Deriving meanings out of a fictional text: Analyzing readers' performance of a narrative in India by using a mental models approach

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Abstract:
Explicating the metaphor of narrative performance, this exploratory study uses a mental models theoretical framework to analyze how readers interpret meaning out of a text by bringing in their experiences and worldview. Narrative performance, derived from audience-centric perspectives such as reader-response criticism, is a process by which readers generate emotional responses to a narrative and construct mental models that are unique and dynamic, and that aid in their absorption in the story. In this study, participants in India read a fictional story, drew story-related pictures that represented their mental models, and participated in in-depth interviews to explain their drawings and engagement with the story. Using diagrammatic-oral technique of mental models extraction, this study examined Indian readers' narrative performance that entailed a commentary of the real-life implications of the work and their own inferential responses to the text. Readers equated fictional story-world with the real-world to make the narrative relevant to their lives and they went beyond the narrative to add elements into their mental models.

Keywords: narrative performance, audience engagement, narrative processing, mental models, India

In a popular culture dominated by a highly successful film industry (Bollywood), how much do reading books and stories captivate Indian audiences? The country that produces the world's highest number of films annually also has the world's highest number of fiction and non-fiction readers (Kellogg, 2013) with an average 10 hours 42 minutes reading done per person per week. The literary culture of reading has steadily grown in India in the last few decades. Coinciding with the growth in literacy (74.5% literacy rate as per 2011 census vs.

65% in 2001 census), India now has over 9000 publishers serving the needs of 1.3 billion people with a print book market estimated to be worth $3.9 billion (Dasgupta, 2016). India is also the third largest producer of fictional novels after US and the UK (Yesapogu & Kandula, 2016). Post-liberalized India is producing stories from home-grown authors like Chetan Bhagat who wrote novels that were adapted into commercially successful films. While readership of digital books remains low because of low Internet penetration at just 19%, print readership, unlike the West, shows a growth trajectory (Dasgupta, 2016).

The growth in fiction readership in India began during the colonial rule in the nineteenth century and since then both English language and Indian language publications have enjoyed popularity (Gupta, 2012). Linguistic, religious, racial and cultural diversity in India has provided enormous scope for writers to explore various themes including historical, cultural, philosophical, and gender issues that has resulted in a rich tradition of fictional storytelling (Yesapogu & Kandula, 2016). Indian fiction readers have come to appreciate culturally grounded and realistic narratives that resonate with their lived experiences (Rajaram, 2018).

However, despite a strong literary culture, little research has gone into analyzing how (and why) these Indian texts engage readers. How are these readers connecting with the story-characters and story-plots? How much of their own lives do these readers see in the characters created by the author? To explore readers' meaning-making processes from reader-centric perspectives, this paper analyzes readers' performance of a fictional narrative by using a mental models approach.

Narrative Engagement

Narratives are symbolic representations of real or fictive events that help in shaping people's worldview (Appel & Richter, 2007; Green & Brock, 2000; Hoeken & Sinkeldam, 2014; Slater Rouner & Long, 2006). People comprehend their lives and the world around them in terms of ongoing narratives that have identifiable characters, a beginning, a middle and an end (Fisher, 1987). While consuming popular narratives such as novels, films or TV shows, readers get engaged in story plots and form relationships with story characters (Slater & Rouner, 2002).

From a reader-response criticism perspective, readers are active agents who impart real existence to any literary work and complete its meaning through interpretation (Iser, 1978). Readers play a crucial role in interpreting narratives as they bring with them a repertoire of their existing knowledge that enables them to experience varied emotions while consuming these narratives (Bruner, 1987; Fisher, 1987; Oatley, 1995). Accordingly, a reception perspective conceptualizes audiences as active and texts as indeterminate, and meaning is viewed as belonging to neither a text nor a reader. The notion here is that meaning is something that is constituted in a text-reader interaction (Barbatsis, 2004).

To explain readers' engagement with a narrative, Gerrig (1993) uses two metaphors: transportation (which resulted in Green & Brock's (2000) transport imagery model) and performance. Narrative transportation refers to readers' involvement with a narrative under

which readers are engrossed in the narrative and temporarily conflate the story world with the real world. Gerrig (1993) states that this traveling into the story world (transportation) begins after readers have constructed a narrative world by merging their real-world knowledge with the description provided by the author; as Gerrig asserts, readers are 'transported by a narrative by performing that narrative' (1993: 2). Readers perform a narrative by drawing on knowledge-based inferences that fill in the gaps and aid in narrative comprehension, and by making non-inferential or participatory responses to a narrative that include affective reactions, evaluation of characters, and implicating self while processing a narrative (Gerrig, 1993). By performing a narrative, readers travel into a world created by them and not necessarily created by the author.

Gerrig derives the metaphor of narrative performance from active audiences' perspectives such as reader-response criticism, and states that performance of a narrative is a reader's own participation in an unfolding of a narrative. Narrative performance, as explicated by Gerrig, constitutes readers' emotional reactions to a narrative and is manifested in the construction of mental representations of a narrative in reader's working memory. Gerrig equates readers' construction of the narrative world with a performance as the construction of a narrative world entails readers' judgment of the text in which the readers bring their own experiences and real-world knowledge to weave a unique story world.

In cognitive and psychological approaches, mental models are mental representations of the text that readers form to comprehend a narrative (Johnson-Laird, 2006; Jones et al., 2011). Gerrig claims his idea of the construction of a narrative world to be like that of construction of mental models as both these concepts 'circumscribe similar theoretical claims' (1993: 11). Just as readers need to employ their judgment and real-world experiences to perform a narrative, they need to go beyond the text itself to construct a mental model (Bower & Morrow, 1990; Gerrig, 1993; Johnson-Laird, 2006).

