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# Translator as Reader: Phenomenology and Text Reception

## An Investigation of *Indulekha*

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### Introduction

**1.0** This paper attempts to see the translator as a reader from the phenomenological perspective and tries to *site* him/position him as a perceiver whose role is to construct meaning. Rather than placing the *reader* at the center, it is worth-trying to place the *translator* at the center. Here, the translator dons a double (*con-fused*) role by virtue of being a reader as well as the translator.

The role gets further complicated and problematic considering the fact that the ‘meaning’ needs to get translated from the ‘reader’ to the translator who wishes to share the so called ‘universality’ or ‘indeterminacies’ to the next reader. In this process he/she is also the *interpreter*. His/her *reception* of the text is vital.

### Background Study Of Phenomenology And Reading

**2.0** Phenomenology is a philosophical method founded by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). It attempts to overcome the division between the subject and object or the mental and material by examining consciousness and the object of consciousness simultaneously.

Consciousness is regarded as intentional, that is, all states of consciousness must be understood as intending something or directed to an object. Husserl sought to create an alternative philosophical position to both idealism, which collapses the material into the mental, and materialism, which collapses the mental into the material. He developed methods of studying consciousness in its intentional mode of operation.

Husserl borrowed the concept of intentionality from Brentano who in turn had derived it from the Aristotelian tradition. But just as Brentano changed the meaning of the original, Aristotelian conception of intentionality, so Husserl reinterpreted Brentano’s conception.

For Husserl, intentionality means that in all pure experiences there is found inherently a being-directed-toward; perceiving is perceiving of something, judging is judging about something, hoping is hoping for something etc.

The phenomenological analysis and description must examine the different forms of intentionality in a critical and reflective attitude, because it is precisely through these different forms of intentionality that each domain of objects becomes accessible to us. Intentionality is at the heart of knowing.

We live in meaning, and we live ‘towards,’ oriented to experience. Consequently there is an intentional structure in textuality and expression, in self-knowledge and in knowledge of others. Husserl proposes a phenomenological reduction so that everything not ‘immanent’ to consciousness must be excluded- all realities must be treated as pure phenomena and this is the only absolute data from which we can begin.

Husserl viewed consciousness always as intentional and that the act of consciousness, the thinking subject and the object it ‘intends’ are inseparable. Art is nothing but a revelation of being. The work is the phenomenon by which we come to know the world. Phenomenology stresses the importance of the perceiver’s role in constructing meaning.

**2.1** Husserl argues that our consciousness and not the outside world must be the proper object of philosophical investigation. According to him, it is in the ‘phenomena’ (meaning ‘things appearing’ in Greek) that appear in our consciousness we find the essential qualities and the universal nature of things. This is obviously an attempt to make the human mind the center and origin of all meaning, and in literary theory, the author’s consciousness. But a shift towards the reader’s consciousness will reject Husserl’s view.

Heidegger, a student of Husserl, feels that our own consciousness not only projects the thing in the world but also exists in the world and is subjected to the forces outside. We can never adopt an objective, unbiased and detached attitude since our consciousness too is merged in the historical and sociocultural ‘phenomena’, which in turn becomes personal and absorbed inwardly.

What Husserl wanted to achieve by the development and application of his phenomenological method can be described thus: to bring latent reason to the understanding of its own possibilities and to bring to insight the possibility of philosophy as a genuine means. Through phenomenology he wished to attain an all-encompassing, intellectually fully justified knowledge of all that is, an absolutely valid knowledge of things and events.

The concept of *Dasein* is relevant here. *Dasein* simply means ‘being there’ or ‘being-in-the-world’. Heidegger argued that what is distinctive about human existence is its *Dasein* (‘givenness’): our consciousness both projects the things of the world and at the same time is subjected to the world by the very nature of existence in the world.

**2.2** In the twentieth century, phenomenology gained ground as a major subject of study. Kant uses the term to make a distinction between the study of essences and the study of the

phenomena or appearances. In literary theory, these two have brought in New Criticism as well as Reader response criticism.

Roman Ingarden developed a theory of aesthetics as applied to the mode of existence of a work of literature. The other is usually associated with the Geneva school, which is concerned with the practice of criticism. The critics of the Geneva school, notably George Poulet, conceived of literature as a manifestation of the author's consciousness, which the critic tries to appropriate.

