of literature. What is of significance here is that a reader's or a critic's comprehension of any piece of literature should not give the reflection that his or her is the only valid opinion or observation on the topic, subject, theme or issue under discussion. Evans (2001), therefore, rightly warns that a "critic should not pretend that his reading is the only valid reading."

How important is the reading can be judged from the views of Woolf (2005) "the way you read a text may either open it up for you or limit the ways in which you are able to think about it." The openness of the text that Woolf alludes to is the result of a thorough and careful reading which takes all important aspects into account. Broadly speaking these aspects may include the text, the context and the reader. And the limitations that a text may pose may be the result of the ideas which Simpson (2013) shares "our experience of reading . . . is habitual and idealist," and this is why that "As interpreters, we depend on *prejudges* that produce recognition of already existing truths." The habituated and idealistic readings produce surface readers who according to Lesjak (2013) "give up on reading as much as they give up on theory, its role reduced to stating the obvious, even as they continue to fetishize the text in their celebration of its surface." Now, what should be the character of reading which should not be reduced to 'stating the obvious' and instead should be in-depth and careful? Lesjak (2013) resolves this difficulty and maintains "Reading is by necessity overreading: intense rather than cool." And it is this 'intense' face of the reading which helps in bringing newness to the text. The newness in the text, according to Woolf (2005), is possible "by reading it inventively," and "not imposing a preconceived pattern on it."

There might be benefits of the preconceived patterns about reading but one harm is that it risks inducing in readers a habit of looking at the surfaces of texts for the desired patterns and what is sought may not always be found on the surface. Best & Marcus (2009) try to explain "surface is associated with the superficial and deceptive, with what can be perceived without close examination and, implicitly, would turn out to be false upon closer

scrutiny." Best & Marcus (2009) further explain "A surface is what insists on being looked at rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*," and by this virtue "Many types of reading, some quite old, some fairly new, might come under the rubric of "surface reading."" It suggests that when readers look at the surfaces of the texts for certain ideas, they unknowingly look for matters of fact rather than matters of concern. By matters of fact I mean those ideas which have been formulated by certain knowledge in the past and which have acquired a factual status in the mind of the readers and with which they attempt to see and weigh things. By matters of concern we mean those ideas which have been eclipsed by matters of fact yet have a vibrant existence when explored on deeper scrutiny. The meaning, thus, resides not just in the matter of fact. What must concern a reader therefore should be the matters of concern if (s)he is thought to be involved in critiquing any text. Almost similar thoughts echo in the words of Latour (2004):

Critique has not been critical enough in spite of all its sore scratching. Reality is not defined by matters of fact. Matters of fact are not all that is given in experience. Matters of fact are only very partial and, I would argue, very polemical, very political renderings of matters of concern and only a subset of what could also be called *states of affairs*.

So, when the 'matters of fact' and the 'matters of concern' become the subject of scrutiny there develops a relation between the reader and the world – the world or the extra textual stuff which Richards and the New Critics denied playing any role in the understanding or meaning making process of the text. For Lesjak (2013) "A way of reading," therefore, is very comprehensively defined to be "at one and the same time a way of being in the world."

The reading activity discussed so far points to independence in approaching a text as it helps one rid of the reading protocols. In this respect, Beers and Probst (2013) share the views "Independent reading is the ability to read text on one's own with deep engagement, with attention to what might sway the reader's judgment or acceptance one way or the other." Independence, however, does not mean twisting the text in order to get the meanings of one's like but it is infact a deep engagement with the minutest details for finding a solid answer to the problems posed by the text. But, as Beehler (1998) believes, it must be taken into consideration that these minutest "details must contribute to the "truth."" The truth may or may not be the universal truth as it originates, grows, and prospers according to the perception, competence, and knowledge of the individual readers who are not always alike. Besides, the 'truth,' if the text reflects it, might be small or big in canvas.

