

# *Revisiting the Influence of Online Readers in Postcolonial Literature: A Postcolonial Analysis*

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the impact of online platforms, institutions and digital reading communities on reading practice in the digital age. The subjective status of the readers and their activeness in the creation and realization of the meaning of literary texts are emphasized by reception aesthetics. The current research on postcolonial literature focuses broadly on the author's perspective and the text's perspective but lacks the readers' perspective. This paper puts the changes in readers' subjectivity in the digital era under the post-colonial perspective, discussing what kind of changes have taken place in the subjectivity of network readers. Meanwhile, it analyzes how cyber subalterns and elites will influence postcolonial discourse in the digital realm. Using a theoretical and methodological framework covering post-colonialism and receptive criticism, this article demonstrates how marginal discourses can construct and grow spaces within social and cultural limits. The results show that the online reading practice and the formation of online communities further blur cultural boundaries. The post-colonial visual threshold gives readers the task of expanding marginal discourse. Finally, this article illustrates that readers' subjectivity is still limited by digital institutions and algorithms, and they must be wary of network colonization.

**Keywords:** online reading, reader-response theory, postcolonial literature

## 1. Introduction

From the standpoint of post-colonial literature research, this paper re-examines the reading practice of network readers and the active role of the reader community. The progress of network technology and the social reality after the epidemic have led to the expansion of network readers, which is one of the bases for the enhancement of the main position of network readers as a part of readers in literary criticism.

However, it is still uncommon to see a detailed analysis of the impact of the enhancement of the subjectivity of online readers on subaltern discourse or related to culture-specific literary works and literacy education.

This paper combines the latest postcolonial theory with the aesthetics of literary reception to explore the influence of online reading on the discourse of the common people on the Internet. By using the entry point of online reading, this paper attempts to focus on how digital technology makes it possible to expand the scope of cultural hybridity and enhance the discourse of the common people. Just like the interaction between cultures in the real world, this kind of discourse and spatial construction in cyberspace is not one-way but has rich possibilities. Online readers are participants in

online reading platforms and consumers of digital literature distribution, enhancing and enabling the role, impact and sustainability of diverse subalterns.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Research on Internet Reading

The rise of e-reading is inseparable from the synergistic effect of technological progress, the operation of the market, and the impact of the epidemic.

Digital reading has gained increasing importance in the reading practice of people living in modern times. Advances in information technologies are the basis for making this possible. Moreover, such changes involve a wide variety of text genres that people can access. The blowout production of digital books and the growth of this market (including editing and publishing departments, sales channels, and marketing tools), from the practice of the last ten years, is phenomenal and unstoppable.

In the meantime, there is a sharp sense of the digital reading market among businesses and, accordingly, active profit-seeking strategies and activities. The potential cannibalization of print book sales by e-books has been exacerbated by the entry of some online retailers such as Amazon, Apple and Google [1]. These retailers not only are publishing a large number of electronic books but have introduced specially designed combos and collections to attract more customers to their sites [2]. In addition, the newspaper and journal industries are also feeling the impact of the online reading trend. In general, it has become a widespread phenomenon for people to access newspapers through the Internet, despite the influence of factors such as age and newspaper brands [3]. The debates between online reading and print reading have been going on for quite a long time. And it will continue to exist with the persistent emergence of new situations, such as the promotive effect of media. However, it is indisputable that online reading still has good prospects for further development. This ensures an increase in the importance of online readers as part of the readership.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in late 2019, has objectively accelerated the boom in online reading as well. On the one hand, the lockdown of the pandemic has led to the need for schools and other educational institutions to allow students and teachers to learn and work online, considering the risks of collective exposure. Online reading has been widely studied in connection with online education. Al-Jarf conducted his research on the Arab-educated population. After sorting out and analyzing the reading preferences of educational groups and teachers in countries including Indonesia, Turkey, Nigeria, and Iran, Al-Jarf believes that people's interest in online reading has increased in different regions. Still, the sources of interest are slightly different. For example, he mentions that students in Nigeria read for pleasure, while students in Iran are influenced by the fact that some books are recommended by curriculums [4]. On the other hand, the tension created by the epidemic has prompted some people to become readers of online texts and escape negative emotions from reading. The study also points out that many readers have re-reading behavior and have a nostalgic tendency when choosing books [5]. It is worth mentioning that the above two studies have both touched on the gender characteristics of Internet readers. "We noticed a high percentage of female respondents (91%). The high percentage of female fiction readers has been a frequent topic of discussion in academia and publishing [5]." "During the pandemic, female teachers showed higher enthusiasm for reading than male teachers [4]." This means that female readers are more engaged online. In short, the practices and preferences of online readers affect every aspect of the electronic publishing industry. It also influences the teaching strategies of schools and the policy-making of governments. It is necessary to study the role of e-readers both from the perspective of the book market and the perspective of culture and education.