The central idea is that the critic should empty his or her mind of all presuppositions and then, responding directly to the text, discover the unique mode of the consciousness of the author. In emptying the mind of preconceptions the critic becomes particularly receptive, even coming to share the mode of consciousness of the author. This has been referred to as 'consciousness of the consciousness of another'.

**2.3** Though Roman Ingarden applied Husserlian phenomenology to the study of literature, based on the call, "to the things themselves", Ingarden developed an individual view, which later on became a tradition called 'phenomenological realism'.

Other scholars include Max Scheler, A. Reinach, Dietrich von Hildebrand and Hedwig Conrad-Martius. Ingarden opposed Husserl's turn to 'transcendental idealism'. He concluded that several concepts were being combined equivocally when Husserl spoke of 'essence' and that they needed to be separated. In his own investigations he developed clear distinctions among the concepts of the essence of an individual object, general and particular ideas and pure or essential qualities; he was then able to determine the necessary relations among the concepts.

The central theme of Ingarden's ontological investigations is the recurrent philosophical controversy concerning the relation between objects encountered in the world and human consciousness.

According to Ingarden, Husserl in his turn to transcendental idealism believed that the real world, given to us in experience, is dependent for its existence on the being and constitution activities of pure consciousness.

Ingarden began his studies in aesthetics as part of his critique of transcendental idealism. He hoped to bring to light the essential differences between real objects encountered in the world and objects such as the characters in a novel that come into existence only through the acts of consciousness that create them. His book *The Literary Work of Art* goes far beyond this original purpose and provides a foundation for literary aesthetics because it presents a clear concept of the essential nature of literary works of art.

**2.4** Ingarden saw literary works as especially appropriate to a phenomenological approach because consciousness operating intentionally is necessary to bring them into existence. Criticism should be concerned with neither the literary work as object nor the

reader as subject but with the fact that the work has no existence other than as an object presented to consciousness.

One of Ingarden's major concerns is with the mode of existence of a work of literature since it is neither pure object nor pure subject. He sees that existence as having several layers: sound formations, meaning units, the modes of appearance or aspects (*ansichten*: that is, aspects of reality which cannot be completely but schematically depicted in a literary text) and the presented objects such as characters and events that are determined by the other three layers.

All of these layers constitute a schematized structure, which must be completed by the reader. For the literary work as aesthetic object to be brought into existence it must be 'concretized' by the reader since the work will inevitably be schematic or indeterminate in many respects.

For example, a character in a novel cannot be described fully. The reader must fill in any gaps or indeterminacies in the description if the character is to come alive on the page. Such concretization must be done repeatedly if a work is to live. Though it can be done only at the individual level, Ingarden believed that certain concretizations were adequate than others and that the work itself exerted controls so that concretization was not completely subjective.

**2.5** Wolfgang Iser develops, after Ingarden, the phenomenological approach to the reading process.

As stated earlier, phenomenology stresses the perceiver's role in any perception and asserts the difficulty, though not fully impossible, of separating anything known from the mind that knows it.

For Iser, the critic should not explain the text as an object but its effect on the reader. Reader's experiences will govern the effects the text produces on them. For him, meaning is not contained in the text itself, but generated in the reading process. Meaning is the result of an interaction between the text and the reader.

The meaning of a literary text comes into existence only during an act of reading, so that literary theory must investigate the text, the reader and their interrelation. A literary text must be considered primarily as a means of communication, according to Iser. Communication requires the transmission of a message from the author to the reader using a code, which is conditioned by the author's and reader's worldviews. In non-artistic, non-literary communication, the code has a referential function pointing to a state of affairs that exists within the author's world.

In artistic, literary text, reader is expected to give an imaginative response, which brings into existence something that cannot be found in the author's historical world. It sees the literary text as a result of the transaction between the text and the reader. As we read on,

the text corrects our interpretations. There is what is called the determinate meanings, which refer to the facts in the text, and there are indeterminate meanings, which refer to the 'gaps' in the text that force the readers to create the meanings.

The continuous interplay between these two meanings, viz., determinate and indeterminate, is what constitutes reading: and this process of reading involves retrospection, anticipation, fulfillment, revision and so on. All art objects have an infinite number of determinants and no single act of cognition can take into account all these determinants. Hence, there is indeterminacy in a literary work.

