

**Plurality in Literary Reading:
A Comparative Study of the 'Goodreads' Reviews of
Moustache and *Mama Africa***

Rafid C

The English and Foreign Languages University
(India)

Abstract:

The paper tries to address the plurality of 'literary reading' through a comparative analysis of the Goodreads reviews of *Moustache*. Inspired by Derek Attridge's idea of the 'event of literature', the paper considers a literary 'work' as an event performed in a reader's relation with the 'text'. The same 'text' can be read as different 'works', and each review is about a particular reading which is a 'work'. The differences among these works attest to the plurality of literary reading. Additionally, the paper refers to Attridge's type/token distinction to elaborate on the plurality of the reviews. Also, Maurice Natanson's idea of the 'temporal horizon' of reading helps to explain the commonalities and differences among the reviews. Similarly, each reading is singular as it happens through the 'complicity of a background' (Merleau-Ponty). Apart from the reviews, the paper also analyses the interviews of the author and the translator to see how the understandings about the same 'text' can vary considerably according to the differences in the 'works'. The larger scope of the paper is to present the platform of Goodreads as a nostalgic space that reminds the academics in literary studies about the 'joy of reading literature' which stands in contrast to the 'pleasure of analysing literature'. The openness to pluralities embodies the joy of reading, and then the reader transcends the theoretical endeavours to decode 'a fixed meaning'.

Keywords: Event of Literature, Temporal Horizon, Goodreads, Type, Token

As a textual practice, 'literary reading' has been defined and conceptualised in multiple ways. However, outside academia, literary reading is commonly understood as a joyous activity. And each reader had their own niche in their favourite books – because each reading is a performance of a singular world that is full of new understanding and realisations. So a single text is read in a thousand ways by different readers. The academic approach to literature, on the other hand, is understood as equipped with theoretical analyses, generalisations, and pattern-seeking. And often, the academic reading of literature is designated as a profession, devoid of aesthetic pleasure, performed by a respective specialist in theory. So each theorist competes to decode 'the authentic' and 'actual' meaning of the text. Now, is it possible to reconcile these two worlds demarcated by the distinct approaches to literature? In other words, can the academic structure – which in this case the literary studies departments – accommodate the common reader and her perception of reading as a pleasurable activity constituted in the plurality of meanings? Only a large-scale project with careful consideration of the nuances in different modes of reading will be capable of addressing these questions. However, this paper attempts to address this question from the specific vantage point of literary reviews with a special focus on the 'Goodreads reviews' of the novel *Moustache*.

To begin with, is there a specific framework that accommodates the plurality of literature? If we are trying to describe 'what is a literary work' and 'what does a literary work do', do we have a description that accommodates the plurality of readings as well as the uniqueness of each reading? The first part of the paper is an attempt to form such a description from the existing scholarship in the area. The following part evaluates if the specific description is capable of accommodating the plurality of readings/understandings in Goodreads reviews. Different readers review the same novel differently on Goodreads – and a description of a literary work should be capable of accommodating those differences.

Addressing the first question 'what is a literary work?', the paper argues that literature could be described as an 'event'. So what does 'event' mean in this context? According to Derek Attridge, literature 'comes into being' only in the reader's interaction with the literary work. According to Attridge, a literary work 'comes into being' as an 'event': "we can't identify the work with any particular embodiment in a physical object.... The literary work comes into being only in the event of reading" (Attridge 2015). The 'event of reading' is performative; i.e. it is an act performed by the reader. But we usually use 'work' to refer to the material form of a book (a printed book for example). However, Attridge uses these terms differently. We cannot identify the 'work' with the physical form of a book and the 'work' does not have a material existence; it exists only in the reader's relation with the text that is reading. Whether it be a PDF or a printed book, we cannot call it a 'work'. Instead, 'work' is realised in the act of reading when the reader enters into a specific relation with the text. A 'work' does not exist before the reading; instead, the reader performs a 'work' in the reading. The same book can be read differently by different readers. That is to say that the same book can be read as different 'works' according to multiple perspectives and ways of reading.

