

Reader Response to Postcolonial Narratives in Contemporary South Asian Fiction

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Abstract: Modern South Asian fiction in English, which includes novels such as *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie, *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid, is concerned with the history and psychology of colonization, partition, and globalization. Although postcolonial literary criticism in relation to this literature has generally been concerned with the author's methodology and textual construction, relatively little work has been done in terms of how the reader interprets these texts. In this essay, reader response theory, especially the transactional approach, the idea of the implied reader and textual gaps, and interpretive communities will be explored. The theory asserts that a socio-cultural position of the reader as a diasporic reader, South Asian reader, or Western reader determines which textual spaces are attended to, how untranslated languages and cultural references are treated, and how the text can be read as resistance, testimony, or exoticized spectacle. The article formulates a conceptual framework of postcolonial reader response on the basis of existing theories of postcolonialism and reader-response; provides a comparative chart of exemplary texts and the principal postcolonial issues that emerge in those texts; and delineates a chart connecting reader-response and postcolonial scholars with their respective interpretative functions. The article identifies the difference between interpretive communities as a problem and an opportunity.

Key Words: reader-response theory; postcolonial literature, south asian fiction, interpretive communities, transactional theory

Introduction

The fiction written by authors belonging to South Asia or about South Asia has taken up an important position in world literature since the 1980s, characterized by prestigious awards, translations into different languages, and increasing presence in college curricula outside the South Asian region (Rajan & Sharma, 2006; Daiya, 2018). Novels like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* employ techniques of narration, magic realism, unconventional chronology, and even direct address that put certain unusual demands on the reader for interpretation. The postcolonial critical approach towards this corpus of literature has usually centered on what the text does: how it uses and reverses the language of the colonizer, how it constructs hybridity and subalternity, and how it narrates its resistance to imperial historiography.

The other side of this coin, however, has not been considered much: the reader's engagement with these texts. The tools offered by reader response criticism, an approach that evolved mostly within the context of Western literary classics, can help analyze the process of meaning making through the interaction between reader and text, the creation of gaps in the text that require filling through individual experience, and the formation of reading communities who have their own interpretive conventions but come up with different yet consistent interpretations of the same text. How does applying such an approach to South Asian fiction produce a particular political problem?

This essay attempts to merge reader-response and postcolonial theories in order to analyze the reception of modern South Asian literature at various reading positions (Hashmi et al., 2025; Pravinchandra, 2014; Asghar, 2014). First, the theoretical framework, which involves the synthesis of transactional, phenomenological, and community theories of reading along with the ideas of hybridity, orientalism, and subalternity in the postcolonial discourse, will be described. After that, an overview of a number of primary sources and their postcolonial preoccupations will follow, followed by a conceptual model of the postcolonial reading process and a discussion of its implications for teaching (Singh & Iyer, 2016; Rastogi, 2005).

Theoretical Framework

The reader-response approach denies the idea that meaning only exists in the text and maintains that meaning results from the interaction between the reader and the text. The transactional approach, based on Rosenblatt's ideas about Literature as Exploration (1938), identifies two stances taken by a reader while reading: the efferent stance, when a reader mainly focuses on receiving information, and the aesthetic stance, when a reader concentrates on the lived experience of reading, images, feelings, and associations. Addresses the same problem using the phenomenological approach, which asserts that literary texts are inherently incomplete; they leave gaps or indeterminacies that should be filled by an implied reader through inference and personal knowledge; thus, each actual reader constructs a unique text while reading. Extends the idea by asserting that the authority for interpretation does not belong to an individual reader but to the interpretive communities, a group of readers with common reading strategies and conventions; these readers will arrive at similar interpretations, although their interpretations will differ greatly from the interpretations made by another interpretive community while reading the same text.

The postcolonial critical framework provides the terminology to delineate precisely what is at issue when such universal reading strategies are deployed for the interpretation of South Asian novels, predominantly written in the language of the former colonizers, English. The concept of Orientalism refers to the practice on the part of the West of representing the East as exotic, inferior, or alien. provides the notion of hybridity and the third space in order to discuss identities and cultural artifacts generated in the liminal space between the colonial and the postcolonial, neither entirely indigenous nor entirely colonial. The concept of the subaltern has been discussed in terms of whether those who are structurally silenced, in South Asian literature, in terms of caste, gender, and poverty, have authentic narrative agency in the text or if they are speaking for themselves through an educated English-speaking author (Arshad et al., 2025; Saleem et al., 2025; Imade & Kadam, 2023). table 1 below identifies how each of these concepts corresponds to particular reading practices (Masroor & Ajmal, 2024).