## 2.2. Combine post-colonial research with Internet reading research

Literary studies have always been the focus of postcolonial studies. Therefore, "readership" is theoretically a topic that postcolonial studies cannot avoid. However, postcolonial theorists often focus their research on readers' reading strategies. For example, Spivak proposes to make the text respond by "patient reading" [6]. The concept of close reading proposed by Mazen and other scholars and the contrapuntal reading strategy proposed by Edward Said have also aroused wide responses [7]. In other words, scholars discuss how reading should be done to resist cultural hegemony. Resistance is indeed necessary for postcolonial studies. However, for the readership research, this means a lack of interpretation of readers' diverse identities and the attention paid to the emotional factors in the reading process.

In recent years, an increasing number of scholars have realized that the Internet has become a key place for fans (readers) to communicate with postcolonial writers and help promote literary works. As Risam [8] says, people must view these digital paratexts as part of postcolonial media history. Similarly, the crucial role of readers must be reflected in the studies of postcolonial literature. Therefore, there has been some research on the identity of network readers and the community of network readers.

The educated group is also the key research object of reading practice. The research shows that the reading willingness of Internet readers has different performances in different age stages. The survey results of teenage students indicate that their reading tendency and readers' identity can be easily influenced by the teenager group around them. The specificity of their choice of reading is limited [9]. Even in higher education, the reading material of choice for many graduate students and faculty members is often related to coursework and research. A broader range of reader practices can be understood through the studies of online reader communities. Under the control of big data and platform algorithms, modern network reader communities can gather readers with the same reading interest and strengthen the emotional influence among members. However, algorithms, to some extent, limit literary innovation and the spontaneity of readers' discovery of new works [10]. In addition, some studies on postcolonial Internet users can also be linked to postcolonial readership studies. For example, Ponzanesi [11] used the concept of "digital diasporas" to represent the diaspora in the digital world, claiming that the development of information technology has reconstituted for the diaspora a new space, which had once been metaphorically eroded. As a result, the academic focus on diaspora has shifted to the field of media studies. Tuzcu [12] coined the term "cybaltern", which refers to a group whose voices are muted paradoxically despite and because of the digital tools available to them. A large proportion of e-readers fit these descriptions, so these studies are also helpful for studying postcolonial readers.

## 3. Methodology

This paper collects secondary data from online reading, post-colonial readership, online post-colonialism and other related topics. It classifies and reanalyzes these secondary data.

This paper mainly implies postcolonial theories and reader response theory to reanalyze the secondary data. Postcolonial theories that will be discussed in this study include Bhabha's theory of third space and Spivak's subaltern discourse theory. The "third space" proposed by Bhabha refers to a space of two-way influence between the colonizing culture and the colonized culture when they meet. There exist multiplicities of voices and identities in this space [13]. Network space can also be a part of the third space. The process of network readers' reading practice can promote the intermingling of cultures and dissolve the colonial discourse. Spivak's theory of subaltern discourse focuses on women in marginal cultures under the dual oppression of hegemony and patriarchy [14].

With the help of her postcolonial theory, this paper will be able to analyze the role of female e-readers in dispelling network hegemony events.

In addition to postcolonial theory, this paper also adopts Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory to seek the influence of network readers on postcolonial literature. Iser's reader-reception theory changes the situation where the right to create meaning belongs exclusively to the author, and it moves this right into the hands of the readers [15]. Harkin [15] also points out that reader-response theory is well suited to a "literature/comparative" course, given its pedagogical significance in guiding students through a variety of literary and non-literary texts.

#### **4. E-readers in the post-colonial era**

In this part, this paper will discuss the diversity of the reader identity of e-readers. This paper holds that the readers' identities of e-readers have been shaped by many factors, such as values, community environment, website algorithm, etc., so it has uncertainty. This paper tries to analyze the two dimensions of individual-social discourse and post-colonial discourse. The different identities of network readers have led to different reading practices, which is causing an impact on the development of postcolonial literature and post-colonial discourse.

