

Vol II Issue VI Dec 2012

Impact Factor : 0.1870

ISSN No :2231-5063

Monthly Multidisciplinary  
Research Journal

*Golden Research*

*Thoughts*

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**RNI MAHMUL/2011/38595**

**ISSN No.2230-7850**

Indian Streams Research Journal is a multidisciplinary research journal, published monthly in English, Hindi & Marathi Language. All research papers submitted to the journal will be double - blind peer reviewed referred by members of the editorial Board readers will include investigator in universities, research institutes government and industry with research interest in the general subjects.

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## TAGORE'S 'HEAVEN OF FREEDOM': A STUDY IN RECEPTION THEORY

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### **Abstract:**

*The Reception Theory has been one of the significant developments in the world of literary theories in the 20th century. It is believed to have emerged from the Phenomenological and Hermeneutical churning; the former emphasizes a work of art to be an intentional object, being different from the real and ideal objects and the latter considers a work of art as a means of elevating self-understanding. It is maintained that meaning of a work of art is dynamic, rather than rigid. Understanding of a text is decided by the embedded meaning in the text as well as the horizon of expectations of the reader. In the same way, a text is considered to be a potential structure which is concretized by the readers and of course successive generations of readers. In the light of the Reception Theory "Heaven of Freedom" a celebrated poem by Rabindranath Tagore can be understood in the present context.*

### **KEY WORDS**

Horizon of expectations, fusion of horizons, potential structure, gaps or blanks & aesthetics of reception

### **THE THEORY**

The rise of the reader-oriented theory in the second half of the 20th century is one of the significant developments in the world of literary theories. By the end of the first half of the 20th century, on the one hand the world had undergone radical changes and on the other, literary theories began to emerge, creating awareness of variety of interpretation. The literary theories staged a shift in the history of criticism and it is rightly said that this shift in literary criticism was as resounding as the shift from Aristotelian poetics to the philosophical aesthetics in the 19th century. The most significant function served by these theories was to free art from the carpet concepts and divulge the innate multifaceted core of a work of art. They also broke the long-cherished notions of the singularity of a work of art and opened a gamut of multiple cognition. The entire process was aimed at objectifying insights and separating comprehension from subjective taste. Another reason forwarded for the emergence of literary theories was the conflict of interpretation, which consists in the dogmatic belief in the academics regarding the interpretative practices. It would often mean that a meaning found in a text would be the meaning of the text. However, the question of accompanying assumptions and presumptions gave rise to the conflict of interpretation. This conflict was of decisive importance in terms of the origin of different theories. In addition to this, the proliferation of media and the cultural & the intercultural interests gave a further boost to so many different forms of literary theory.

The emergence of so many theories runs parallel to the democratic values too. The eminent German theorist Wolfgang Iser notes, "Why do we have so many theories? Each one subjects art to a cognitive framework which is bound to impose limits on the work. Whatever aspects one concept fails to cover will be more often than not be taken up by another approach, which will of course be subject to its own restrictions, and so on id infinitum"<sup>1</sup> Iser maintains that this process of liberal interpretation not only accounts for the multiplicity of literary theories, but also allows the readers to experience the 'ultimate unknowability' of art. Thus, a literary theory, Iser says, "... provokes cognitive attempts at understanding,

and exceeds the limits of the cognitive frameworks applied. This duality transforms art into an experiential reality for which, however, the cognitive quest is indispensable”<sup>2</sup>. Reception theory, being one of the reader-oriented theories, is said to have originated in two theoretical sources viz. Phenomenology and Hermeneutics. Edmund Husserl, the German thinker and one of the major exponents of Phenomenology, denied the independent existence of objects in nature. The term 'phenomena' means 'things appear' in Greek. It was maintained that the proper field of investigation is our consciousness of the objects in the world around. Consciousness is supposed to have been the key concept of this philosophy, which gave rise to a belief that object is 'never knowable' by the subject, since it is the idea of the object which determines what it is for the subject. This theory emphasizes a work of art to be an intentional object, which is different from the real and ideal objects. The intentional object is not a given, but it is required to be built. Roman Ingarden, a Polish philosopher and literary theorist, applies the theory to the study of literature. A literary work, to him, has no existence other than as an object presented to the consciousness of the reader. It is the reader who concretizes the literary work. The gaps in it are required to be filled in by the reader. The concretization has to be done repeatedly, if the work is to live.