Attridge also talks about 'text', which can be any arrangement of words that exists prior to the event. That means the 'text' does not need an event to come into existence. Instead, a reader enters into a relation with the 'text' and performs it as a literary 'work'. In the context of literature, a text can be read as multiple works. For clarity, throughout this paper, I use the term 'work' to refer to a literary work that exists in the interactive event of reading. Also, I use 'text' to refer to any written expressions in language that exist outside the interactive event of literary reading. Also, the word 'literature' is used interchangeably with the 'event of literature'.

The type/token distinction by Attridge will also be relevant to the context of this paper. A text is a 'type' which can have multiple 'tokens' in the form of different works. 'Type' is an abstract idea which refers to the text and 'token' is realised in a particular reading

of the text. Different readings perform different 'tokens' from a single 'type' of text, and the 'type' is an abstract concept which ceases to exist in the absence of tokens. The possibility of innumerable 'tokens' refers to the plurality of potential readings. Each Goodreads review by a reader is a response to the particular 'work' performed by the reader. That means each review is a response evoked by a particular token of the text (type).

Before proceeding to the comparison of different Goodreads reviews, let us have a brief introduction to the novel. The novel *Meesa* (2018) is originally written in Malayalam by S Hareesh, and Jayasree Kalathil translated the work to English with the title *Moustache* (2020). In the novel, protagonist Vavachan belongs to the Pulaya community, a lower caste group in Kerala. At the beginning of the novel, Vavachan gets a chance to play the role of a police officer in a drama. His appearance in the drama with a large moustache terrifies the upper caste audience. As a result, Vavachan is banished from the community for refusing to shave. He becomes an outcast, wandering in swamps and deserted areas. The story takes on a surreal edge as Vavachan's moustache grows and covers the earth like a thicket. He becomes the bane of the upper class and the government officially forms a commission to hunt him down. As the government officials attempt to track Vavachan, the story unfolds with strange and thought-provoking events.

The character of Vavachan is nuanced. A reader can argue that the character is an archetype of the oppressed and down-trodden. Can we understand the character as a lower-caste hero who resists the caste equations? Or does he transcend/reverse the hierarchies in the creation of an alternative social structure? Can we say that the hero exhibits epic qualities in his fight with the cast-ridden system? Each of these perspectives could be one reading among different readings which embody different perspectives on the central character. And a book review website is a place where these multiple perspectives coexist and converse. Also, book reviews are understood as subjective opinions of respective readers in contrast to critical analysis which looks for generalisable theories

and 'the meaning' in the work. A critical analysis could impose a subaltern identity on the hero and 'prove' the claim by using instances from the text. Whereas a book review does not claim the actual meaning of the text. Instead, in most cases, a book review admits that the review is from a particular perspective which coexists with other reviews. So the practice of book reviews, as in the case of Goodreads, inherently embodies the plurality of readings. Here I am attempting a comparative analysis of different 'Goodreads' reviews of the novel *Moustache*.

Some reviews contain a direct assertion of the multiplicity of readings and perspectives. A review from the user id Chitra Ahantem (2020) emphasises the plurality of meanings: "So then, is the book about the social and caste system? Or about the socio-cultural history of the Kuttanad region? Or the hardships faced by people in a region faced by yearly floods and hard labour? Is it about the lack of agency for women... *Moustache* is all of these and more..." Most of the reviews on Goodreads mention the issue of caste, the representation of women, and the portrayal of the landscape. The overlap in the themes means that most of the readers have a common interest in certain themes.

The overlap in the reviews could be explained in terms of the shared nature of the 'temporal horizon'. Maurice Natanson introduced the idea to refer to the reader's consciousness of the past which gets enacted in the event of reading. The concept is about "Bringing forth the past and charting the associations that reading unleashes" (Natanson, 1998). A shared horizon of knowledge including a shared sense of the past can result in common understandings and common 'readings'. However, the possibility of commonalities does not limit the plurality of readings. Any reader can have an understanding that is different from 'the common understanding' of a particular novel. That is to say that different 'works' of 'text' can have common elements, and despite the common elements, a new work can present a completely different perspective.

