

The Interaction of Text and Context: Radway's 'Reading the Romance'

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In this exposition on Janice Radway's 'Introduction' to the British version of her book *Reading the Romance*¹ I will first very briefly spell out the importance of the introduction and then give a quick summary of Radway's arguments. I will follow this up with an enumeration of the implications of the theoretical position of Radway. Thus, my paper will be in three sections:

Section – I is introductory in nature,

Section – II offers a topic outline of Radway's 'Introduction', and Section – III is overtly a theoretical discussion.

Before I begin, a word about the title of my paper: "The Interaction of Text and Context". I have borrowed this title from the subtitle of Radway's yet another significant study² as it effectively encapsulates what Radway is doing in the new introduction to her classic text and because it draws attention to the reflexive character of her critical endeavour. As I would be reflecting on the significance of this title again in my concluding section, let me now straight away introduce the much-anthologized piece.

Section - I

Janice Radway is an American scholar who currently teaches at Duke University. Before moving to Duke, she taught in the American Civilization Department at the University of Pennsylvania. During her stay at Pennsylvania she undertook what came to be known as "the most extensive scholarly investigation of the act of reading" and resulted in the publication of her seminal book *Reading the Romance* (1984). The book challenges popular and often demeaning myths about why romantic fiction, one of publishing's most lucrative categories, captivates millions of women readers. Among those who have disparaged romance reading are feminists, literary critics, and theorists of mass culture. They claim that romances enforce the woman reader's dependence on men and acceptance of the repressive ideology purveyed by popular culture. Radway questions such claims, arguing that critical attention must shift from the text itself, taken in isolation, to the complex social event of reading." She examines that event, from the complicated business of publishing and distribution to the individual reader's engagement with the text.

Reading the Romance has a political agenda as well. As an American Studies scholar, Radway wanted to expose the culture of patriarchy that pervades modern life in America. Her hope was that if the public is alerted to a problem in cultural life, they will use this knowledge to advocate resistance and social change.

As the book became immensely popular and influential, her publisher wanted to issue a British version of it in 1987 and Radway wrote a long introduction entitled "Reading *Reading*

the Romance" for her British readers. In this new Introduction Radway squarely places the book within the context of current scholarship and offers both an explanation and critique of the study's limitations. More importantly it is an exciting narrative of pains and pleasures of a sustained research work—almost a guideline for doing research in popular culture. Of particular importance to the researchers is the way Radway interacted with her contemporary critical scene and arrived at her provocative approach that combines reader-response criticism with anthropology and feminist psychology.

Section - II

Radway begins by stating what she had set out to do in her book *Reading the Romance*. Her objectives were tripartite:

1. To study the particular nature of the relationship between audiences and texts;
2. To take up specific questions that have preoccupied British feminists and cultural studies scholars in the 1970s, and
3. To reflect on the political implications of reading the romance.

She further clarifies that the book's theoretical argument was directed generally to the American Studies scholars working in the United States, who took literature as their primary object of concern and who had been preoccupied with the question: 'What can a literary text be taken as evidence for?'. As the British readers are likely to read the book more as a contribution to feminist scholarship or to communications studies theory, there are chances of their finding the book's preoccupation with the question of a literary text oblique. Hence Radway describes in detail the context in which her book came into being. This description, incidentally, is also a description of the phases of evolution of cultural studies in America.

The story of culturally oriented scholarship in America goes back to the late 1940s and the early 1950s when the hegemony of New Criticism in American English departments was challenged. The assumptions of New Criticism were challenged in two ways:

If New Criticism insisted on the autonomy of the literary texts, the new generation of scholars wanted their study to include the historical context in which the classic American literary texts were conceived.

1. If New Criticism favoured only the canon of elite literature, the new scholars wanted to include the popular literature produced for and consumed by the "ordinary" Americans.

They argued that the "elite" literature might be taken as evidence for the beliefs of only a particular section of the American population.

Cultural Studies programs in America grew out of this movement. Initially it employed ethnographic methods to make sense of American culture. Culture was defined in anthropological terms, as the whole way of life of a historically and temporarily situated people. However, Marxism played a small role in the turn to ethnography in American Cultural Studies.

Radway began her research against this intellectual quarrel in American academia. She wanted to discover how particular communities actually read particular texts. At the beginning, she focused on ethnographies of reading and conceptualized the project as a response to a set of theoretical questions about literary texts.

As for the evolution of her multi-focused approach, Radway states that she was initially influenced by

1. Marxist literary theory on ideology,
2. Feminist literature and theory, and
3. The assumption formulated by the reader response theorist Stanley

However, she found that the data she collected from the group of 42 romance novel readers went contrary to her assumptions. Radway candidly confesses thus:

"Only when the Smithton women repeatedly told me about the meaning of romance reading as a social even tin a familial context could I see that my study intersected with work being done in Britain."

She was indeed surprised to learn that the women readers constructed the act of reading as a "declaration of independence."