The Hermeneutical theory considers a work of art as a means of elevating self-understanding. The process of understanding involves a gap between what is to be understood and the subject who is supposed to understand it. The word 'Hermeneutics' originally meant the formation of the principles for the interpretation applied to the valid readings and commentaries on the Bible. From 19th century onwards the term hermeneutics came to be known as the theory of interpretation in general. In other words, it is the formulation of principles in getting at the meaning written in texts. According to Wilhelm Dilthey, the aim of Hermeneutics is to establish a general theory of understanding. He used the concept of Hermeneutic circle which consists in understanding the meanings of the verbal whole through approaching them with the sense of the meaning of the whole. Hans Georg Gadamer, another renowned figure in Modern Hermeneutics, brings together the historical and the temporal situations of the interpreter in the act of interpretation. An individual's being is made up of the present which looks back to the past and anticipates the future. A reader brings to the text a pre-understanding which is formed by his personal horizon. The reader is expected to allow the text to speak to him. The understood meaning of the text is thus the product of a fusion of horizons that a reader brings to the text and the text brings to the reader. To Gadamer, the past can be grasped only through relating it to the present.

Hans Robert Jauss, the German critic, is considered to be one of the main influences on the emergence of the Reception Theory. He delivered 'Provocation' lecture of seminal importance at the University of Constance in 1967. According to Jauss, the interpretative process emerges through a historical perspective. The reader and the text are always located in history and the act of reading in any historical period is informed by the conventions and expectations of that period as well as the socio-cultural influences surrounding the reader. This is important from the reader's understanding point-of-view and the production of the textual meaning. Jauss uses the term 'horizon of expectations', which means the textual elements which impact on the reader's expectations regarding the text in question. It also implies that textual meaning is dynamic and it is open to revision and reassessment. In other words, a text is an entity which is situated between the past and the present. Jauss coined another term called 'fusion of horizons', meaning a fusion between the past experiences of the writer which are embedded in the text and the interests of the present day readers<sup>3</sup>. It means there is an attempt at considering the relation between the original reception of the text and how it is perceived in different stages in history until the present.

Wolfgang Iser is the other exponent of the Reception Theory, who began his pursuit with his memorable lecture concerned with indeterminacy and reader's response delivered at the University of Constance in 1970. He was inspired by Roman Ingarden, a Phenomenological theorist. Like Jauss, Iser is of the view that the text is 'a potential structure', which is concretized by the reader. However, he differs from Jauss in that he denies the text the objective structure. To him a text creates 'gaps or blanks', which the reader must fill in using his imagination. The 'aesthetics of reception' thus emerges in the interaction between the text and the reader. The text is like a skeleton. It possesses meaning potential and the meaning is brought out when the reader concretizes the schematized aspects which constitute the text. The reader's experience will be charged throughout the process of reading, leading to a continuing process of re-evaluation and modification. In short, a textual work doesn't involve a single universal and determinate meaning, but a process of continuing interpretation and reinterpretation to arrive at possible meanings that reflect the individual reader's perceptions and experience. It is interesting to note here that while Hans Robert Jauss tries to reconcile historical criticism with Formalist criticism, Iser derives his critical theory from New Historicism, Narratology and Phenomenology.

The Reception theory has certainly contributed to, according to Steve Padley, "... a shift away from the concerns with the text as a self-contained unit or with the author as having a privileged perspective on textual meaning<sup>4</sup>". Moreover, the emphasis on the implications for the interpretative act of the reader's

extra-literary experience and the perceptions of the social world in which the text is produced and received is in keeping with the liberalizing and democratizing tendencies of the contemporary period. The marginalized interpretative communities too have acquired a say in the affairs by creating a more receptive climate.

#### THE APPLICATION

Against this background, we can read the most celebrated poem "Heaven of Freedom" composed by Rabindranath Tagore, the only Indian writer having been graced with Nobel for literature. Tagore displayed his creative excellence not only in the memorable literary works, but also in establishing educational institutions like Shantiniketan. "Gitanjali5", the anthology of poems was originally published in Bengali in 1910 and the English version was brought out by the poet himself in 1912.

