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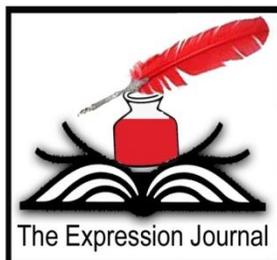
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**INTRICACIES OF RECEPTION: THEORY AND PRACTICE**

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**Abstract**

With due reference to Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope, in this paper, I have tried to elaborate the aspect of the open unity of the aesthetic and the socio-cultural discourse, and the fact that the full meaning of a work of art can be understood only when it is seen as possessing a temporality beyond its contemporary ethos. Also, how the chronotopic possibilities of a literary work are realized in film adaptations which in a way proves the idea of how the dialogic encounter of two contexts-- both historical and contemporary-- does not result in a merging of two, but celebrating the two separately. In this way, the very act of placing a literary object in relation with 'the other' yields timeless/space-less essence to a text whereby this very openness of the text provides possibility of constructing multiple meanings with it and leads to something emergent, thus leading to an after-life of a text that the author cannot anticipate. Consequently, to analyze adaptation as a modern form of reception, I have taken into account Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* as an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

**Key-Words**

Reception, Adaptation, Theory, Practice, *Haider*, *Hamlet*.  
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The aesthetic value of a text and its significance, which depends largely on to the readers' interpretive methods and activities, gets actualized only with the test of time. Coleridge's famous aphorism visualizing the active participation of readers in the fictional reality of literature as "willing the voluntary suspension of disbelief" points to the idea that although the context is central to text, the reader's historical positioning tends to dismantle the notion of chronotope and lets him/her explore infinite possibilities of meaning-making.

Accordingly, with due reference to Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope, this study tries to elaborate the aspect of the open unity of the aesthetic and the socio-cultural discourse. Also, the fact that the full meaning of a work of art can be understood only when it is seen as possessing a temporality ahead of its contemporary ethos. This design also helps us recognize how the chronotopic possibilities of a literary work are realized in film adaptations which in a way proves the idea of how the dialogic encounter of two contexts— both historical and contemporary— does not result in a merging of the two, but celebrating the two discretely. In this way, the very act of placing a literary object in relation with 'the other' yields timeless/space-less essence to a text, whereby this very openness of the text provides possibilities of constructing multiple meanings with it and leads to something emergent, thus leading to an after-life of a text that the author cannot anticipate.

Moving a step further, even film adaptations involve yet another set of re-conceptualizing and receiving, thereby resulting in multifold reception-stages: from the Text to the Reader to the Script-writer to the Director to the Viewer. This in turn can be related to the "horizon of expectation" theory of Hans Robert Jauss by which he suggests that placing more importance on the reader tends to lessen the abyss between the schools of literature and history. And it is this which makes literature a dialectical process of production, reception and adaptation.

In *The Beauty Of Inflections* (1988), Jerome McGann establishes that an artwork has "two interlocking critical histories" (24), out of which while one is derived from the expressed objectives of the author, the other is derived from the readers' critical responses and reactions. Hence in line with this argument, the author is perceived alongside numerous discursive, historical and erratic ramifications. Although, no doubt, textuality tends to govern the entire interpretative operation, the actual meanings of the text lie in the virtual space: between the text and its readers, between the text and its film adaptation, between the film and its audiences, and between the readers of the text and the audiences of the adapted film.

Reader response theory, as the practice of reception is widely called, claims that the meaning of a text is governed by its reception and the effect it induces in its readers. Aristotle's concept of catharsis, which finds detailed explanation in *Poetics*, is perhaps the most primitive illustration of the reader-response theory. In essence, it is about robbing off the author of his impervious 'authority.' For instance, as Henri Lefebvre, in "Toward a Leftist Cultural Politics: Remarks Occasioned by the Centenary of Marx's Death" remarks that this procedure of transmission of meaning from one stage to the other "transforms writing into an interplay of signs, regulated less by the content it signifies than by the very nature of the signifier." (LCP 116).

In line with the same argument, both Barthes in "The Death of the Author" (1967) and Foucault in "What is an Author?" (1969) are precisely problematizing the concept of reception only. Foucault is interested in complicating the notion of what it means to be an author through the articulation of "author" alongside its many historical and discursive formulations. Rather than, like Barthes, singling out and attacking the stature of the author.

Similarly, the approaches of Raymond Williams and Roland Barthes towards literary reception are contradictory in many ways. While Barthes argues that in order to extract the maximum out of a particular text, the identity of the author and his personal biographical details should not be considered because a text, according to

Barthes, contains multiple layers of meaning, which can otherwise be misconstrued. Raymond Williams, on the other hand, insists that the socio-political context of the author plays an integral part in the inherent, thematic structure of any text, i.e. the social milieu dictates what an author should write, also how and why? As such, Williams' historically grounded claim is that, that literature emerges as a response to the sociological changes within and prior to the author's surrounding, hence its contemporary understanding should be refined likewise.