It is also necessary here to stand that texts are not things created in the void, as a text for Tyson (2006) is "an event that occurs within the reader, whose response is of primary importance in creating the text." Similarly, Pechey (2007) believes "texts are events and not those quasi-spatial entities: systems or structures." The event(s) is not a tiny thing and is not independent of the surroundings and the circumstances we live in. An event may occur in relation to a text; it might have occurred already in the reader either through his own personal experience or through a word of mouth; it might have been imagined or dreamt even; it may be happening outside one's self; it may also occur in association with the full text or with any of its incidence. There can be many shapes and possibilities of an event to occur within and without the reader, within and without the text, within and without the author. The important thing in this connection is how the readers establish their relation with the text. Thus, according to Tyson (2006) a text during the reading process acts as a *stimulus* to which we respond in our own personal way. Feelings, associations, and memories occur as we read, and these responses influence the way in which we make sense of the text as we move through it.

Likewise, Beers and Probst (2013) opine "the text awakens associations in the reader's mind, and out of the mix, meaning is created. It resides neither in the text nor in the reader's mind, but in the meeting of the two." Similar thoughts are also expressed by Barth

(1984) who believes "no single literary text can ever be exhausted – its "meaning" residing as it does in its transactions with individual readers over time, space, and language." Hence, in the eyes of Pechey (2007) "readers are the authors" not only because the meaning reside in the transaction between the readers and the texts, but also because "meaning is always everywhere because we as individuals can never be, although/because we end both spatially and temporally where and when our bodies end," and this is why perhaps that "the 'text' is an abstraction from the work, which is always the text-and/ in-a-context, the context-and/in-a-text." In this regard another factor of overriding importance is highlighted by Pechey (2007) "The text is at once that which is nothing if not understood and yet also that which can never be 'completely translated,' in the sense of being subordinated to a 'common logic.'" Furthermore, with reference to the readers-response critics, one gets an insight into the phenomenon of the text in a more explanatory manner, as for Evans (2001) it is a fluid and dynamic process rather than as static object . . . the text itself shapes, moment – by – moment, our unfolding understanding of its meaning: by providing new information, by clearing up or creating ambiguities, the text shapes our response.

The fluid and dynamic aspect of the text that Evans highlights can further be understood through the remarks of Colebrook (2011) about the theory, life and text. According to a new emerging "antitheory theory," we should now regard art, literature, culture, and all modes of textuality as adaptive responses to the imperatives of life: texts should be read in terms of a life that is purposive, organic and *human* (in the sense of being an extension of human cognition and understanding).

Similarly, taking forward his ideas Colebrook (2011) further maintains "a text can also be read with reference to the functions of this world, in terms of how the text creates orientations for thinking, the manner in which it uses materials." The relation between the text and the world can further be understood through the views of Said (1983) who says, "a text in its actually *being* a text is a being in the world," and by this reason it "addresses anyone who reads." The discussion so far has attempted to highlight the scope of the text but its more comprehensive view which broadens the horizons of reading as well as critique is given by Barthes (1973/2002) as follows:

The text, in its mass, is comparable to a sky, at once flat and smooth, deep, without edges and without landmarks, like the soothsayer drawing on it with the tip of his staff an imaginary rectangle wherein to consult, according to certain principles, the flight of birds, the commentary traces through the text certain zones of reading, in order to observe therein the migration of meaning, the outcropping of codes, the passage of citations. Still another view about the text might help us understand it in a better way perhaps. According to Felski (2011): the texts we study are permanently engaged in coercing, mystifying, and hoodwinking their readers. In such scenarios, texts are munificently awarded supermanlike powers with the one hand, only to have them immediately whisked away with the other. A novel is charged and found guilty of manufacturing docile bourgeois subjects but this jawdropping achievement—how remarkable, if true!—turns out to be the mere reflex of systems of power steering the action behind the scenes, occult forces that fully determine without themselves being determined. In such a scenario, texts turn out to be passive intermediaries rather than active mediators, servile henchmen and bully boys entirely at the beck and call of their shadowy, omnipotent, and all-seeing masters.