Filling of the indeterminacies is called concretizations. Iser distinguishes between the text, its concretization, and the work of art. The first is what is given to us by the work of art, the second is the reader's activity of producing the text, and the work of art lies between these two. It lies at the point where the text and the reader converge.

The reading process involves a dialectical process of change and self-realization for the reader. He constructs himself in the process of reading. Iser uses the term "implied reader" to refer to the reader who will respond in full measure to the demands made by the texts. It is the reader whom the text addresses. It is at once textual and imbued with consciousness.

Hence, he is a phenomenological reader, a transcendental model, not empirical as an informed reader. Iser calls the material from which the text is constructed the 'repertoire'. The elements of the repertoire are always presented from a certain perspective and only through certain points of view or aspects and so must be regarded as textual 'schemata'.

There are in general four perspectives through which the pattern of the repertoire emerges: the perspectives of the narrator, the characters, the plot, and the role textually predetermined for the reader. The mutual interactions of these diverse perspectives establish discontinuity, contradictions and indeterminateness between textual schemata. Whenever the connection between textual schemata is not explicitly determined by the text, a 'blank or gap is said to exist. These blanks stimulate the imagination of the reader, whose appropriate responses are necessary to fulfill the intentions of the text.

The reader has his own worldview, and brings his presuppositions and expectations to the text. But these presuppositions and expectations are frustrated because the blanks and gaps prevent him from combining the schemata into a representation of a world that is identical with his own. The reader must therefore suspend his habitual frame of reference and use imagination to constitute a new object on the basis of the textual directives. He thus achieves a fresh insight into his own habitual world view which the text has persuaded him to suspend temporarily, and through his active participation is made to experience for himself the meaning of the text which he has helped to bring into existence.

Such meanings are primarily ways of overcoming some of the deficiencies of the worldview from which the repertoire was drawn.

Through the juxtaposition of various norms of human behaviour presented from diverse perspectives, the reader is encouraged to perceive the deficiencies of each norm by itself and to construct a new image of human nature that is better able to capture the complexity of human experience. Iser then views literature, as a counterbalance to other cultural systems within any historical period. He acknowledges his indebtedness to the literary theory of Roman Ingarden, who first explored the ways in which a reader “concretizes” an aesthetic object on the basis of a schematically determinate text.

However Iser and Ingarden belong to radically different traditions. Iser’s fundamental orientation is derived from the philosophical hermeneutics of Georg Gadamer, who himself owes much to Heidegger. According to him meaning can be experienced even when it is not intended. It shows his heavy reliance on Heidegger’s ontologic analysis, especially in its conclusion that the distinction between the judgment of fact and judgment of value is problematic. Hence he believes that everything that is said and is there in the text stands under anticipations.

This anticipation of meaning necessary for gaining any understanding is no longer regarded in terms of the subjective act of throwing a framework about an object but in terms of the communality that binds the interpreter and the text to the same tradition. Tradition here is not a precondition that must be overcome by method; it is the very product of our acts of understanding.

Gadamer considers that we understand a text only in terms of our cultural environment but the text is engaged in a dialogue with history. Our present perspective and understanding involves a fusion with the past; the fusion of the past and present represents the hermeneutic understanding. Iser too dwells on this issue of developmental process based on the constant modification out of the interaction and negotiation between text and reader.

**2.6** Iser’s work has come in for a good deal of discussion. Stanley Fish raises objections to his refusal to take a firm stand and his compromise on several issues. Fish states that the blanks in a text do not exist independent of the reader; nor do they exist prior to the act of interpretation. There is nothing totally indeterminate, since all the time the reader operates within an interpretative framework.

In his essay ‘Affective Stylistics’, Fish attacks the notion that reading is a finished activity and substitutes a temporal view in place of a spatial view. The text is put to a close examination to know how stylistically it affects the reader, or rather how the sequence of words on a printed page gets converted to a felt experience. Fish describes the process of the structure of the text as it occurs from moment to moment, when it undergoes the process of being read. It should not be mistaken for the impressionistic responses of the reader, but should be understood as the cognitive analysis of the reading process, resulting from specific and particular elements in the text.