Table 1: Reader-Response and Postcolonial Theoretical Concepts

Author (Year)	Key Concept	Relevance to Postcolonial South Asian Fiction
Rajan & Sharma, (2006)	Recognition and South Asian identity	Explains how readers interpret South Asian literary identities through cultural recognition, migration experiences, and negotiation between regional histories and global literary spaces.
Hashmi et al., (2025)	Postcolonial existentialism; identity, race, and belonging	Highlights reader engagement with themes of fragmented identity, displacement, racial experiences, and belonging in contemporary South Asian fiction.
Pravinchandra, (2014)	Beyond Anglophone postcolonial studies	Encourages readers to examine South Asian literature beyond English dominance by considering regional narratives, cultural contexts, and alternative literary traditions.
Arshad et al., (2025)	Subaltern voices and female narratives	Provides a framework for readers to analyze marginalized voices, gender representation, and whether female and socially excluded characters achieve narrative agency.
Singh & Iyer, (2016)	Comparative South Asian literature	Supports diverse interpretations by emphasizing multilingual, regional, and comparative approaches beyond dominant Anglophone perspectives.
Masroor & Ajmal, (2024)	Narrative subversion and language experimentation	Explains how readers respond to unconventional storytelling methods, linguistic resistance, and the challenge of traditional colonial narratives in South Asian fiction.

Primary Texts and Their Postcolonial Concerns

As part of grounding the theoretical framework, the present review is based on six of the most widely discussed and studied contemporary literary texts of South Asia written in English from the partition period until the post-9/11 period. The reason for selecting the above-mentioned literary texts lies in the fact that all these texts have attracted considerable attention in the field of postcolonial criticism and in some cases, reader response criticism as well.

Table 2: Selected Primary Texts in Contemporary South Asian Postcolonial Fiction

Author	Title	Year	Setting	Central Postcolonial Concerns
Salman Rushdie	Midnight's Children	1981	India	Nation-as-allegory, hybridity, fragmented historiography, and the relationship between personal and national identity after colonialism
Arundhati Roy	The God of Small Things	1997	Kerala, India	Caste hierarchy, gender oppression, transgressive relationships, social marginalization, and non-linear narrative structures
Bapsi Sidhwa	Cracking India (Ice-Candy-Man)	1988/1991	Lahore, Pakistan	Partition trauma, communal violence, displacement, and childhood perspectives on historical violence
Mohsin Hamid	The Reluctant Fundamentalist	2007	Pakistan/USA	Diaspora identity, migration, cultural conflict, post-9/11 belonging, and hybrid identities
Aravind Adiga	The White Tiger	2008	India	Class inequality, subaltern consciousness, social mobility, globalization, and resistance against dominant structures

A number of patterns become apparent when comparing these novels. For novels depicting the time of the Partition (Cracking India, Train to Pakistan), the interpretation requires a high degree of historical knowledge by the reader in order for the emotional impact of violent scenes to have any significance for the reader, as the historical context of 1947 needs to be known beforehand. On the other hand, novels depicting caste/class struggles (The God of Small Things, The White Tiger) require readers to recognize structures of inequality that they will not necessarily be acquainted with as people outside of South Asia, and might still have a differing perception of as people from South Asia belonging to other social groups (Ul Huda et al., 2025).

A Conceptual Model of Postcolonial Reader Response

A summary of the theoretical threads discussed above will help conceptualize the postcolonial reading process as a layered construct where a certain text meets a particular reader whose socio-cultural background has been determined, resulting in a transaction between the two parties, which involves a particular reading stance (either efferent or aesthetic) on the part of the reader as he or she attempts to fill the textual gaps; and finally, the interpretation is influenced by the interpretive norms of the particular interpretive community where the reader comes from. The whole process is illustrated in figure 1 below.