Readers' active participation in processing of a narrative, however, has received inadequate scholarly attention in the communication and media studies literature as scholars who have studied narrative processing have focused almost exclusively on the transportation metaphor to the exclusion of the performance metaphor (Escalas, 2007; Van Laer et al., 2014). To study the persuasive effects of stories, researchers frequently pay attention to the extent to which readers are transported (Gerrig, 1993; Green & Brock, 2000), absorbed (Slater & Rouner, 2002), or engaged (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009) in the story world and have found that the more that readers are swept up into the story-world, the more they will be influenced by story beliefs (Green & Brock, 2000) and will counter-argue less about story messages (Slater & Rouner, 2002). By studying readers' performance of a narrative, this paper focuses on active audience participation in narrative processing, and their construction of distinct narrative worlds (mental models). The following section explains the mental models theoretical framework and its applicability in narrative processing research.

Mental Models: The construction of narrative worlds

Mental models, as mental representations of the story characters and settings, integrate information from the text with broader real-world knowledge of the readers (Bower & Morrow, 1990; Johnson-Laird, 2006). Gerrig (1993: 11) states that his idea of construction of a narrative world is similar to that of the construction of mental or situation models as both these concepts 'circumscribe similar theoretical claims'. Just as readers need to employ their judgment and real-world experiences to perform a narrative, they need to go beyond the text itself to construct a mental model (Bower & Morrow, 1990; Gerrig, 1993). Mental models can also sometime require readers to draw inferences and readers may draw from their prior knowledge to add information to these models that are not presented in the original text (Neihaus & Young, 2014).

In explaining the distinction between narrative and narrative world, Gerrig (1993) relies on a distinction between propositional models and situation (mental) models. While in propositional models readers extract the basic meaning of the text, in situation models readers capture the essence of the text and not just the text itself (Bower & Morrow, 1990). Similarly, narrative worlds encapsulate the essence of the narrative as understood by the readers, and not just the narrative itself. Both mental models and Gerrig's notion of narrative world require participation by the readers in constructing these worlds that are unique to their understanding of the text. Furthermore, Sharma (2016) found that readers construct a variety of mental models that depict various elements of story, and found a link between identification with story characters and their depiction in readers' mental model drawings. Studying the performance metaphor from a mental models approach, thus, becomes imperative given the similar underlining theoretical basis of both these concepts. A growing body of literature across disciplines highlights the usefulness of a mental models approach in studying people's beliefs and attitudes. Scholars studying risk communication (Morgan et al., 2002), natural resource management (Jones et al., 2011), advertising and marketing (Devinney, Dowing & Collins, 2005), and early childhood education (Vosniadou & Brewer, 1992) have successfully integrated the mental models approach in examining how audiences process information.

Narrative Performance

Reader-response criticism places readers at the center of interpreting meaning out of a text. Scholars such as Wolfgang Iser considered the interpretation of a literary text as a performance and stated that literary texts initiate performances of meaning rather than formulating meanings themselves (Iser, 1978). According to Iser, a literary work had two sides: artistic (created by the author) and esthetic (realization accomplished by the reader). Iser emphasized that readers' realization of a text is different from that created by the author. Reception theorists such as Stuart Hall (2001) argued that while a producer encoded the text in by providing messages and values in the media, readers (audiences) decoded it by interpreting the text and extracting meanings out of the text. Hall asserted that readers

can decode the text by either adopting a dominant position (that which resonates with the author's view), an oppositional position (an opposite view that of the author) or a negotiated position (a middle ground between the dominant and the oppositional view). According to this perspective, demographic differences like age, gender, race, ethnicity, etc. could bring about differences in message interpretation by different readers.

According to Gerrig (1993), readers perform a narrative by making narrative inferences and participatory (non-inferential) responses. Narrative inference is a process in which readers bridge the gaps in a narrative by making knowledge-based inferences that are based on a story's description (Graesser, Singer & Trabasso, 1994) and add information not present in the story to their mental representations of the narrative ((Bezdak, Foy & Gerrig, 2013; Neihaus & Young, 2014). In this process readers make educated guesses about the unfolding of a narrative and draw inferences about character's or characters' goals and actions (Neihaus & Young, 2014; McKoon & Ratcliff, 1992). Inferences can be on-line and off-line; online inferences are generated during comprehension while off-line inferences are generated during a later retrieval task (Graesser, Singer & Trabasso, 1994). Readers draw inferences as soon as they begin reading, and some of these inferences are automated and do not require a lot effort on the part of the reader (McKoon & Ratcliff, 1992).

Participatory responses are expressions of people's emotional reactions to a narrative (Bezdak, Foy & Gerrig, 2013). Readers generate participatory responses during comprehension that arise because of involvement in the text, and these responses are represented in readers' mental representations. Being emotional responses to narrative, these can be in the form of affective conceptual and evaluative responses to a story (Bezdek et al., 2013; Polichak & Gerrig, 2002). Non-inferential responses do not serve to fill the gaps in a story, but these often function to enrich the emotional and aesthetic aspects of the narrative world (Gerrig, 1993). Inferential and non-inferential responses may or may not be generated exclusively as some readers may make both these responses simultaneously (Polichak & Gerrig, 2002).

Polichak and Gerrig provided a preliminary taxonomy of participatory-responses by analyzing related literature and include affective responses, replotting, problem-solving, and evaluative responses as the basic participatory-responses that readers could generate. While affective replotting and problem-solving responses are limited to the experience of the narrative, evaluative responses go beyond the narrative itself and reflect readers' evaluation of the narrative's general messages (Polichak & Gerrig, 2002: 79). The fundamental participatory responses that a reader makes are the affective responses wherein a reader has a liking or a disliking for certain characters or story situations. The more involved readers of a narrative will begin to participate in a narrative in the form of problem-solving where they will have a goal in mind and will focus their attention on the ways that these goals are met. Readers, in other words, demonstrate their preference for certain outcomes. In replotting (especially significant in suspense narratives), readers will take a retrospective look at the story and begin reiterating how things took place (Gerrig, 1993). Readers will participate in a narrative by making evaluative responses in which story

outcomes and judgments will begin to influence readers' beliefs about the world and how they ought to behave in the real world (Polichak & Gerrig, 2002).