Felski's views are an eye-opener in that they talk about the active and the passive roles of the texts. It may be concluded from this that the texts become active agents of change when the readers have little knowledge or they have been made to believe in the truthfulness of the books as they are written by scholars. The same text may also become a passive agent when the reader is more knowledgeable than what (s)he is reading in, on, and outside the pages. However, a good understanding of the text, art, literature and hence life is possible through a reading that is thorough and careful. Tankersley (2003) talks about such reader, "When" his "comprehension is deep and thorough," he is "able to process text

at higher levels of the thinking process." But the higher levels of thinking process are not easily achieved by every reader. To this end, Tankersley (2003) borrows from Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy four levels of reading protocols like "evaluation, synthesis, analysis, and interpretation," which are thus explained:

Evaluation is the ability to make judgments about ideas and concepts being read . . . Synthesis is the ability to apply ideas and concepts in new ways. It is this ability to put two concepts together in an new way or to form new thoughts, conclusions, or ideas . . . Analysis is the ability to combine a reader's background information and experience with new ideas or concepts to pull apart the information or concepts . . . Interpretation is giving one's "slant" or meaning to the ideas or concepts.

Beside these levels of readings there have been the kinds of readers as well. According to Tyson (2006), these include, for example, the "*informed reader, the educated reader, the ideal reader, and the optimal reader, implied reader and the intended reader.*" Of all these kinds, the 'informed reader' – the term coined by Stanley Fish – needs to be mentioned here, as Tyson (2006) believes he it is who has attained the literary competency necessary to experience the text . . . in the fullness of its linguistics and literary complexity, and who consciously tries to suppress the personal or idiosyncratic dimension of his or her response.

There are also some other kinds of readers which are explained by Tankersley (2003):

Effective readers modify their reading rate and self-monitor comprehension. Proficient readers have strategies to use when meaning is lost while reading. Less-able readers, by contrast, frequently skip over difficult portions of the text or unknown words while reading . . . Critical readers make connections while reading. They analyze what they are reading and synthesize the information in new ways.

The "readers and the readings," Beehler (1998) believes "are produced by the many cultural and linguistic forces brought to them." These forces can't be homogeneous in that within the same cultural and linguistic circle or surrounding the readings of any fictional text will be as diverse as the readers because different readers are different linguistic experiences. This might have made Beehler (1998) to conclude "our understanding of the reading process continues to be incomplete," and that "Every interpretation is itself a narration, a further encoding of the text, and every reading is an interpretation; therefore, the text's resistance to closure is strongly felt." Almost similar thought in terms of the linguistic experience of reading are also expressed by Barthes (1973/2002):

To read, in fact, is a labor of language. To read is to find meanings, and to find meanings is to name them; but these named meanings are swept toward other names; names call to each other, reassemble, and their grouping calls for further naming . . . it is a nomination in the course of becoming, a tireless approximation. . . .

It is worth noting here that a language is not only personal. Before being personal it is familial, social, political, apolitical, religious, non-religious, psychological, emotional, situational, occasional, and so on and so forth. The personal side of the language is thus shaped by many of these factors and one amongst these may be dominantly visible unless some other factor with a greater force comes to replace the previous one. It is through such linguistic characters that we develop a capacity to respond to others, especially the texts, and entailing which our biases develop. And it is also because of this that Barrow (2004) believes "we formulate ideas . . . once the ideas get going they take on a life of their own," and that an "individual character takes on a life of its own, has its autonomy, by virtue of our distinctive capacity for a language." All these factors contribute to the readings, understandings, interpreting, evaluating, analyzing, and hence critiquing any text. But, at the

same time, it seems to be unwise not to look at the co-acting phenomenon that is associated with the texts. One wonders, is it possible, to overlook the following remarks by Felski (2011):

The works that we study and teach . . . could never have come to our attention without the input of countless co-actors: publishers, advertisers, critics, prize committees, reviews, word-of-mouth recommendations, departmental decisions, old syllabi, new syllabi, textbooks and anthologies, changing critical tastes and scholarly vocabularies, and last, but not least, the desires and attachments of ourselves and our students. Some of these mediators, to be sure, will prove more helpful, desirable, generous, or respectful of their object than others, but the fact of mediation is not a regrettable lapse into complicity or collusion but a fundamental precondition of being known. Unbought, unread, uncriticized, untaught, these literary and critical texts would languish in limbo, forever invisible and impotent.

The numerous co-actors that Felski alludes to play their definite role in promoting the texts but these are the contextual issues which do not alone matter when it comes to the interpretation of the texts. It is both ways, the text and the context. One should not inflate the one to deflate the other or one can also not ignore what Shakespeare (1992) says, "there is nothing / either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." But thinking must at least be free in order to think freely. Too much regulated or controlled thoughts, however, may restrict the advancement of news ideas which could be more powerful than the one someone is controlled by. And this is possible through a critique that is minute.