Meaning of the text is not the outcome of what the text says; rather the meaning is the experience of what the text does to one as one reads it. Readers do not merely consume texts passively. Instead they are actively involved in constructing a meaning out of it. Hence the work has no independent existence.

Later Fish shifts the focus from reading as an individual experience to reading as a collective endeavour. Reading for him, always takes place within what he calls “interpretive communities”. All of us who are readers belong to an interpretive community, which is to say that we share the strategies of interpretation that we employ when we read texts.

**2.7** Robert Jauss preferred to see the issue from the point of view of reading and reception. He rejected the aesthetics that valorizes the synchronic over the diachronic. Jauss has proposed the term *horizons of expectations* of a reading public. According to him a literary work must not be seen as a monument, which reveals its timeless essence in a monologue. The focus should be on the changing and diverse responses of the public at large. To him, readers use different criteria to judge the nature of literariness in a text or the genre to which it belongs.

What appeals to one generation of readers at a given period may not interest readers at some other period. No text is universal. Further, readers who come at a later point of time have an access to the response of the earlier generation of readers. Thus out of a cumulative response, there grows an evolving, modifying historical tradition.

So, a present day reader of *Hamlet* has an accumulated knowledge of the play, as a result of its theatre and interpretative history, which an Elizabethan reader could not enjoy. Ultimately everything stems from a dialogue between past and present and thereby creating a fusion of horizons.

### **Translation in the Context of Phenomenology and Reader Response**

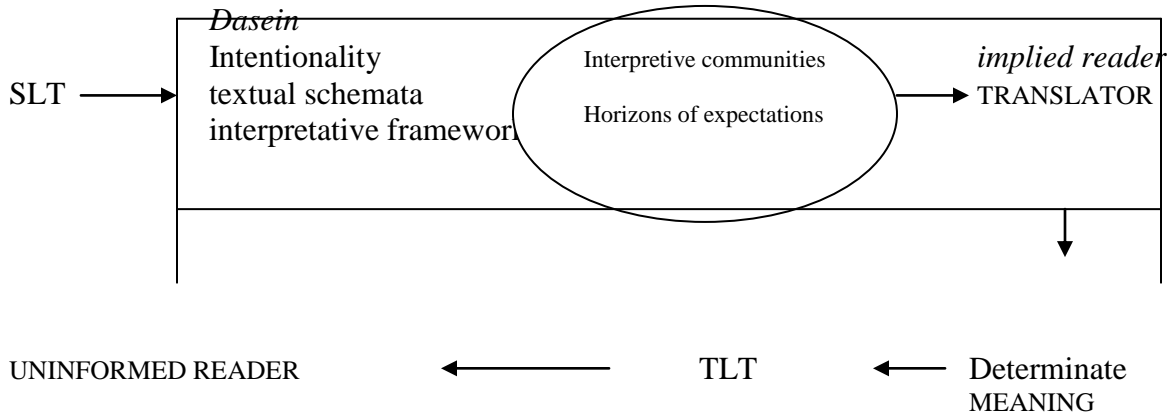
**3.0** The process of translatology reveals that a translator first decodes linguistic symbols, which are the signifiers of the Source Language Text (SLT). The translator is expected to be intimately familiar with every nuance of the symbols of the SLT. He/she should consider the formal aspects of the language, which he/she decides to decode first.

The cultural aspects need also be meticulously considered in the process. From the linguistic point of view the translator should be aware of the syntactic, morphologic, semantic, phonologic and pragmatic aspects of the language. Despite these technical and formal concerns, the author-text-reader relations as explained in the earlier part need restructuring with the introduction of the role of translator. If the reader or the critic is the co-author and if criticism is not an interpretation of the text but an extension of it, is the translator a reader or a specialized reader?



SLT → TRANSLATOR (READER<sup>1</sup>) → TLT → READER<sup>2</sup>

Here the position of the reader acquires special significance in these two levels. The first reader is a specialized reader, the translator who seems to have got firm grip over the theoretical background related to the discipline; whereas, the second reader is represented himself/herself as the ‘consumer’ of the TLT, with no awareness about the multifaceted role of the translator.