Bezdak et al. (2013) provided direct evidence of participatory-responses generated by film viewers by recording verbal responses of the viewers as they watch short films. The study collected data using a think-aloud method and expanded on the taxonomy originally listed by Polichak & Gerrig (2002). Significantly, Bezdak et al. (2013) added self-projection (self-implication) positive and negative evaluation of characters and story situation and outcome preference to the potential list of p-responses generated during experiencing a narrative. Implication of the self or self-referencing is a way in which an individual processes information by relating it to oneself or to personal experiences (Burnkrant & Unnava, 1995). Kuiken, Maill and Sikora (2004) state that literary reading has the capacity to implicate self as readers use metaphors and similes in their reading experiences. Implication of self while processing narrative thus is yet another way in which readers can perform a narrative.

Based on Gerrig's explanation, this paper makes the following theoretical assumptions about narrative performance:

1) Readers play an active role in the construction of a narrative world by interpreting a text in their own way;
 2) Narrative performance comprises inferential and non-inferential or participatory responses.

Fiction readers in India

Since ancient times, India has enjoyed a rich literary tradition. Though India is home to some of the world's oldest texts such as the *Vedas* and epics like *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, modern Indian literature charts its trajectory from the early days of the British rule. Indian fiction readership has grown steadily since the nineteenth century, as much of the fiction reading during colonial era had been the import of British fiction novels to India as a part of the colonial strategy to make Indians read, think and behave like the British (Joshi, 1998). Joshi (1998) asserts that unlike the British, however, the Indian readers sought out gothic, melodramatic, and sensational novels – the literary work that was closer to Indian literature and mythological tales before the pre-British era. This difference in the literary preference of Indian readers from the British subverted the colonial agenda of intellectual conversion in their colony (Joshi).

During the colonial period, scholars bifurcate India's literary scene into two separate groups: the first generation writers and the second generation writers (Yesapogu & Kandula, 2016). The first generation writers (nineteenth century writers) wrote to depict Indian culture positively to the Western audience – their readership was primarily Europeans. The second generation writers (early 20th century) used literature to dramatize and popularize the suffering of Indians under the colonial rule, and also to highlight the problems within the Indian society (Yesapogu & Kandula, 2016). While authors tried to evoke intense emotions toward 'Mother India' and vociferously advocated for India's independence, it was during

this time period that an examination and realistic portrayal of Indian society gained emphasis. The focus, thus, shifted from mythological tales to the portrayal in realism of Indian society as writers such as Premchand occasionally drew inspiration from contemporary social settings that entailed an exploration of class, caste, socio-economic status and the role of women within society.

During this period, women and their role in society also drew writers' attention though the story plots in fictional novels largely reflected the traditional patriarchal Indian society (Dutta, 1990). Dutta notes that most of the fictional characters during early twentieth century mimicked women's role in real-life – of a dutiful daughter, a meek wife, and a self-sacrificing mother. After examining half a dozen novels written in early 1900s, Dutta (1990: 84) questions the 'glorification of motherhood' in these works, where women are often depicted as progenitors while their individuality and aspirations are neglected. So much so, Dutta suggests, that woman in many of these fictional novels do not have control over their bodies, and their social status is determined by how many sons they can produce. Dutta asserts that this veneration 'places the virtuous self-abnegating mother in an exalted position while depriving her of real power – of control over material resources and of rights over her children'.

While the condition of women remains contentious in contemporary Indian society, Indian authors (in novels such as Mulk Raj Anand's *Gauri,* Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many* Hungers, and RK Narayan's *The Dark Room)* have pointed to an Indian woman's need to redefine herself by challenging the cultural and psycho-biological myths about motherhood which women have internalized (Dutta, 1990). The real-life expectations of women and their portrayal in fiction continues to draw scholarly attention in India today as the economic landscape shifts in the 21st century (Lau, 2010). Lau notes that while more independent and single women have joined the workforce in recent decades, women perform a challenging cultural balancing act to defend ever greater levels of personal autonomy, while maintaining their place within their families. Most often, in fiction today, women are portrayed as struggling to maintain a balance between their individuality and their traditional roles (Lau, 2010).

As leisure readers in India continue to increase, the regional language fiction and English-language fiction have simultaneously grown (Gupta, 2012). Though writers now are exploring various themes and increasingly targeting rural and urban youth, award-winning author Mimi Mondal states that Indian readers still largely read 'realist fiction' where culturally-rooted characters progress the plot (Rajaram, 2018). According to Monini (2018), realism is overall less dependent on dynamic plot progression, and Indian readers do not like the fantasy world of sci-fi stories. Thus, the themes revolving around family, society, culture and education continue to dominate the Indian fiction landscape.

Despite a rich history of fiction readership in India, along with a continuing surge in publications, little attempt has been made to understand how readers in India process information contained in fiction. Given the preference of Indian readers for consuming realistic and culturally relevant tales, it is plausible that Indian readers construct their story-

worlds based around their everyday lives. However, since each of us have different life experiences, an exploration of readers' mental models would indicate what attracts each reader in a fictional story and why. More specifically, it would be worth analyzing how contemporary readers reflect on the recurring themes of gender role and socio-economic struggles within the Indian society. Thus, the narrative performance of these readers might reflect their personal narratives associated with the text as well as a projection of real life in the models.

Research questions

This study explores the metaphor of narrative performance by identifying different dimensions of performance in readers' mental model drawings along with their interview data. Prior studies have used participants' drawings as representative mental models to understand how readers' process information (Kurnaz, Kildan & Berat, 2013). This study poses the following research questions:

> 1) How, if at all, are the inferential and non-inferential (participatory-responses) responses reflected in readers' depiction of their mental models?
>
> 2) How do readers implicate their selves while relating with the story? Do they deploy personal experiences when processing the text?
>
> 3) How, if at all, do readers go beyond the fictional narrative to analyze real-life events connected to the narrative? Do readers comment on Indian society and its issues while reading the narrative?