On the contrary, Roland Barthes argues that the actual worth of a literary text should not be confined within the domains of an author's "history, his tastes, and his passions" (1), and hence repudiates biographical criticism. In his article, entitled "The Death of the Author", he bases his argument on this very premise and tries to validate his argument through illustrations of examples like Honore de Balzac's story in which a male protagonist mistakes a castrato for a woman and falls in love with him, thereby suggesting that the essential meaning of a work depends on the 'impressions' on the reader, rather than the 'intentions' of the author. Barthes claims that a "text is a tissue of quotations"(3) drawn from "innumerable centers of culture"(3), rather than from one, individual experience. He appears distraught with the fact that "in contemporary culture [texts are] tyrannically centered on the author"(1). In fact he goes on to state that "a text's unity lies not in its origins, but in its destination." (3)

Raymond Williams, on the other hand, strongly professes that to divorce a text from the biographical details of its author is to rob it out of its soul. A text, according to Williams, is essentially a product of its creator's age and the arenas of which he is a part, because it consciously or unconsciously inculcates the larger issues prevailing in that age. For instance, in *Orlando*, when Woolf brings in the idea of traversing English history over a span of 400 years, she does not aim at creating art for art's sake, but wishes to highlight the dual concerns regarding the Feminist issue of women's writing and gender discrimination throughout the countries. In this way, Woolf's writing is undoubtedly motivated by the socio-political consciousness of her age and the preceding ages. As such Barthes' point of view of the author having no real significance does not sustain itself, at least herein, whilst analyzing such feminist texts or a Post-colonial text like *Things Fall Apart*. Also, the validity of the genre of Autobiography, then, in the context of Barthes's proposed argument, appears to be under risk. So Barthes' idealized, 'non-realistic' perspective saying "the birth of a reader must come at the cost of the death of the author", seems less appropriate to us as modern readers than Williams' projection of the idea that a text has a

necessary linkage to its author's immediate context, hence should be received accordingly. Nevertheless, the approaches of both these thinkers predictably are heading towards an emphasis on the consumption of works, rather than on their production, thus shifting the onus of interpretation directly on the readers.

In "The Identity of the Poetic Text in the Changing Horizon of Understanding," Hans Robert Jauss<sup>1</sup> establishes that the history of a literary work depends not entirely on the author's historical positioning, but the historical process of the evolution of the audience. In fact, decoding the 'hidden' meaning of the text and the author's mysterious intention is no longer the appropriate approach for reception theorists. Rather the production of meaning for them depends upon the readerly imagination and the readers' active participation at a particular historical juncture.

Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia and polyphony, as is illustrated in "Discourse in the novel", is reflective of the reader oriented approach and its historical significance. "For the word is, after all, not a dead material object in the hands of an artist equipped with it... [and] under changed conditions [its] meaning may emit bright new rays, burning away the reified crust that had grown up around it." (Dialogic Imagination 419). As such Bakhtin maintains that the various voices in the novel are orchestrated only in the hands of the readers. Furthermore this notion of the "dialogic" and its historical continuity seems foregrounded within the aesthetics of reception.

Film adaptations of canonical texts, to move step further, prove that temporal and spatial indicators, when thoughtfully fused across different mediums yield dual signification— contextual and historical. For instance one can analyze how a literary work produced one century undergoes makeover to accommodate another century and its changed circumstances, which are often transnational and gets exposed to the socio-culture and political currents of two or more different historical moments In *Cinema and History*, Marc Ferro offers a model to analyze filmic adaptations as cultural documents and to explore it historically. In this context, the relationship between reception and the dynamics of chronotopic patterns stands inevitable. Literary hermeneutics, hence, stimulates an everlasting dialogue between the self and the other; the producer and the recipient. Spanning across different spatio-temporal moments, such dialogical literary understanding, in turn, becomes the centre for historical anthropology if looked at with the lens of hermeneutics.

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<sup>1</sup> Jauss qtd. in Machor and Goldstein. *Reception Study: From Literary Theory To Culture Studies*. New York: Routledge. 2001. Print.

In “Adaptation as Reception”, Anne-Marie Scholz accredits Robert Stam for his concept of “Intertextual dialogism” as “the infinite and open-ended possibilities generated by all the discursive practices of a culture, the endless matrix of communicative utterances within which the artistic text is situated, which reach the text not only through recognizable influences, but also through a subtle process of dissemination.” (Scholz 679).