For example, most of the reviewers comment that the novel is focusing on social issues. This can be considered as an understand-

ding that is common to different 'tokens' of the text. However, a reader can also have a reading which undermines the social relevance. For example, the user 'Kidliomag' (2020) comments on the book: "Book totally focused on the social issues like gender roles, caste based politics, rich-poor dynamics and different communities belongs to Kerala". Many other reviews also included similar comments about the 'total focus' on social issues. However, do all readers agree with the novel's focus on social issues? Not necessarily; as 'Chinar Mehta' (2021) says, the novel could be read as a fairy tale as well: "That said, it was still a book I would recommend to someone who, above all, likes STORIES, especially those that read like fairytales". The emphasis on the fairytale aspect of the novel is a departure from the social focus mentioned by other readers. Another reader with the username Kelvin has a satirical take on the excess of fantasy in the work: "pure example for writer on weed;)... a fiction – fantasy rather". We could argue that these readings or 'tokens' disrupt the possibility of a single and authentic understanding.

Another academic exercise is to impose categories and create patterns about different readings. For example, a 'theorist' could say that women read a particular novel in a particular way. The readers are categorised based on their gender identities and then their readings are arranged accordingly. In the case of previous reviews, let's see if it is possible 'to categorise' the readers into two; as those who focus on the social aspects and those who focus on the elements of fantasy. Such an approach will be problematic because each reader in the category of 'readers who mentioned social realities' reads the respective social representations differently. The same applies to the category of readers who read the novel as a fantasy. For example, many readers disagree with the way the novel has portrayed women. Anyhow, as each reading is different from the other, the reader's understanding concerning the women characters in the novel also varies. A Goodreads user 'Praveen' (2021) says that "some of the parts can be a hard read too" because "the horrific rape of Seetha or the many scenes that represent toxic

masculinity, with the author presenting it with a detached eye". Whereas 'Amanda' (2021) opines that calling the novel 'anti-woman' would be an "understatement" because "The female characters in the book rarely have any sort of developed personality, and most (all?) of them faced one or both of two ends: rape or murder". In contrast to Praveen's claim that the toxic masculine representations are limited to certain parts of the novel, 'Amanda' comments that sexism is present "throughout the narrative". Considering that the user name 'Amanda' could be a woman, can we make a general argument that all women dislike the novel because of the sexism that is present 'throughout the narrative'? The argument sets an a priori rule that all women by definition of their gender identity will read the novel similarly. However, despite the shared identity as women, each 'woman reader' is situated in a singular context which is different from other 'women readers'. Hence reviews by female readers differ considerably in their response to the novel's representation of women. For example Ritu (2020), in her blog 'Bohemian Bibliophile' talks about the issue: "The lack of agency for women and the way abuse and rape is depicted in the book is disturbing. Although I did not have an issue, some might struggle with the cultural aspects of the book." For Ritu, the 'sexism' of the novel is understood as a 'disturbing' 'cultural aspect'. However, does the singularity of reading imply that each reading is totally distinct from other readings?

First, a reader reads a text in a context of ideas and perspectives as Merleau-Ponty says; we could perceive things only "through the complicity of a background" (Ponty, 1973). Though each reader is situated in a unique world of ideas and perspectives, certain understandings are shared among different readers. For example, a set of readers who attend the same feminism course will have a shared understanding of gender issues and sexism. However, each reader will also have perspectives and ideas that are different from other readers. The differences in perspectives along with the shared understandings constitute a singular 'background' for each reader. And the 'background' of perception is not static; so when

the same reader reads the same work for a second time, she is reading the work differently because the background is different from the first time. It is interesting to contextualise these differences in a conversation between the author of *Moustache* S. Hareesh and translator Jayasree Kalathil. Referring to the aforementioned discussions about the rape of Seetha and the assertion of toxic masculinity, Jayasree Kalathil says:

This story can't be told in sanitised terms.... *Moustache* is a masculine world with atrocious people doing atrocious things. But it is never gratuitous. Hareesh's entire project in *Moustache*, as I read it, is to unearth the toxicity of masculinity that flourishes within patriarchal systems of power and expose its impact on women, Dalits, and nature (Susan, 2020).

Kalathil's take on the issue could be viewed as a reflection of the translator's limitations in tackling the sexism of the narrative. However, Hareesh has a different perspective on the character of Vavachan: "Vavachan rapes a woman. He also lives through bad times; he is a man of contradictions" (Susan, 2020). For Hareesh, the emphasis is on the portrayal of Moustache as a round character with contradictions and complexities. This tendency is obvious when he says "my pleasure lies in hearing and telling stories.... Leave the characters to their own whims" (Susan, 2020). Despite both Kalathil and Hareesh having a 'shared understanding' of the novel as a result of their mutual interactions, they considerably differ in their 'readings' of the novel. The difference in the readings would attest to the 'background' of perception which is singular to each reading.