Methodology

Sixteen adults, nine females and seven males, aged 21-67 consented to participate in the study in Chandigarh (India). Participants were recruited in a public location and participants volunteered to be interviewed in a public park. A large Western University's Institutional Review Board in the US approved the project. First, each participant read a piece of fiction (a 6500-words long short-story in Hindi) without illustrations, reading which took an average 40 minutes. Participants received a printed copy of the short story to read at their own pace. None had read the story previously. Participants' mental models were extracted using a diagrammatic-oral interview procedure (Jones et al., 2014) in which participants represented their mental models, visually drawing them immediately after reading the story, and then explained their drawings in open-ended semi-structured interview sessions. Participants did not receive any cues about what they could draw. After finishing the drawing each participant answered questions in semi-structured in-depth open-ended interview in Hindi (Interview Guide: Appendix A). Participants answered questions about their drawings and different themes that they identified in the story. Interviews were audio-taped, translated into English, and then transcribed. Interviews averaged about 45 minutes

each. This study is a secondary analysis of the original data. The first study examined readers' mental models in depth and commented on the different elements found in these models (Sharma, 2016). While the first paper only looked at character identification and their representation in readers' mental models, this paper analysis different dimensions of readers' narrative performance.

Data Analysis: This study uses constant comparative analysis to code and analyze the data. Constant comparative analysis involves systematic comparison of units of study, in this study; units of study here include participants' drawings and their interview data. Thus in interview research, the researcher would begin analysis during the first stage of data (conducting the first interview in this study) gathering through the use of memo writing and would continue subjecting all the data collected to microscopic analysis. In this method, data collection and data analysis occur simultaneously throughout the duration of the study (Kolb, 2012). The purpose of this analysis is to note similarities and differences that enable inductive coding and generate concepts, categories, and theories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987).

Coding: In constant comparative method, coding involves three levels of analysis: a) open coding, b) axial coding, and c) selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Following this method, I systematically compared the data and continued asking questions about what was there and what was missing. In the second stage of axial coding, I drew connections between different categories by asking questions and relating subcategories to a main category. I analyzed the participants' drawings in two ways: by looking at the drawings individually, and by examining the interview data to analyze inferential and participatory responses generated after they read the text. In the third stage of coding (selective coding), I chose the core categories pertaining to narrative performance and connected those with the other similar and competing categories. Data collection and analysis was done until saturation was reached and no new categories emerged.

Stimulus Text: Participants read a Hindi short story, 'Suhaginey' *(Married women)*, written by Mohan Rakesh. This piece of fiction, with its gripping narrative and realistic portrayal, was chosen as it has several characters (males, females, and children) and portrays different relationships and emotions, thus enabling readers to connect with the story and its characters, and enable them to generate varied reactions. The plot primarily revolves around the relationship between two female characters from dramatically opposite backgrounds and financial conditions. The story, however, depicts how their lives are interconnected and how deeply they are emotionally similar in their relationships. The lead character, Manorama, works as a school principal; her housemaid Kashi is a poor and uneducated woman. While Manorama is professionally successful and is authoritative within the school premises, her wish for motherhood remains unfulfilled due to the reluctance of her husband to have children. Manorama lives separately from her husband so that she can earn a decent income to support her husband's family. During the story, it is depicted that Manorama increasingly gets frustrated with this arrangement and yearns for a child of her own. Her isolation and her dream of having a baby pervade the story. On the

other hand Kashi, while she has three kids, is steeped in poverty. Kashi's husband – Ayodhya – has abandoned her and still beats her up regularly. Despite her problems, Kashi remans a good and a committed servant. Parts of the story are also captured from the perspective of Kunti, Kashi's ten years old daughter, who regularly sees domestic violence at home and is trying hard to make sense of her domestic situation. Even though posturing an authoritative exterior, Manorama appears emotionally helpless and ultimately depends on Kashi and her family for an emotional connection. The story ends with Manorama taking a stand to not send any more money to her husband and rather giving it to Kashi to support her children. The themes of motherhood, poverty and women's position in society are explored in this story. This story is written in third-person.

Results

As new data (in the form of drawings and interview transcripts) emerged, an initial analysis revealed that each drawing was distinct and contained different elements from the story. As initial coding began, both the similarities between the drawings and their unique features highlighted the variations in readers' mental models. The drawing data were then analyzed alongside each participant's corresponding interview data to identify how each reader connected with the story and to consider why they drew different elements in their models.

For example, the first drawing (**Figure 1**) depicted no human character, no emotions and nothing much to suggest what the story plot might be. Rather, it contained mountains and trees with a vague summary of readers' thoughts written on the drawing (Translated: *Destiny and its helplessness*). In this drawing, Participant 1(a 67-years old male, retired government official) focused more on the geographical location of the story and did not identify strongly with any of the story characters.

His performance of the narrative, however, entailed his juxta-positioning the names of real places onto a narrative that was completely fictional. The descriptions of trees, mountains, natural surroundings, etc. reminded him of real places that he had visited years ago. He labeled his drawing with the names of all the real places he could think of while reading the story. During the one-on-one interview, the participant explained:

> The story reminded me of the neighbouring town: 'Chamba.' I think, it must be Chamba, as it is near 'Pathankot' (the only name mentioned in the story). Here, I have drawn river Raavi (the name of the river is not mentioned in the story). When I started reading this story, I immediately started thinking about the location of the school, the setting of the story… Ayudhya (Kashi's husband) is based in Pathankot. So the story must be set around Chamba region. There is a river near this school. While I was reading, I thought it must be river Raavi. That's the river near Chamba region. I have been to that area a lot of times in my youth. I remember the chilly mountain breeze in the mornings. The writer here mentions that. It's so refreshing. I don't know why the writer did not provide any real names of places in the story.

He however said that he did not experience any connection with the story characters or the story plot. 'Well, the characters are all sad and despondent. I am not like that. It is a women-centric subject. I found it interesting but it is very different from me personally.'

