

BEYOND EFFERENT AND AESTHETIC READING: A BAKHTINIAN–ROSENBLATT FRAMEWORK FOR CRITICAL READING THROUGH THE WORKS OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

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ABSTRACT

Critical reading in contemporary literary studies has evolved beyond conventional approaches that privilege either information retrieval or personal response. This conceptual study proposes a Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading by integrating Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism with Louise M. Rosenblatt's Efferent–Aesthetic Reading continuum. While Rosenblatt's framework explains the dynamic relationship between readers and texts, Bakhtin's dialogism expands this interaction by emphasizing multiple voices, ideological positions, and dialogic meaning-making. The proposed framework offers a comprehensive approach that encourages readers to move beyond literal comprehension and subjective appreciation towards critical interpretation, reflective inquiry, and contextual analysis. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fiction serves as the literary corpus for illustrating the applicability of the framework because her narratives foreground issues of identity, migration, gender, culture, memory, and belonging through diverse narrative voices. By synthesizing reader-response and dialogic perspectives, the study presents a structured model for examining how readers negotiate meaning through interaction with texts and broader sociocultural contexts. The framework contributes to language and literature studies by strengthening critical reading pedagogy, fostering interpretative competence, and promoting dialogic engagement with literary texts. It also provides researchers, teachers, and students with a theoretically grounded model that can be adapted to diverse literary works and educational settings, thereby advancing critical literacy in higher education.

Keywords: Bakhtinian Dialogism; Rosenblatt's Efferent–Aesthetic Reading; Critical Reading; Reader-Response Theory; Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni; Critical Literary Engagement.

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading occupies a central place in language and literary studies because it enables individuals to construct knowledge, interpret experience, and engage with the cultural and social worlds represented through texts. Within the field of literature, reading extends far beyond the mechanical act of recognising written words or retrieving factual information. It is an interpretative process through which readers negotiate meaning by drawing upon their knowledge, emotions, values, and lived experiences. Every reading event is therefore shaped not only by the text itself but also by the unique perspectives that readers bring to it. As higher education increasingly emphasises critical thinking, intercultural competence, and independent inquiry, literary reading has come to be recognised as a multidimensional activity that combines cognitive understanding with reflective interpretation. Contemporary literary scholarship consequently views readers as active participants in the creation of meaning rather than passive recipients of an author's intentions.

This shift in understanding has significantly influenced the teaching and learning of literature across educational contexts. Traditional approaches often treated literary texts as repositories of fixed meanings that students were expected to identify and reproduce. More recent developments in literary theory, however, have challenged this assumption by recognising that meaning evolves through continuous interaction between readers and texts. Literary interpretation is now understood as a dynamic process in which readers question ideas, examine assumptions, evaluate multiple perspectives, and construct informed responses supported by textual evidence. Such an approach encourages learners to move beyond surface-level comprehension towards deeper intellectual engagement, making critical

reading an essential component of contemporary literary education.

A major contribution to this transformation emerged through Louise M. Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of Reading, which redefined the relationship between readers and literary texts. Rosenblatt argued that meaning is not permanently embedded within a text but emerges through the transaction between the reader and the text during the act of reading. Every reading experience is therefore unique because it is shaped by the reader's personal background, prior knowledge, emotions, purposes, and cultural context. Her distinction between efferent and aesthetic reading remains one of the most influential concepts in reader-response criticism. Efferent reading focuses primarily on the information, ideas, and knowledge that readers take away from a text, whereas aesthetic reading emphasises the lived experience of reading by encouraging attention to language, imagery, emotions, and imaginative participation. As Rosenblatt (1978) observed, "A poem is what the reader lives through under the guidance of the text and experiences as relevant to the text." This insight repositioned literary reading as an interactive process of meaning-making rather than a one-way transmission of information.

While Rosenblatt's theory fundamentally transformed reader-response criticism, contemporary literary scholarship has increasingly recognised that literary interpretation also unfolds within broader social, cultural, historical, and ideological contexts. Readers approach texts with multiple identities shaped by language, education, gender, ethnicity, and cultural experience, and these identities inevitably influence interpretation. Consequently, literary reading cannot be understood solely as an individual cognitive activity; it is equally a social and cultural practice through which readers negotiate diverse perspectives and engage with competing systems of meaning. This recognition has encouraged scholars to explore theoretical approaches that explain how dialogue, plurality, and interaction contribute to literary interpretation, thereby extending the scope of reader-response theory beyond the relationship between an individual reader and a text.

Within this evolving theoretical landscape, Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism offers a broader perspective on how meaning is constructed in literary discourse. Unlike structural approaches that regard language as a fixed and self-contained system, Bakhtin viewed language as a living social phenomenon that continuously evolves through interaction among multiple voices. Every utterance, according to Bakhtin, is shaped by previous conversations while simultaneously anticipating future responses. Meaning is therefore never static or final; it emerges through dialogue, negotiation, and the coexistence of diverse perspectives. His well-known observation that "The word in language is half someone else's" (Bakhtin, 1981) underscores the idea that language always carries traces of earlier voices, cultural influences, and ideological positions. Consequently, literary texts become dynamic spaces where meanings remain open to reinterpretation rather than being confined to a single authoritative explanation.