In the above given diagrammatic representation, the *indeterminacy* of meaning in a text is **fixed** in the context provided by the ‘intention’, ‘textual schemata’, and ‘interpretative framework’, so as to unravel the *definiteness* of the meaning in the ‘interpretive community’ as well in the ‘horizons of expectations’. The uninformed reader gets the possible meaning from efforts taken by the translator.

### An Illustration from the Translation of *Indulekha*

**4.0** O.Chandumenon’s Malayalam work *Indulekha* (1889) is one of the earliest novels in the language. The setting of the novel is elitist in nature and characters are representatives of the pre-modern period of Kerala. Still, the work seems to attract people of the present generation.

Translation of *Indulekha* in English has helped the readers of other states and abroad to get a glimpse of the colonial social milieu of Kerala. The values represented in the work to some extent are Victorian in spirit. The form of novel was not quite familiar among the society of Kerala.

Chandumenon himself had that apprehension when he wrote this novel. He had admitted in the preface to the novel that he was inspired by Lord Beaconsfield’s novel *Henrietta*

*Temple*. One can see that *Indulekha* was a result of Chandu menon's reading and a failed attempt at translating *Henrietta Temple*.

The reason for the failure of translating the novel is given in the *Preface*.

"I do not think that it is particularly difficult to read a novel and then translate it orally in such a way that close friends of mine who do not know English can understand it reasonably well. On the other hand, I believe it is practically impossible to do a written translation in such a way that they will really grasp the import of the story" (*Indulekha*: 238).

Chandumenon did not believe in complete faithful translation as an effective method. He preferred a translation which supplemented, explained the original thereby the reader got a total picture of the original. But he was also aware that this was possible only in the rendering and narration of the original story and not in actual translation.

"The actual force of an English work can be put across quite well in an extempore rendering because it is possible, even as each incident is being recounted, to supplement the translation with detail, example and commentary, and to draw out the meaning implicit in the words with gesture and tone of voice. If you incorporate such description and commentary into a faithful written translation, there is no doubt that the work will get completely out of hand" (*ibid*).

This led to the actual preparation of Chandu Menon to explore the medium of fiction in the lines of *Henrietta Temple*. The book was published in late 1889 and within one year the second edition came out.

W. Dumergue, the then collector in Malabar and Malayalam translator to the Madras government, brought out the first translation of *Indulekha* in English in 1890.

W. Dumergue, the reader/translator, finds the novel as a resource for colonial administration. *Indulekha*, he writes in his *Preface*, "supplies a distinct want felt by the colonial administrators".

The translation of the book into English had been welcomed by the original author himself. The translator did bring out the then prevailing social milieu as represented in the text. It has to be noted that not much is deleted in the TLT in the process of translation.

Leela Devi's translation of *Indulekha* titled *Crescent Moon* (1979) gave more thrust to the romantic aspect of the novel. She had completely avoided the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter while translating the SLT.

The translation of *Indulekha*, by Anitha Devasia, published in 2005, remains faithful to the original and at the same time shows high amount of sensitivity to colonial/post colonial theoretical studies. “I have tried to remain alert to the cut and thrust of the many historical issues at stake in the text” (*Preface xvii*). In the translation, she has attached as appendices Dumergue’s Preface, Chandumenon’s Memorandum to the Malabar Marriage Commission and The President’s Supplementary Memorandum to the Malabar Marriage Commission. A glossary of select Malayalam words representing the customs of elite sections of the society is also given. This gives the TLT more of a comprehensive nature.

Readers who come at a later point of time, thus, have an access to the response of the earlier generation of readers. The latest venture opened up a dialogue between the past and the present and thereby enabling a fusion of horizons.

### **Conclusion**

It may be noted that the reader/translator crisis or confusion works very much even from the production of the SLT. The reader/translator apparently looks for some framework within which the text is rendered meaningful. W. Dumergue’s interpretative framework has strong moorings on the colonial agenda of perpetuating the British rule. This must have been one of the reasons for the hasty selection of this text for translation.

By the time Leela Devi and Anitha Devasia came up with the translations, the “interpretive communities” gained insightful strategies of interpretation when reading the texts. Readers have access to the response of the earlier generation of readers, hence out of a cumulative response, there grows, as pointed earlier, an evolving, modifying historical tradition which would give definiteness to questions on what to expect and what not to expect.

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