While this participant's connection with the story characters and story situations remained weak, he generated a lot of inferential responses that helped him make informed guesses about the narrative setting. He added elements in his mental model that are not originally present in the text (e.g., real names of places). As evident in his mental model drawing, none of the story characters are represented as a focus of this reader's attention as he was more preoccupied with the solving the puzzle of the geographical location of the story. He however summarized the text by writing 'Destiny and its helplessness,' confirming the despondency he spotted in the story. Yet, the drawing itself presented a rather picturesque location.
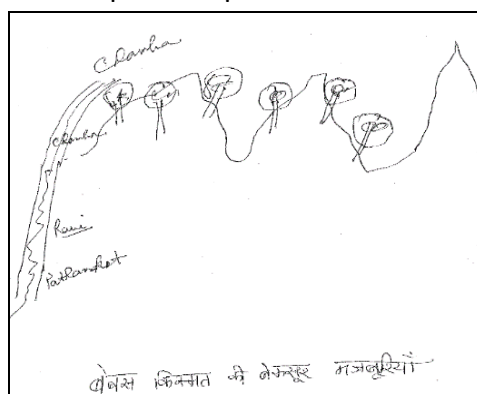

Figure 1

Contrasting this interpretation is the performance by Participant 2 (a 62-year old female, a retired high school teacher who lives with her husband and two grown up sons). Her mental model drawing centered around Kashi's suffering family. Kashi's wailing children and her dominant and violent husband Ayudhya featured prominently in her mental model drawing (**Figure 2**). On her drawing, she clearly wrote her assessment of the narrative: 'A poor woman (Kashi) is only to suffer whose individual life is nothing. She gets beaten but still she gets happy when her husband visits her.' She also labels one character 'male' in her drawing and writes 'poverty' at the top of her drawing.

She reflected on the entrenched patriarchy in the Indian society, and commented on the status of women in India:

> All women go through the same kind of suffering: whether they are rich or poor. It is the same situation for women in our (Indian) society. It does not matter what they do; no one listens to women. A woman may be very well educated and she may be earning a very high salary. But the society views

her as just a woman, who should be subservient to men. Men just do what they want to do. Look at Ayudhya, he contributes nothing in the household but is so dominant and rude. He gets away with all the ill-treatment and neglect. That is the reality. But Kashi, like a doting mother, endures everything. She is poor but raises her children single-handedly.
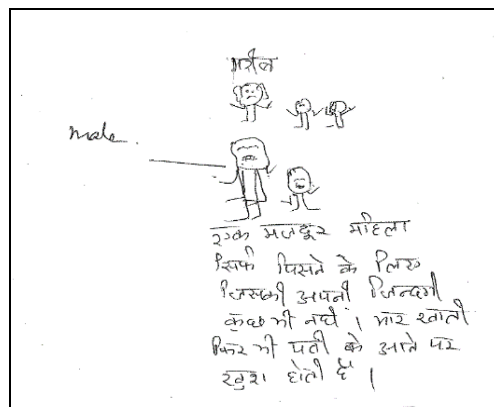

Figure 2

Though Ayudhya is a minor character in the story, he is the biggest character in size depicted in her mental model. She explained:

Yes, Ayudhya is the most prominent (in my drawing). He has a minor role [in the plot], but dominates Kashi completely. He is often angry and violent. Men dominate in our society. Women always play a secondary role.

In her assessment, the story was a realistic take on women's condition in the Indian society. Her performance focused more on real-life projections and she responded emotionally to the text. This performance included references from her personal life, which were different from Participant 1's performance. The other reader's connection with the story was mainly through the geographical locations mentioned in the text.

Though both the participants read the same text, there was little in common in their evaluation of the text and their mental model drawings. Participant 2 completely ignored the nature, trees, and the location of the story; she focused mainly on the story characters and how they mimicked the real world around her. Themes like motherhood, poverty, status of women, etc. emerged in her conversation after she read the text. Participant 1, however, largely ignored the story characters and situations; his mental model drawing is largely based on his long-term memory of visiting some real places. He brushed aside all the sufferings in the story by labeling them as 'destiny' and did not explore any gendered roles that the other participant did. His projection of real-life onto the narrative was mainly geographical, while the other participant's interpretation of the fictional story with the real-world was mainly thematic and emotional. Participant 1, a middle-aged male, projected his his real-life

gender onto the narrative and perhaps found it difficult to become involved in the story characters.

However contrasting these two performances are, both of these participants nonetheless went beyond the narrative they read, inferred the text by making educated guesses, drew from their stored memory and constructed mental models highlighting the elements that they deemed were the most prominent features in the story that they read. Interestingly, however, the same text provided two different versions of the same story.

As more and more drawings and interview data were collected and analyzed, common themes emerged such as affective responses, self-referencing, real-life projections, and story message in the data analysis. During the axial coding stage, for example, any instance of additions made by readers in their mental models that are not a part of the original text were coded under the category of 'Narrative Inference.' Similarly, depiction of any emotions in the drawings were coded as 'Affective responses,' and any reference to self or society at large during the interviews or in the drawings were coded as 'Self-referencing' and 'Real-Life projections.' Readers' responses to questions about the story's central message were coded as 'Themes' and analyzed further. All the data collected during drawing and interview stage, thus, were coded to identify different dimensions of narrative performance.

The following main dimensions of performance emerged after this analysis:

Narrative inference and readers' construction of the narrative world

An examination of the mental model drawings and the interview data revealed that readers drew inferences that were reflected in their drawings, and readers added elements in their mental models that were not present in the original text or engaged in metaphorical interpretation of story characters that are not originally part of the storyline. Participants also used symbols to represent story interpretation. This is consistent with the mental models theory which posits that readers do add elements beyond the text when constructing these models (Neihus & Young, 2014).

With the writer of the story spending a lot of time describing the lead character Manorama's constant craving for motherhood, some participants felt that Manorama's unborn child (not yet even conceived) was an important part of the story. In fact, small child by Manorama's side or even a fetus depicted in the mental model drawings pertained to Manorama's unfulfilled desires.