The second novel considered in the paper is *Mama Africa* (2019) by T.D. Ramakrishnan. Unlike the previous novel we discussed, *Mama Africa* is not yet translated from Malayalam to English. So all available Goodreads reviews are written by the Malayali readers of the novel. The plot revolves around the protagonist Tara Vishwanath who is an African author of Indian origin.

A reader can find the novel as a soup of fictional, surreal, and historical elements. Also, a reader can yield a comparison between *Moustache* and *Mama Africa* in terms of the nature of the protagonists, elements of fantasy, and the exploration of geography. The reviews of *Mama Africa* also refer to the differences in 'readings'. A comment from the Goodreads user id 'Aswathi Babu' (2022) claims that the women protagonists by TD Ramakrishnan, including Tara Vishwanath, are symbolic of courageous women. However, in the opinion of 'Nandakishore Mridula' (2019), Tara is comparable to the 'damsel in distress archetype of characters from early Malayalam movies. In different 'tokens' of the text, the same character is understood differently.

Apart from the comments on the protagonist, the readers also have different takes on the style of writing. 'Deepak V' (2019) praises the author's writing style in the novel *Francis Ittikora* but criticises the style of *Mama Africa* because 'it has come down to the level of a pulp fiction'. He also criticises the depiction of historical incidents in the novel as they resemble Wikipedia entries in terms of language and style. Whereas 'Hareesh Kakkanatt' (2021), who gave a five-star rating for the novel, exalts the author's writing style which made him feel the setting including the weather of Kilimanjaro mountains. 'Dr Jeevan KY' (2020) agrees that he felt like trekking the mountain of Kilimanjaro while reading the novel. However, 'Sanu Mayyanad' (2022), who rated the novel with a single star, shares a long review pointing out the historical and stylistic contradictions in the novel. Also, he argues that the protagonist Tara was inspired by the protagonist from Madhavikkutti's *My Story*, which also carries notable contradictions. Conclusively, we can say that multiple 'works' of the novel *Mama Africa* embody remarkable differences. And our understanding of literature should be capable of accommodating these pluralities and differences.

The paper was an attempt to demonstrate the possibility of realising the plural nature of literary reading through the comparative analysis of the book reviews in Goodreads. The analysis of the reviews will help in understanding the nature of 'literary

reading'. As a practice, literary reading is an event in which the reader performs the 'text' as a 'work'. As a popular medium for literature enthusiasts, Goodreads reviews might help students of literature to rethink the role of theories. Like a review, any theoretical reading is also presenting a perspective among a multitude of possible perspectives. And there is no 'correct reading' or 'authentic meaning'. Perhaps, like this, we the students of literature can figure out a way to reconcile with the lovers of literature within us.

References:

- Attridge, D. (2015). *The Work of Literature* [Print]. Oxford University.
- Hareesh, S., & Kalathil, J. (2018). *Moustache: A Novel* [Print]. Harper Collins.
- Mama Africa*. (n.d.). Goodreads.
<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/46019918-mama-africa>
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1973). *The Prose of the World* (C. Lefort, Ed.; J. O'Neill, Trans.). Northwestern University.
- Moustache*. (n.d.). Goodreads.
https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/50145773-moustache?ref=nav_sb_ss_3_9
- Natanson, M. (1998). *The Erotic Bird: Phenomenology in Literature* [Print]. Princeton University.
- R. (2020, December 22). *Moustache by S. Hareesh, Jayashree Kalathil (Translator) Book Review*. Bohemian Bibliophile.
<https://bohemianbibliophile.com/moustache-by-s-hareesh-jayashree-kalathil-translator-book-review/>
- Ramakrishnan, T. D. (2016). *Mama Africa* [Print]. D.C Books.
- Susan, R. (2020, November 21). *How 'Moustache' Came To Life: Author S. Hareesh And Translator Jayasree Kalathil Tell Their Story*. HuffPost.
<https://www.huffpost.com/archive/in/entry/jcb-prize-s-hareesh-jayasree-kalathil-moustache-meesha-book-in-5fb8970ec5b62517bdbd9f8c>