Bakhtin's concept of dialogism extends beyond spoken communication to encompass the structure and interpretation of literary works. Novels, short stories, and other literary forms are characterised by the interaction of multiple voices, viewpoints, and ideological positions that coexist without necessarily resolving into a single unified perspective. This plurality, often described through concepts such as polyphony and heteroglossia, enables literary texts to represent the complexity of human experience by allowing different social, cultural, and historical voices to interact. Readers, in turn, do not merely observe these interactions but actively participate in them by questioning assumptions, comparing perspectives, and constructing interpretations through reflective engagement. Literary meaning thus develops through an ongoing dialogue involving the author, the text, the reader, and the wider sociocultural environment. As Bakhtin remarked, "Truth is born between people collectively searching for truth in the process of their dialogic interaction." This principle reinforces the view that understanding is achieved through engagement with diverse viewpoints rather than through acceptance of a single, predetermined meaning.

The growing relevance of dialogic reading has become particularly evident in contemporary language and literature education. Modern university curricula increasingly encourage students to analyse literary texts critically, examine competing interpretations, evaluate cultural contexts, and formulate independent arguments supported by textual evidence. Such expectations require readers to move beyond the identification of themes or literary devices towards a deeper exploration of the relationships among language, ideology, culture, and identity. Literary interpretation therefore demands intellectual flexibility, ethical reflection, and the ability to appreciate multiple perspectives

simultaneously. Traditional instructional practices that focus primarily on memorising author

biographies, plot summaries, or thematic descriptions often fail to cultivate these higher-order interpretative abilities. Instead, contemporary literary pedagogy requires theoretical models capable of fostering analytical reasoning while encouraging students to engage meaningfully with the diverse voices represented within literary texts.

Although Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory and Bakhtin's dialogism have each transformed literary studies in significant ways, they have generally developed along parallel rather than intersecting theoretical paths. Reader-response criticism has primarily concentrated on the dynamic relationship between readers and texts, whereas Bakhtinian scholarship has explored the social, ideological, and dialogic dimensions of language and literary discourse. Both perspectives reject the notion of fixed textual meaning and emphasise the active role of interpretation, yet only limited scholarship has examined how these complementary traditions may be systematically integrated into a unified conceptual framework. This theoretical separation has restricted opportunities to develop comprehensive models of literary reading that simultaneously acknowledge individual reader experience, dialogic interaction, and the sociocultural processes through which literary meaning is negotiated. Addressing this gap provides the foundation for constructing an integrated approach that brings together the strengths of both theoretical traditions, thereby offering a richer explanation of critical literary interpretation in contemporary educational contexts.

A theoretical integration of Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory and Bakhtinian dialogism provides a more comprehensive understanding of literary interpretation than either perspective can offer independently. Rosenblatt explains how readers construct meaning through personal engagement with a text, whereas Bakhtin demonstrates that this meaning continues to evolve through interaction with multiple voices, cultural discourses, and competing ideological perspectives. When considered together, these theories broaden the scope of critical reading by recognising that literary interpretation is simultaneously personal, social, and dialogic. Readers not only respond to the emotional and intellectual dimensions of a literary work but also examine how language reflects questions of identity, power, memory, culture, and history. Such an integrated perspective encourages learners to move beyond binary distinctions between information-oriented and experience-oriented reading towards a more reflective process of literary inquiry that values multiple interpretations and sustained critical engagement.

This integrated perspective becomes particularly meaningful when applied to contemporary multicultural literature, where narratives frequently explore issues of migration, cultural identity, gender, belonging, and social transformation. In an increasingly interconnected world, literary texts often represent diverse communities, conflicting value systems, and transnational experiences that cannot be fully understood through a single interpretative lens. Readers are therefore expected to appreciate not only the aesthetic qualities of literature but also the cultural, historical, and ethical dimensions embedded within narratives. Literary reading consequently becomes an opportunity to engage with unfamiliar experiences, question established assumptions, and develop a broader understanding of human diversity. Such an approach strengthens intercultural awareness while encouraging readers to recognise literature as a space where multiple voices coexist and interact.

The fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni offers a particularly rich literary corpus for examining these dimensions of critical reading. Her novels and short stories recurrently explore themes such as diaspora, migration, family relationships, gender, memory, identity, tradition, and cultural negotiation. Rather than presenting characters within rigid cultural boundaries, Divakaruni portrays individuals whose identities evolve through continuous interaction with different social, historical, and cultural environments. Her narratives are characterised by shifting perspectives, layered storytelling, and the coexistence of multiple voices, inviting readers to examine complex human experiences from diverse viewpoints. This narrative richness creates opportunities for readers to participate actively in the interpretative process rather than merely observing events from a detached perspective.