Participant 3, a 40-year old male, drew Manorama's character emerging out of a tree and drew a baby crawling towards her (**Figure 3**). The baby in the drawing is the character's craving and not an actual character in the story. The participant explained:

> I have tried to draw Manorama and have shown that she is just like a tree-trunk, she is lifeless and helpless. She cannot do anything about it. This child (crawling toward Manorama) is her imagined child (the child), is not

real. But, I felt that Manorama is incomplete without a child. She wants a child of her own. So, I drew a child for her, so that the picture is complete. This child fulfills her desires.
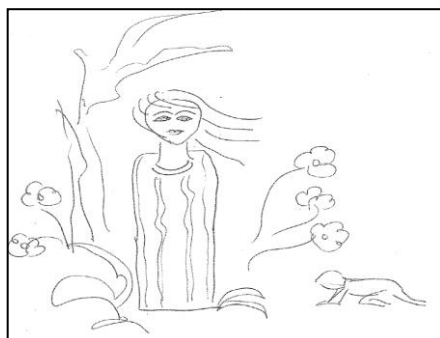

Figure 3

Participant 4, a female, 35, drew a boy along with Manorama in the drawing and labeled the characters in the drawing as 'mother' and 'baby' (**Figure 4**). She also drew a tree and labeled it. The small boy in her drawing as she explained in the interview was not born yet. The participant stated that she felt that Manorama's world revolved around a baby that Manorama could not give birth to. A door in the participant's drawing symbolized her waiting for her husband; expecting him to come through the door and give her this boy. She explained:

This is the door that she (Manorama) looks at all the time. The door remains closed. Manorama always looks at it so that her husband comes through it and gives her the baby. This boy is not born yet. But Manorama is happy in this child's presence. Both are happy. They are smiling. While reading the story, I felt this is how the story should end.
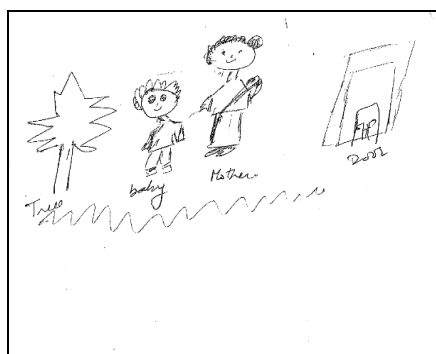

Figure 4

Participant 5, a 33-year-old female, drew an abstract version of the lead character Manorama, representing her as an 'incomplete woman' with tears flowing down from her eyes and a foetus lying by her side (**Figure 5**). A tree in the participant's drawing represented the environment around Manorama. A lock with a cross sign in the drawing is

the participant's own addition to symbolize Manorama's locked up feelings. The participant explained:

> I have drawn an incomplete woman with tears in her eyes, and a closed door that never opens. I have tried to draw a child whom she wants but who is not born yet ... there is no greenery around. She wants the door to be locked because it contains her own feelings. Manorama has suppressed her own desires to be a mother.
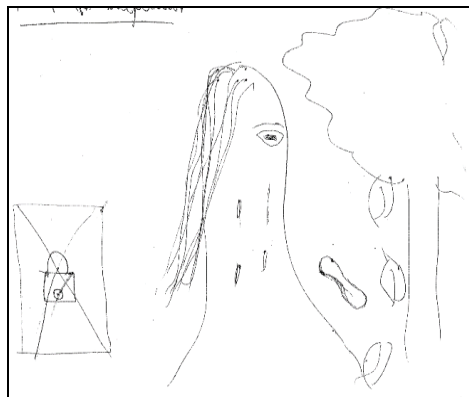

Figure 5

Readers' inferential responses, thus, were one way in which readers in this study performed the narrative.

Real-Life Projections: Commentary on Indian society and the status of women

In this study, reading a fictional story resulted in readers' commentary about the condition of women in Indian society and the effects of poverty on people in the India. Some participants wrote on their drawings their comments about what they thought were the larger 'message' of the story.

Participant 5 explained the social pressures on women to act in certain way. She stated: 'I have seen many women (like Manorama). Women do not express themselves; they are worried about social pressures. This is common in Indian society. Women are suppressed. The story is so close to what I see and hear every day.'

Participant 3, however, described the tensions after reading the story. He explained:

> The story made me think about the kind of life that we lead. The modern lifestyle that we have in which relationships are not strong and we suffer from loneliness. We lead very stressful lives, and are always running to make both ends meet. Manorama undergoes so much stress, she is compelled to strike a balance between her desires of motherhood and her need to earn money. Her husband must be helpless too. Economic pressures are real. We all have to do this balancing act.

Participant 2 described women's condition: 'This story depicts the reality of a poor woman. This is how it is for every woman. I can relate with Kashi. She steals because she is helpless; she has to raise her children. Anyone in her situation would act in the same way. The more deprived you are, the more you steal.'

Another female participant, 33 (Participant 6), described the effects of domestic violence on children (she drew Kunti – **Figure 6**) after reading the story:

> I could relate to the fact how things are before and after marriage. From the point of view of Kunti, I can remember how when we were young and there was some disagreement between parents, we would not understand it. But still we would think we would solve the problem if we were older. I thought about it when reading about Kunti and the effect of domestic violence on children. It happens in every family but children become vulnerable.

Another female participant, 62 (Participant 7), explained how the poor sections of society need to be treated by the middle class:

> Manorama helps Kashi and her family in the hour of need. She is sympathetic. This is how we should treat our servants and maids. She is herself going through so much in her life. Her personal stress also leads to her shouting at Kashi. But in the end, she is good at heart. She helps the poor. This is how we should treat poor people.

Self-referencing (personal narratives) by the readers

The performance metaphor centers around the way readers implicate their own selves while reading. In this study, participants recalled specific instances from their lives and related those to the fictional narrative. Participant 8, female, 60, recalled her experiences with her maid while talking about the story: 'While reading the story, I was thinking how I am just like Manorama. I treat my maid just the same way. Sometimes I say something to her (maid), but then I realize that she is so poor and suffers so much.'

Participant 4 explained that she experiences similar emotions as the story's lead character:

> I can relate with Manorama's anger and the way she regrets being so angry even when she does not want to be angry. She feels guilty; I feel the same way at times.

Participant 9, (male, 26), recalled his own experiences when reading about the character Kashi: 'When Kashi is misinterpreted I started to think about how it also happens with me. I am also misunderstood by my friends and family at times.'

Participant 10, a 63 year-old female, recalled a similar incident in her own life as she read Manorama's and Kashi relationship in the story:

> A few years ago, I had a maid Geeta who used to steal from my house. I noticed that some spoons were missing from my kitchen. I did not tell anything to her but kept vaguely mentioning that the spoons were missing from the kitchen. After a few weeks the missing spoons started appearing in my kitchen again. This is how one needs to deal with these people. If you show them respect they will respond.