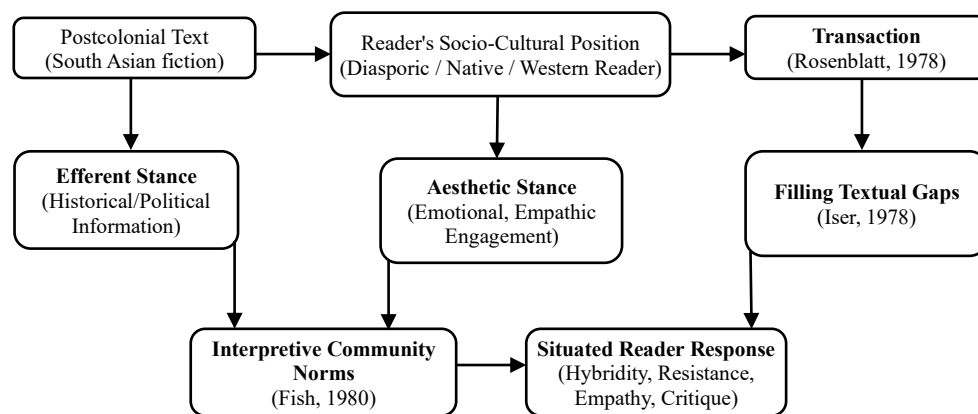


Figure 1: A Conceptual Model of Postcolonial Reader Response, Synthesizing Rosenblatt's (1978) Transactional Theory, Iser's (1978) Reader-Gap Theory, and Fish's (1980) Interpretive Communities.

This is an Original Conceptual Synthesis Rather than a Report of Empirical Survey Data

Divergence Across Reading Positions

One consistent finding from the literature on reception in postcolonial criticism is that South Asians, diasporic, and Westerners are not merely having differing attitudes towards a fixed set of meanings, but rather, in Iser's (1978) terminology, are filling textual blanks with entirely different content. A Western reader who encounters an untranslated Hindi, Urdu, or Malayalam word in a novel might skim past it as exotic local color, whereas the bilingual reader fills in the blanks to gain access to a whole semantic/emotional palette which is closed to the other reader. In a similar fashion, the reader situated in an Orientalist context is likely to read a chaotic marketplace or an arranged marriage as evidence of exoticism/backwardness in the East, whereas the reader situated in the text's own cultural context will read the same scene as straightforward realism or as pointed social commentary.

Pedagogical descriptions of the instruction of South Asian postcolonial fiction in mixed classrooms speak precisely to this divide: Instructors note that those students who hail from the area as well as those who come from the diaspora often read the conflicts in the text as something which they have encountered

in life or through their families, whereas others read them as an opportunity to explore an unknown culture, a divide which mirrors the efferent-aesthetic divide and which may be used to either enhance or to perpetuate misunderstanding in the classroom environment.

Pedagogical and Critical Implications

The awareness that postcolonial South Asian fiction will be read differently by different interpretive communities has several practical implications for the fields of literary criticism and pedagogy. On a critical level, it challenges any attempt to view any one possible interpretation of a work of literature as the "true" interpretation, regardless of theoretical sophistication. An interpretation that finds hybridity, subaltern voice, or resistance within a text is an interpretation produced from a certain position, a certain stance toward the text, not an objective assessment of the politics inherent within the text. On a pedagogical level, it suggests that instructors who wish to teach novels such as these have ways in which to make the positionality of reading visible in the classroom through the assignment of tasks such as identifying gaps and how they are filled from the readers outside knowledge, comparing responses of readers from different positions to certain terms or historical allusions in the text, or by placing a text alongside commentary about its intended ambiguity.

Limitations of the Current Evidence Base

The scholarship examined in this literature review tends to be more theoretical than empirical since the authors tend to make deductions about how the readers will respond to the structural elements of the text or through classroom-based observations. In contrast, empirical studies of reception where interviews or surveys of South Asian, diasporic and Western readers of the same book are carried out on a large-scale basis have not been undertaken frequently enough for the model presented in this paper to qualify as an empirical finding. The future undertaking of such research, using tools like surveys and think aloud protocols, would provide more evidence for the propositions in this paper.

Conclusion

Postcolonial South Asian fiction of time, as read using reader response theory, represents a way of looking at a tradition which is usually focused on authorial strategies and the politics of the texts and instead focuses on the reader as an active subject in the process of constructing meaning. The theories proposed by Rosenblatt, Iser, and Fish show how the same book might yield very different readings based on the socio-cultural context of the individual reading it, and postcolonial notions like Orientalism, hybridity, and subalternity endow that process with a political dimension. Considering reader response as a variable and not a constant in both scholarship and pedagogy promises to be a fertile area for future research and teaching, one that will help to politicize the act of interpretation itself.

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