

## ROLAND BARTHES ON READER'S ROLE IN THE TEXT

*G.M.Bhat*

Terry Eagleton starts his polemic essay "The Revolt of the Reader" with the following words:

The growth of the Readers' Liberation Movement over the past few decades has struck a decisive blow for oppressed readers everywhere, brutally proletarianized as they have been by the authorial class.<sup>1</sup>

However it was Roland Barthes who for the first time heralded the Readers' Liberation Movement (RLM). Among the entire structuralist thinker, the question of nature of text, its origin and its function has dominated the works of Roland Barthes most of all. Text became his main concern in 1970 when he wrote his *Le Plaisir du texte* (The Pleasures of the text) and *S/Z*. Barthes used the term for the object of an act of reading. In one of Barthes' famous essays '*De Loeuvre au texte*' he suggested that we should abandon the notion of work' adopt the term text'. In his earlier works he drew distinction between *scriptible* and *lisible* texts. *Lisible* texts refuse the norms of genre and *doxa*, and can never be accepted by the institutions; *scriptible* texts on the other hand can be. Text is not merely a concept but a process of writing and need to be approached through process of writing. It should not be subjected to a *metalanguage* and thus close down the process. The reader has only to enjoy it. Signification and communication do not apply to Text because they reduce it to a sign by coupling signifier and signified. Barthes used a new term for the Text, it was *Significance*. By *Significance* he meant that it is not a determinate meaning, but a

---

IJL (Interdisciplinary Journal of Linguistics) Vol(2), University of Kashmir.

process of meaning. To read a text in this sense means to read it for a mobile play of signifiers with no possible reference to one or several signified. This kind of reading takes place on three levels that is production, enunciation, and symbolization. Text is an open-ended structure that influence differently to different individuals. That influence cannot be reduced to any interpretation through functional means of communication. The influence on individual readers, in other words individual pleasure got from the text cannot be communicated to other individuals. That pleasure is restricted to the mind of the individual; it is his own profit of labour. No other person is partisan to that or it cannot be borrowed from any other individual or individuals. All literary methods of interpretation fail. No help can be sought from others.

Barthes believed that text disturbs the perception of communication and expression of a language. Language is the raw material for the text; it works on it. It determines new relations between signifiers and the signified. When a new text comes into being, the one-to-one signifier-signified relationship is changed. A new relation between incompatible and different signified and one signifier is forged.

As a result of this new meaning, new interpretation and new communication are necessitated. When the reader of the text discovers this new relationship and encounters the hurdle, resolves it, he gets immense pleasure which a one-to-one relationship already established by convention would not give him. Thus finding the new relationships is the reader's quest and sole aim. The text does not do it for him, but problematizes the relationship so that the reader of the text has something to ponder about, something to do and seek clues from other relationships contained in the text and in other texts related to the text. The reader's getting lost in the crisscross relations is the literary worth of a literary text. And in getting lost lies the success of the reader.

Pleasure thus becomes a sort of problem, not easy attainment by other's help. No readymade interpretation can give that much pleasure as the reader's own groping and searching. Barthes said that "text itself plays." He wrote:

In fact, reading, in the sense of consuming, is far from playing with the text. 'Playing' must be understood here in all its polysemy: the text itself plays (like a door, like a machine with 'play') and the reader plays twice over, playing the text as one plays a game, looking for a practice which re-produces it, but, in order that practice not be reduced to a passive, inner mimesis (the Text is precisely that which resists such a reduction), also playing the Text in the musical sense of the term.<sup>2</sup>

The similarity between text and music in Barthes is quite fascinating as he compares the fate of the Text with that of music which is a performing art. He wrote:

The history of music ( as a practice, not as an 'art') does indeed parallel that of the text fairly closely: there was a period when practicing amateurs were numerous (at least within the confines of a certain class) and 'playing' and 'listening' formed a scarcely differentiated activity; then two roles appeared in succession , first that of the performer, the interpreter to whom the bourgeois public (though still itself able to play a little the whole history of the piano) delegated its playing , then that of the (passive) amateur , who listens to music without being able to play (the gramophone record takes the place of the piano). We know that today that post-serial music has radically altered the role of the 'interpreter', who is called on to be in some sort the co-author of the score, completing it rather than giving it 'expression'. The Text is very much a score of this new kind; it asks of the reader a practical collaboration<sup>3</sup>.

When a word used in an ancient text or a classical text is not familiar to the reader, or the word has become obsolete, its cultural context is replaced by a new cultural context, the word becomes an object for the reader. It is his own will that can impart some visualized meaning to it. It also happens when a writer deliberately uses strange and coined words, nicknames, (as in Dickens' novels), archaisms, rare words (as in the novels of Flaubert) and neologisms and word-creations in James Joyce's novels. In such cases, the words become productive as they become pseudo- signifiers with no corresponding signified. This productivity thus adds to the potential of the text of giving pleasure to the reader. But in certain cases it hampers the reader's quest by making the text difficult and affecting its readability. James Joyce's *Ulysses* is an example.

Barthes always maintained that once the text is published an author has no intellectual property right over it. The critics and the readers are free to interpret, explain and evaluate in their individual way. Linda Hutcheon remarks about Barthes' concept of the role of reader in determining the meaning of the text:

The metaphor for creation changes from one of expression to one of performative inscription, and the discursive content of the text's inscribing is that of a network of "multiple writings, drawn from many culture and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation". And it is the Read or whom Barthes sees as the activator of this contextual network<sup>4</sup>.

**NOTES**

1. Terry, Eagleton. "The Revolt of the Reader".
2. Roland, Barthes. 2000 "From Work to Text". Niall Lucy (ed.). *Postmodern Literary Theory*. London: Blackwell: 290.
3. Roland, Barthes. 2000 "From Work to Text". Niall Lucy (ed.). *Postmodern Literary Theory*. London: Blackwell: 290-91.
4. Linda, Hutcheon. 1988. *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge: 76-7.