"Heaven of Freedom" is made up of seven subordinate clauses studded into one super-complex sentence. Considering the Indian political dependence, the word 'freedom' may be interpreted as liberation from the clutches of the heartless British rule. India, besides being afflicted by the foreign rule, was internally debilitated by the age-old caste system giving rise to inequality, untouchability, poverty and misery. On scanning the life of the poet, the word 'freedom' may assume world-wide dimensions. About the interpretation of the term in the present time, according to Jauss' principle of 'horizon', we may say that in the wake of globalization and American omnipresent interference, the 'freedom' has lost its significance altogether, or at least it has become a relative concept. The so-called free nations are monetarily dependent on the developed nations. There are nations like Afghanistan and Iraq which are wriggling in 'freedom' imposed on them by the American domination. Even the so-called 'superpower' has been stunned by the 9/11 air-bomb attack. The comprehensive meaning of the word 'freedom' is difficult to actualize, at least on the planet called Earth, which is being fast denuded of her natural resources. The 'gap' in the title arises in the use of the word 'heaven', which is non-existent, hence a utopia.

The entire poem is an invocation addressed to the Father, occupying the last line. What precedes this is a cluster of wishes of the poet belonging to and writing in the pre-independent India. Tagore desires for a mind without 'fear'. During the dependent times people lived under tremendous fear. The women lived under the fear of commandeering men, the lower caste people had the threat of the upper castes and all the Indians had been under the inhibition of the cruelties of the British. From today's point-of-view, 'fear' has acquired horrendous shapes. Now, it is not a matter of political fear, but the percolating venom of consumerism on the one hand and the vast quantity of poor and miserable people on the other bear out the intensity of 'fear'. It should be noted that freedom and fear are incompatible. Where there is freedom, there can't be fear. The second desire of the poet is that 'knowledge' must be free. Being an educator of the first water, Tagore had a totally different insight into education, which meant to him a free transaction between a being and the teacher called the nature, without a mechanically-drawn curriculum as such. In the present scenario, we see that knowledge has become a saleable commodity. The word 'free' gives rise to a gap, which can be filled in by the fact of the awe-inspiring expenditure involved in the professional disciplines in the present times. The freedom of knowledge seems to be a distant cry in the period when people pay donations in lakhs to become teachers. It can be anybody's guess what happens to the students of the teachers who have become teachers through foul means.

Tagore further longs for a united world. He appears to have transcended the national boundaries and wishes that the 'narrow domestic walls' should vanish. However, the very freedom of India was unfortunately accompanied by the partition of not only the geographical but also the socio-cultural expanses. In the 21st century, we are discriminated by our nation, race, religion, sex, caste, wealth and what not. W.H. Auden, one of the resounding modern English poets, puts it right that an individual is known by his number rather than his 'self' in a self-styled free state<sup>6</sup>. Words hardly come from the 'depth of truth'. We remember Gandhian concept of 'integrity of personality', which means a correspondence in a person between what he thinks, what he speaks and what he does. Truth was one of the weapons Gandhiji wielded for the freedom of India. In the present situation people are indifferent towards truth. Even language, which is expected to convey truth, actually conceals, suppresses and frequently distorts it. 'Tireless striving', to Tagore, must have meant consistent pursuit of perfection. Freedom allows striving and striving makes you engaged in the pursuit of perfection. For a socially well-placed person like Tagore striving for perfection might be pertinent. But, what about the millions of people who are left high and dry, without even the basic needs for survival? Tagore further wishes that 'clear stream of reason' shouldn't be lost. Man is a rational being. It is reason that differentiates man from other animals. However, the 'dreary desert sand of dead habit', meaning the pursuit of material pleasures, especially in the consumerist world of today, has separated man from his reason. The savagery lying under the skin of civilization surfaces at the slightest provocation. The world wars and battles, the massacres, the incidence of violence speak volumes on human irrationality. The last line in the poem invokes the almighty Father for bestowing heaven of freedom. The

word 'my country' for Tagore may not be India only but the entire world, since he happened to be the 'citizen of the world' rather than a member of a national unit. The poem, in spite of being an immortal work with a grand vision of the poet, turns out to be a 'cry in the wilderness' in the present context.

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