Consequently, she took up this theoretical position:

- (a) "there is no overall intrinsic message or meaning in the work";
- (b) the work "comes alive and communicates when readers add their own interpretations and understandings to the program";and
- (c) "there can be as many interpretations of a text as individual viewers bring to it." However, at times similar readings are produced because similarly located readers learn a similar set of reading strategies and interpretive codes which they bring to bear upon the texts they encounter. It is at this point that Radway gives an account of the way she arrived at the most exciting of her findings. Let me quote her atlength:

I turned to Fish's notion of "interpretive communities" to theorize these regularities and then attempted to determine whether or not the Smithton women operate on romances as an interpretive community. We should remember that Fish tried to account for the differing interpretations in the academic community. But did the Smithton women form an "interpretive community"? They formed a relatively homogeneous group:

they not only gave remarkably similar answers to my questions, they constantly referred to the connection between their reading and their daily social situation as wives and mothers. I theorized that reading romances is related to the notion of "patriarchal marriage."

Cutting her long story short, Radway claims that *Reading the Romance* attempts

- (a) to understand how the Smithton women's social and material situation prepares them to find the act of reading attractive and even necessary;
- (b) to characterize the structure of the particular narratives the women have chosen to engage; and by means of psychoanalytic theory, to explain how and why such a structured "story" might be experienced as pleasurable.

Finally, Radway enumerates the findings of her study based on the social and material situation within which romance reading occurs:

1. The Smithton women saw reading as a way of participating in a large, exclusively female community. For them reading is a way of temporarily refusing the demands associated with their role as wives and mothers and romance reading functioned as a "declaration of independence," as a way of securing privacy while at the same time providing companionship and conversation.
2. The romance readers of Smith tonuse their books to erect a barrier between themselves and their families. The simple act of reading a book serves as a way of declaring themselves off-limits.
3. Romance reading is a form of resistance to a situation predicated on the assumption that women alone are responsible for the care and the emotional nurturance of others. For them, romance reading creates a feeling of hope.
4. The Smithton women felt an intense need to be nurtured and cared for, despite their universal claim to being happily married. Romance reading addressed needs, desires, and wishes that a male partner could not.

Romance reading is a profoundly conflicted activity centred upon a profoundly conflicted form.

Section - III

In the final section I will discuss the implications of the theoretical position of Radway and point to some of the problems in her formulations. Radway herself acknowledges the limitations of her sample size and cautions against using her conclusions as anything more than hypotheses that need to be tested. Yet her study raises issues which merit attention.

Firstly, Radway tends to present herself as an outsider, a kind of ethnographer, which raises questions about objectivity and distance. One such example is the clear distinction which Radway makes between feminism and romance reading. Radway the researcher is a feminist and not a romance fan, the Smithton women, the researched, are romance readers and not feminists. I suspect that this distinction produces a feminist

politics of 'them' and 'us' in which non-feminist women play the role of 'them' to be recruited to the cause. In Radway's insistence that "real" social change can only be brought about if romance readers would stop reading romances and become feminist activists instead the outsider perspective becomes more visible.

Secondly, Radway's view of the romance readers is totally positive. I would say she tends to romanticize Romance reading. While her argument that reading romance novels gives women strategies to cope with a pervasive patriarchy has bearing in feminist psychology, it is hard to imagine the Smith ton women as "subversive" as well. I can cite here one of the research works I conducted with a group of my students on the readers of one of the most popular Kannada woman novelists Triveni and the readers of Vaidehi, arguably the most subversive of Kannada woman writers³. The finding is that even subversive fiction does not necessarily turn the readers subversive. Very often it is consumed without paying any heed to the political implications of the subversion in the narrative.

Thirdly, what ultimate effect has the fantasy resolution on the women who seek it again and again? Does the romance's endless rediscovery of the virtues of passive female sexuality

merely stitch the reader ever more resolutely into the fabric of patriarchal culture? Radway ends with no answer to this question and others related to it.

Let me conclude by coming back to the title of my paper: "The Interaction of Text and Context". Context has been central to critical inquiry right from Plato and Aristotle to the Neo-Marxist criticism. However, in all these cases Context meant the context of literary production. But in Radway's case the Context means the context of literary consumption which is hardly considered in any serious critical debate. Even the Reader Response theorists posit the notion of an "Ideal Reader" which makes the analysis text bound. Radway's method opened up the possibility of investigating the "ActualReader". Hence, she finds the tools of Ethnography and Psychology useful. Today with the dwindling of the reading habit due to the influence of electronic media, romance writing / reading too is becoming a matter of yester years. Yet it is possible to use Radway's methodology to explore the consumption pattern of TV serials and study the nature of the relationship between audiences and serials. If Radway asked what a literary text can be taken as evidence for, today we can ask what a serial can be taken evidence for. Surely the question can take us to the heart of consumer culture.

End Notes

1. *Reading the Romance* (1984) became hugely popular selling more than 30,00 copies. Encouraged by the success of the book in the US, the publishers produced a British version to which Radway added a lengthy 'Introduction' which is an example of meta-criticism. The 'Introduction' is a much-anthologized piece which underlines the importance of the context in the intellectual production including Radway's own 'Introduction'.
2. It is a lengthy article "Women Read the Romance: The Interaction of Text and Context" published in *Feminist Studies* in 1983.
3. This small research surveyed college students who consumed Kannada novels using Radway's experiment as a model under Pathways to Higher Education programme.

Works Cited

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