As also in “Response to a Question from the *Novy Mir* editorial staff,” wherein on being asked to comment on the contemporary state of literary scholarship, Bakhtin eulogizes his ideas about culture and inter-cultural relationships. He maintains that in order to evaluate literature, one must have an understanding of not only the existing culture era, but also the classical that led upon it. Moreover, his notion of examining foreign culture involves the readers’ “creative understanding” and critical empathy letting them decode the text’s tempo-spatial settings thereby making the work futuristic.

To re-conceive adaptation as another realm of reception, it is important to note that a context of texts alters in film adaptations and so docs their history. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and its recent Indian adaptation *Haider* serve as prime examples in this regard. The gap between a modern-day reader’s perceptions of hamlet’s tragedy as being set in the Renaissance context and a modern-day viewer’s perception of Haider’s tragedy as being set in the armed Insurgency hit Kashmir conflict of the 1990s is obvious. Using the plotline of *Hamlet*, Vishal Bhardwaj’s venture at tracing the recent history of the tension between the people of Kashmir and the Indian army, tells us about how historical moments make shifts. Acquaintance with this history informs the reception of the reader/audience, while also stressing that “interpretations of literature arise out of a dialogue between past and present readings.”(McQuillan 147 ) Similarly extending Hans-Georg Gadamar’s version of hermeneutics further, Hans Robert Jauss argues that although each historical period yields its own dominant interpretations of a text, its real meaning lies in the fusion of these varied political and cultural interpretations over time. Perhaps implying that literary meaning of a text can be extracted upon, at different historical moments, by readers. The text, in its essence, becomes performative and thus open to the readers for interpretation from within their historically-situated horizons.

The Dialogic encounter of two or more cultures, to believe Bakhtin’s argument, allows a space for co-experiencing and empathy. He writes that “it is only in the

eyes of another culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly.” (7)<sup>2</sup> Such a relationship between the self and the other, he believes, acknowledges similarity and respects plurality, without attempting to overpower the other. In the context of his own autobiography, for instance, Roland Barthes maintains that “What I write about myself is never the last word: ... the more ‘sincere’ I am, the more interpretable I am, under the eye of other examples than those of the old authors, who believed they were required to submit themselves to but one law: authenticity.” (Barthes qtd. in Anderson, 71).

Adaptations of literary works serve as a social-cultural event in history and function as an important site of cultural tussle and negotiation. Hence its status as being something secondary, derivative, or unoriginal, and thus inferior is too limited an approach to decode adaptation not just as a product but a process (of creation, distribution, reception and recreation). The persistence of historicity within each of these stages of its processing carries the text’s original worth rather than moving away from originality/authenticity.

In “The Theory and Practice of Adaptation”, Robert Stam establishes a thorough and wide-ranging definition of adaptation where he maintains that “adaptation is reading, rewriting, critique, translation, transmutation, metamorphosis, recreation, transvocalization, signifier, performance, dialogization, cannibalization, reinvisioning, incarnation or reaccentuation [...]. Each term, however problematic as a definitive account of adaptation, sheds light on a different facet of adaptation.” (Stam qtd.in Scholz, 658)

Adaptation retains a sense of orientation and is by default reflective of a chronological origin back in history. This evolutionary perspective of adaptation insists in the historical nature of understanding and is crucial in the shaping of the audiences’/readers’ “horizon of expectation”. It involves a process within which a reader tends to decode cultural conventions and historical codes inherent in the text, and comes to a conclusive interpretation of the text based on his present knowledge of the past.

In his 1989 essay entitled “The Play of the Text”, Wolfgang Iser intimates reading as a “performative act of meaning making that is armed at filling up the structural “gaps” and “blanks” inherent in the narrative, which lies in the virtual space that exists between the text and the reader. Although similar conventions are assumed by

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<sup>2</sup> Bakhtin, Mikhail. “Response to a Question from the *Novy Mir* Editorial Staff.” *Specificity of the Literary*. 1986. 1-9.

text and reader from reality, deeper aspects are left open-ended and unexplained by the text. In line with the same argument, Iser defines his notion of “the implied reader”, in *The Act of Reading*, as one who “embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect—predispositions laid down, not by an empirical outside reality but by the text itself. Consequently, the implied reader as a concept has its roots firmly planted in the structure of the text...” (Iser, 34). Through the reading process, it is the reader who actualizes the potential of the text. And this is how literary communication takes place thereby resulting in the formations of, to use Stanley Fish’s terminology, an ‘interpretive community’. The emergence of virtual text takes place from the gap between authorial intention and reader’s response. Hence, the afterlife of the text dictates the historical dimension as well as the contemporary contextualization of Reception.

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