##### **4.1. Diverse and malleable identities**

The readers in network reading practice are different from those constructed by postcolonial theorists, who are expected by postcolonial theorists to be resistant to colonial or hegemony discourse.

The concepts of a series of reading strategies developed by postcolonial theorists, including "patient reading [6]", "contrapuntal reading", and "close reading" [7], require a certain level of knowledge of the potential readers. When proposing reading strategies, these scholars assume that those who practice reading belong to the educated group. They also look forward to the readers' efforts to decolonize in the cultural and academic fields. However, from the results of previous research on the online reading practice of educated groups, the reading of intellectuals is more likely to be influenced by their curriculum [4]. Some students read electronic books mainly because they are required to do so. Bana's research shows that the students in their survey tended to admit that e-reading had helped them develop better reading habits, though to some extent due to curriculum requirements [16]. This means that most highly educated people are limited in their choice of reading materials and rarely explore new texts.

Besides the elite group, many other people are also involved in online reading practices, such as teenagers and people from all walks of life who have experienced lock-downs during the pandemic. These people's reading interests come from multiple sources.

Teenagers could read certain texts because of their pursuit of pleasure, the pursuit of the trend or countertrend of the books read by people around them, or their being influenced by television and film adaptations [9]. Adults who are anxious about careers during the pandemic time turn to online books to escape from reality and gain emotional relief [5]. These people are not necessarily readers of postcolonial texts, but they have potential reading possibilities. Considering their large population and the scale of their reading practices, postcolonial studies should include these people in the consideration of postcolonial readers. Just as the third space proposed by Bhabha refers to, in this space, culture mixes and influences each other [13]. Cyberspace is a place full of multiple collisions between mainstream culture and subculture, central culture and marginal culture. Postcolonial studies should not only enter this space from the author and text side but also consider expanding the scope of postcolonial readers to promote the diversification of cyberspace.

## 4.2. The same situation in different spaces: the subalterns

The Internet indeed can amplify individual or marginal discourse, but this does not mean that every discourse is amplified equally. In the digital world, there still exist subcultures and marginalized groups.

The contribution of network readers to the development of postcolonial literature lies not in their groundbreaking views on the theories but in their positive role in the emergence of new works of post-colonial literature. Those post-colonial theoretical works, such as *Orientalism*, can be more deeply grasped in the intellectual community than in any other group. After all, these theoretical works are not as easy to read as ordinary novels, and according to post-pandemic research data, novels are the most popular text genres for online reading because they bring pleasure in reading. According to the study of the Nigerian fiction reading community, the emotional connection of readers in the online community has been enhanced [10]. The time-sensitive nature of the Internet ensures that any literary innovation is immediately visible to the community, and readers' feedback can quickly backfire on the authors. This nurturing community is the perfect place for the literature of marginal cultures to grow. Moreover, online readers could, in theory, help amplify the voices of the subalterns. Once people have access to the website, they can express their views and find groups with similar views in the online reading community. The algorithms of those websites will recommend more similar content based on user preferences. Although this may still not be comparable to the power of mainstream discourse, the internal environment of the online reader community can make subaltern discourse the strongest voice in a small circle. Some studies even show that the influence of some subaltern discourse has gradually approached that of the mainstream ones. As in Stern's study, African voices have gained a stronger place in mainstream French publishing. Stern ponders whether the democratising potential of the online reading medium still exists when what was once part of the periphery becomes part of the mainstream [17]. The internal dynamics of the publishing industry in the future are difficult to predict. However, the potential of the online reading medium to make more peripheral literature seen remains positive.

In addition, the high percentage of women in the online readership makes it possible for it to contribute to post-colonial feminist studies. On the one hand, women who are oppressed by hegemony and patriarchy, as referred to by Spivak [14], theoretically have the opportunity and place to speak out as online readers. On the other hand, the large number of female readers and the interest in postcolonial feminist works will inevitably help the website algorithm to push a wider range of feminist texts. Bourrier and other scholars studied the habits and preferences of Goodreads users when reading Victorian literature. They found that readers' interest centered on children's literature of the period and literary works with strong female characters. They argue that this phenomenon should guide the standard Victorian literature syllabus to enrich students' understanding of Victorian literature by adding content of readers' interest [18]. This is an example of readers' reading interests challenging the canon of traditional literature. If postcolonial literature gets more exposure on the network reading media, it will undoubtedly be beneficial to the expansion of the influence of postcolonial feminist literature.