Participant 4 could draw parallels with Manorama's life:

> Whatever is happening with her (Manorama) happened with me also. I can understand her troubles. While reading I thought about my past experiences. I could relate to the fact that you miss your husband all the time if he is not around. How insensitive men can be at time, I wonder?

Participant 11, a 21 year old male, recalled an actual example that was similar to the situation depicted in the story:

> One of my mother's friends is not married. After her parents' death, she was all alone. She had a very friendly relationship with her maid and considered her maid to be her sister – someone she could share her personal life with. I remembered them while reading this story. This is how loneliness is.

Readers' affective responses to a narrative

Readers' affective responses to the narrative and its characters were revealed in two ways: first, through the drawings that depicted varied emotions, and second, during the interviews where readers explained their own emotions while discussing the narrative. In many cases, readers' own affect towards characters or story situations was depicted in their mental model drawings. Several drawings, for example, contained characters that had clear emotions drawn on their faces (e.g. **Figure 2** where sadness was visible in the manner mouths were drawn mostly with inverted 'U' and **Figure 5** where the character has tears flowing from her eyes). Contrasting emotions such as fear (**Figure 7**), anger (**Figure 8**), and happiness (**Figure 4** and **6**) were clearly discernable in the drawings.
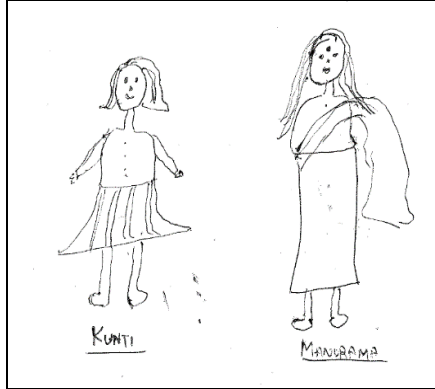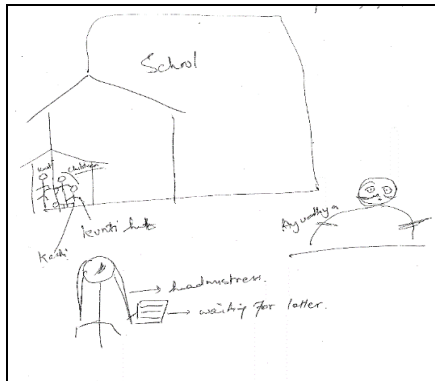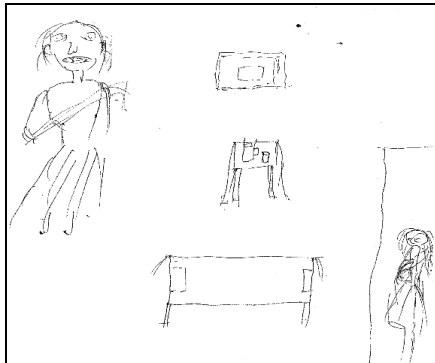
Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 8

Interview data corroborated that positive and negative affect or liking for a character determined the presence and placement of that character in participants' drawings. Participants drew an image of the character or characters that they strongly liked or sometimes strongly disliked. Participants tried to show their feelings for various characters by drawing various affective dispositions.

Participant 7 indicated she liked Manorama's character but disliked Ayudhya's, and described him as ferocious and scary. She drew both these characters in her drawing and drew Ayudhya as fearful with wide eyes and big moustaches (**Figure 7**). His face appears as the most prominent element in the drawing even though he is a relatively minor character in the story.

Participant 6 stated she liked both Manorama's and Kunti's characters and drew these two characters with smiles on their faces (**Figure 6**). 'I liked both these characters and admired how they conducted themselves in these circumstances' she said. Participant 4, who drew Manorama and her awaited child (**Figure 4**), explained why she drew these two characters smiling: 'A child would be Manorama's world. He will make her the happiest. I visualize her always smiling with her child.'

Different central message identified by the readers

During the interviews, participants were asked to identify the central idea or the main theme of the story. Even as a wide range of themes were identified by the participants in this study female participants focused on two main themes: motherhood and the condition of women in the Indian society. Male participants identified three main themes: poverty, the stress of modern life and the exploitation of poor in the Indian society. Most of the female participants related the fictional narrative to their past or present lives and recalled their own stories when thinking about the narrative.

Participant 4 said: 'Motherhood is the main theme. Woman is connected to so many things. She is involved in so many things. But ultimately her home, her family, her husband and her children are everything for her.'

Participant 2 thought the story is about relationship between husband and wife. She explained: 'It is about man and woman relationship, I think. Relationship between husband and wife. Men do whatever they want, woman tolerate and suffer.'

Participant 8 identified the main theme of motherhood in the story:

A strong theme in the story is of motherhood. A woman considers herself incomplete if she cannot become a mother. That feeling is very strong. Manorama is going through that feeling here in the story. It is an emotional issue. All women have a longing for a child.

Participant 12, a 67-year-old male, thought poverty, both material and emotional, was the central idea of the story as 'It [the story] has shown poverty both material poverty and the poverty of the soul and the resulting hollowness in her (Manorama's) life.'

Participant 3 described why he thought modern life and its resulting problems were the main theme. 'The story's theme is about the modern life that we lead and how modern life can sometimes be so cut off from the reality. Despite Manorama's academic success, her life is empty.'

Evaluative responses by the readers

Several participants evaluated those story characters, particularly those with whom they empathized. For example, many participants empathized with Manorama but also disapproved of her actions and the decisions that she took. Many participants who

otherwise empathized with Manorama presented other alternatives that the character could have tried to escape her gloomy situation.

Participants generally ignored less significant (as perceived by the readers) characters from such evaluations. For instance, Participant 7 who said he empathized with Manorama's character also pointed out her negatives: 'Manorama has a soft mind. She could not decide when to fire her employee Kashi. That is where someone can hurt you. It is good to be soft but then you have to be careful that you are not hurt. I like her but not totally'. Participant 6 said she identified with Manorama's character but did not approve of her actions.

> I can relate with Manorama but I do not agree with the way she is acting. I do not know for how many years she is living like this. but it looks she is living in the situation for a long time. she should not suffer like this. She is working, she is headmistress. She is confident to live all by herself. She is managing the entire school campus. Why is she suffering like this? One should revolt.