## **Conclusion**

The study highlights the diversity in readership as people approach texts differently with different reasons and interests, and that reading is not passive but an active process. It is like recreating a work (possibly, in an imaginative manner too). The interests of the readers may be personal, social, political, religious, and so on and so forth because the texts borrow their raw material from life that is either actually lived or it exists somewhere in the mid of the writers. It is further noted that one should not be authoritative in giving one's opinion as a text could both be open as well limited. Usually it is our habits and ideals that determine and govern our reading practices. But habitual and ideal readings produce surface readers. So there is a need to read inventively because surface reading is superficial and deceptive. A surface reading is like looking at things instead of seeing through and beyond the things. The discussion also shows that the reading is like being in the world because a text is like an event that occurs in the mind of the reader and awakens associations of different sorts in the minds of the readers. Thus readers too are the authors of the texts by virtue of their involvement in the reading activity. Reading, hence, is a fluid and dynamic process. On the other hand, texts also enjoy superman like powers as they coerce, mystify, and hoodwink their readers. So there is a need for a thorough evaluation, synthesis, analysis and interpretation because there are different kinds of readers and texts. It reveals further that our comprehension of the reading process continues to be incomplete.

## References

- Barthes, R. (2002). *S/Z*. (R. Miller, Trans. ). Blackwell, UK. (Original work published in 1973).
- Barrow, R. (2004). Language and Character. *Sage publications, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi*, 3(3), 267-279. Doi: 10.1177/1474022204045738.
- Beehler, S. A. (1988). Close vs. Closed Reading: Interpreting the Clues. *The English Journal, National Council of Teachers of English*, 77(6), 39 – 43
- Beers, K. & Probst, R. E. (2013). *Notice & Note: Strategies for Close Reading*, Heinemann Portsmouth, NH, USA.
- Best, S. & Marcus. S. (2009). Surface Reading: An Introduction. *Representations, University of California Press*, 108(1), 1-21
- Colebrook, C. (2011). The Context of Humanism. *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory & Interpretation*, 42(4), 701-718.
- Das, K. (2014). Decoding the Text, and the 'Power' of the Reader, *Researchers World Journal of Arts, Science and Commerce*, 5(2), 86-92
- Duck, P. (2018). Making Sense of Close Reading, *Changing English: Studies in Culture and Education*, 25(1), 14-28.
- Evans, D. (Ed.) (1999). *Humanism: Historical & Contemporary Perspectives*. Washington Area Secular Humanists
- Felski, R. (2011). "Context Stinks!." *New Literary History*, 42(2), 573-591.
- Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2013). Close Reading as Part of a Comprehensive Literacy Framework. 30-34
- Latour, B. (2004). Why has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern. *Critical Theory*, 30, 225-248.
- Lesjak, C. (2013). Reading Dialectically. *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts*, 55(2), 233-277.
- McKee, L. and Carr, G. (2016). Supporting Beginning Readers in Reading to Learn: A Comprehension Strategy, *The Reading Teacher*, 70(3), 359-363.
- Miller, J. H. (2004). *On Literature: Thinking in Action*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Nicholson, H. (2017). Close Reading, *The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 22(2), 183-185
- Pechey, G. (2007). *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Word in The World*. Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, London & New York
- Said. Edward. (2004). *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*. Palgrave Macmillan
- Schoening. M. (1999). Literary Interest Now. *Modern Language Studies*, 29(2), 175-187.
- Shakespeare, W. (1992). *Hamlet*. Penguin



- Simpson, J. (2013). Cognition is Recognition: Literary Knowledge and Textual "Face." *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation*, 44(1), 25-44
- Tankersley, K. (2003). *The Threads of Reading: Strategies for Literacy Development*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, Virginia USA
- Tyson, L. (Ed). (2006). *Critical Theory today: A User – Friendly Guide*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London & New York.
- Woolf, J. (2005). *Writing about Literature: Essays and Translating Skills for University Students of English and Foreign Literature* (Routledge Study Guides). Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, London and New York