Despite the aforementioned empowerment by online readers for post-colonial literature, there are some potential limitations for online subalterns. First, the Internet is not a suitable means for all subalterns to participate in post-colonial practices. The premise of network reading involving a wider range of users is the popularity and accessibility of the network. The development of Internet technology does not mean that it is appropriate to speculate that all people have equal access to online reading. Because of this, some voices that would otherwise be silenced remain unheard. Second, algorithms are not the spontaneous actions of computers but are controlled by a few elites. This means



that the self-discovery potential of web readers is more or less monitored and controlled [10], and the democratization of knowledge is still under certain threat.

## 5. Reader and meaning

In this part, this paper combines network readers with Iser's reader response theory. It aims to discuss the influence of online readers more precisely on postcolonial literature and the democratization of knowledge.

For one thing, online readers' practice of creatively revealing the meaning of literary texts is diverse and holistic. This variety means that the reader approaches the text from diverse perspectives. Iser's reader-response theory holds that the space of meaning is virtual. Text has different ways of realizations, and no one can exhaust them all at once because readers have different ways to fill the 'gap'. The gap here refers to what appears in the text beyond the reader's immediate understanding. As Harkin [15] concludes, Iser's reader-response theory gives readers the power to create meaning in text, and online readers have demonstrated that they have the full potential to do so. In fact, the Internet gives online readers even more agency. Network search engines and online reading communities enable e-readers to assemble different thoughts from people. This guarantees that they understand the meaning of the texts from various perspectives with minimal time. This is called the wholeness of reading. Internet readers can use the Internet to obtain information at a high speed so they can read one or several postcolonial literary works in a relatively complete time. This continuity of reading is of great significance to the interpretation of postcolonial texts.

For another, online readers can avoid overstating the role of the reader or the author in the process of constructing meaning. This is supported by online reading communities, platforms, and social media. Iser's reading response theory embodies a pedagogical nature, and some scholars worry about whether it is better to keep the text mysterious to the reader [15]. This paper holds that it is one-sided to exaggerate or deny either party's ability to construct meaning. In the practice of reading online, there is a possible balance of two forces. The advent of online publishing has provided a more accessible and democratic platform for the dissemination of postcolonial fiction and other literary genres. Unlike traditional print publishing, which often involves significant financial and logistical barriers to entry, online publishing offers a more cost-effective and efficient means of distributing literary works, particularly for emerging and independent authors. This has created new opportunities for postcolonial and other underrepresented voices to be heard and has contributed to a more diverse and inclusive literary landscape. In the digital space, readers can even communicate directly with authors. In other words, the two entities that create meaning can converge in the practice of online reading.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper applies postcolonial theories, especially Bhabha's theory of third space and Spivak's subaltern discourse theory, and Iser's reader-response theory, to analyze online reading practice. Through the collection, classification and analysis of secondary data from related research, this paper argues that post-colonial research focuses more on research strategies and thus ignores the importance of reading behavior based on online readers. In the fourth and fifth parts of the article, the paper shows that the cyber world is, meanwhile, a place of cultural hybridity like the third space, and expounds on the positive influence of online readers on enhancing post-colonial and marginal discourse. This paper shows that the concepts of the "cybalterns" and the post-colonial subalterns both overlap and differ. Although online readers can have more agency and the knowledge has been democratized to a certain extent, there is still a risk of alienation and marginalization. This is because online reading platforms

and algorithms are still the result of human or elite manipulation, and the online practices of e-readers and authors are inevitably monitored and regulated.

In addition, from the level of text and meaning, this paper analyzes online readers' reading practice by combining it with Isser's reader response theory. The Internet has empowered online readers to create diverse meanings. However, due to the extensive participation of the authors in cyberspace, the two sides of meaning creation can achieve a balance of power to a certain extent, avoiding the extreme of exclusive power. In general, this paper tries to put online reading within the scope of post-colonial research. It appeals to post-colonial research, especially post-colonial literature research, to pay attention to the identity, dilemma and influence of online readers. This will help to promote to the next level the participation of periphery discourse in dynamic cultural hybridity.

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