Participant 4, who liked Manorama's character stated that she could have decided on the marriage a lot earlier: 'Why wait? It only causes pain. She should have taken a stand much earlier.'

Discussion and Conclusion

Readers' engagement with a fictional text is a complex process that entails several different kinds of emotional reactions generated during and after the reading process. Narrative performance is an effective metaphor to understand the cognitive and emotional responses involved while a reader gets engaged with a narrative. As categories emerged in the data and connections between these categories were analyzed, a few key points emerged that are discussed here.

The mental model theory posits that all readers add elements in their mental models and actively 'fill the gaps' even when the story is not a mystery or a puzzle that needs to be solved. Readers are actively thinking about how to 'complete the story' or how to 'give it a perfect ending' (as a few readers stated who drew Manorama's child). Similar to Gerrig's (1993) notion of replotting in narrative performance, some readers in this study wrote the names of real places they had visited and connected them with the story's description. Inferential responses, thus, enable readers in this study to adapt the text as per their personal beliefs, preferences and likings.

Similarly, interesting patterns emerged as I analyzed readers' affective responses in this study. Contrasting emotions of happiness and sadness regarding the same characters revealed readers' own affective responses to these characters and situations. While one reader drew Manorama happy and another drew her sad and teary after reading the same story, it is interesting to examine why readers were projecting contrasting emotions on the

same character. The interviews revealed that readers' own emotional responses to the characters and story situations mostly determined what emotions they would project on a character. For example, a reader who felt extremely saddened by Manorama's situation and found her helpless drew her sad and teary. However, readers who were hopeful for Manorama and wished her better times, often drew her smiling with a child near her (either her own or Kunti, the maid's child). Thus, a favorable outcome for Manorama could have resulted in positive affective disposition among the readers. However, the same could not be inferred for Kashi's character, who was portrayed as crying and sad by all the readers who drew her or discussed her. Some readers, however, did admire her character and found her a hardworking employee.

Additionally, an examination of different themes identified by participants highlighted that gender is a factor to consider when examining readers narrative responses to the text *Suhaginey.* Since the definition of the performance metaphor centers around an individual's ability to process a text in a unique way, it follows that the same text will be understood differently by different readers. In this study, there were differences in the way in which men and women identified the central theme of the story. As the story revolved around two women and the male characters played a secondary role, women readers identified two main themes: motherhood and the status of women in the society. Men mostly stated poverty and inequality in Indian society as the story's central idea. Thus, while each reader understands a slightly different version of the same text and brings in his or her unique interpretation of the story, gender may be relevant in how readers identify the main message of the story especially when the text is gendered. This is different from the findings in narrative persuasion literature that suggest that gender does not have a significant effect of gender reader's identification with characters (Slater at al., 2006). As demonstrated in this study, gender could have a significant effect, especially where the readers process and decode a gendered text. Since this study is set in India and uses an Indian story, gender roles within Indian society influenced how readers in this sample connected with the story.

Additionally, this study uses a middle-class sample that did not differ much in terms of socio-economic status, education, race and ethnicity. Gender and age were the only differentiating variables in the sample. As discussed above, while gender did result in differences in interpretation, no age-group differences in interpretation of the text were found in this study. Both the younger and the middle-aged woman gave personal examples to understand what Manorama and Kashi were going through. Men, mostly, were concerned poverty in India and the glaring economic divide. Many women, who employed maid servants themselves, could easily relate with Kashi (a maid servant) and processed the story from her perspective. This is a similar kind of emotional relationship that Manorama had with Kashi. Women's real life projections and personal narratives too were more from their own experiences, while men had to rely on old memories or extrapolate other's experiences to connect with the story.

Both men and women, however, cognitively engaged with the text and generated inferential and emotional responses and used personally relevant information to connect

with the story. While their engagement with the text didn't differ much, the cognitive mechanisms employed might have been different. Thus, both genders performed the narrative in consonance with their own identities.

Most readers thought that the story depicted events closer to what they see in their real lives. Many times, during the interviews, readers pointed out that they have seen or met women like Manorama or Kashi. Many readers narrated personal stories related with the text. Perceived realism thus was amplified when readers attached personal narratives with the story. Research in narrative engagement has found perceived realism increases transportability in a narrative (Green, 2004). However, it can be argued that perceived realism could start before the transportation process and might aid in mental model construction or, in other words, performance of a narrative.

Some studies have remained inconclusive as to whether empathy with characters can result in more emotional (participatory) responses (Bezdak et al., 2013). As this study demonstrates, empathy with characters can generate more evaluative responses by the readers. Readers can choose to assess those characters and situations more with whom they empathize. Readers generally refrain from spending their time and mental resources on characters or situations whom they cannot identify with. Readers can like a character overall but may dislike certain actions of the characters that they think are counter-productive for them. Readers thus could generate more emotional responses for those characters with whom they feel emotionally connected. As previous research studies have pointed out (Barker, 2005; Slater & Rouner, 2002), character identification is a complex construct and it is hard to measure the extent of identification using single scale items, as is mostly done in social science research. An investigation into readers' mental models and examination of their performance of a narrative could provide interesting insights into differences in emotional responses to different characters.

Elicitation of readers' mental model representations is challenging since mental models are dynamic structures created in the minds of the readers and are, thus, not available for direct inspection (Jones et al., 2011). Even as several studies have extracted mental models using readers' drawings and open-ended interviews, it is difficult to say with certainty that readers' drawings represent the actual mental models created while comprehending the text. Also, this study focuses on just one story and its reading by a small group of middle-class individuals in one city in India. Further research on different types of narratives across cultures and with more participants would yield even more interesting patterns of readers' performance of a narrative.

Biographical note:

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

1. Please explain what have you drawn after reading this short story?
2. What is the general theme of the story?
3. What characters did you identify with? Why did you like each of these characters?
4. Please explain any emotions that you had for the character?
5. Please discuss if at any time you felt that you as though you were in the story or you went on a journey within the story?
6. Is there anything in the drawing that tells me something about you?