The dialogic qualities embedded in Divakaruni's fiction closely align with Bakhtin's understanding of polyphonic literature, where different voices retain their individuality while contributing to a broader conversation. At the same time, Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory explains why readers often arrive at different interpretations of the same literary text. Individual experiences, cultural backgrounds, educational contexts, and personal values inevitably influence the meanings that readers construct during the reading process. Literary interpretation therefore emerges through the

interaction of textual plurality and reader experience rather than through the discovery of a single authoritative meaning. Examining Divakaruni's fiction through these complementary theoretical perspectives highlights how readers continually negotiate meaning across personal reflection, textual dialogue, and sociocultural understanding.

The educational significance of this integrated perspective extends well beyond literary criticism. In contemporary higher education, critical reading has become an essential academic competency because students are expected to analyse evidence, evaluate contrasting viewpoints, formulate reasoned arguments, and engage responsibly with complex social issues. Literature classrooms provide an especially valuable environment for cultivating these abilities because literary texts naturally invite multiple interpretations and encourage sustained reflection. Paulo Freire (1970) observed that "Reading the word is not preceded merely by reading the world, but by a certain form of writing it or rewriting it," emphasising that reading is inseparable from critical consciousness and social awareness. Similarly, T. S. Eliot recognised the dynamic relationship between readers and literary tradition when he remarked that "The past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past." Collectively, these perspectives reinforce the view that literary reading is an evolving dialogue among texts, readers, cultures, and historical moments, thereby establishing the intellectual foundation for a more integrated approach to critical literary interpretation.

Against this theoretical and educational background, this article develops the Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading (BRFCR) as an integrated conceptual model for literary interpretation. The framework brings together Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of Reading and Bakhtin's dialogic philosophy to explain how readers construct, negotiate, and refine meaning through continuous interaction with literary texts and the diverse voices they embody. Rather than viewing efferent and aesthetic reading as separate or competing modes, the BRFCR recognises them as complementary dimensions within a broader process of dialogic engagement. Readers initially approach a literary text through individual cognitive and emotional responses, but these responses are progressively enriched as they engage with multiple perspectives, cultural discourses, historical contexts, and alternative interpretations. Consequently, literary meaning is understood as dynamic, evolving through reflection, dialogue, and critical inquiry rather than remaining fixed within the text itself.

The BRFCR also offers a coherent pedagogical perspective for addressing the changing expectations of literature education in the twenty-first century. Contemporary classrooms increasingly encourage collaborative learning, reflective discussion, intercultural dialogue, and evidence-based interpretation. However, many existing instructional approaches continue to separate personal response from analytical interpretation, often emphasising one at the expense of the other. The framework developed in this article bridges this divide by demonstrating that emotional engagement and critical analysis are mutually reinforcing components of literary understanding. It encourages learners to examine how individual interpretations are influenced by broader social, cultural, and ideological contexts while remaining attentive to the aesthetic richness of literary expression. In doing so, the framework supports the development of readers who are not only analytically competent but also culturally sensitive, ethically aware, and intellectually reflective.

Beyond its pedagogical relevance, the BRFCR contributes to contemporary scholarship by establishing meaningful connections among reader-response criticism, dialogic literary theory, critical literacy, multicultural studies, and higher-order thinking. These theoretical traditions have often been explored independently, despite sharing common concerns regarding the active role of readers in the construction of meaning. By synthesising these complementary perspectives, the framework offers a broader analytical lens through which literary interpretation can be examined. It highlights that understanding literature involves far more than identifying themes, symbols, or narrative techniques; it requires readers to negotiate multiple voices, evaluate contrasting viewpoints, question ideological assumptions, and reflect upon their own interpretative positions. Such an interdisciplinary perspective enriches both literary criticism and language education by providing a comprehensive model for examining the complexity of literary engagement.

The applicability of the BRFCR is illustrated through the fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, whose narratives provide fertile ground for dialogic literary exploration. Her works portray characters navigating multiple cultural identities, historical memories, family relationships, gender expectations,

and transnational experiences, thereby creating literary spaces where diverse voices intersect. These narratives invite readers to engage in continuous dialogue with textual perspectives while simultaneously reflecting upon their own cultural assumptions and experiences. Through this interaction, literary interpretation becomes an active process of questioning, negotiation, and meaning-making rather than the acceptance of predetermined conclusions. The richness of Divakaruni's fiction therefore demonstrates how the integrated framework operates within multicultural literary contexts and illustrates its relevance for both literary scholarship and classroom practice.

Ultimately, this article reconceptualises critical reading as a dialogic, transactional, and socially situated process of literary engagement. By integrating Bakhtinian dialogism with Rosenblatt's Efferent–Aesthetic continuum, the Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading (BRFCR) extends conventional approaches to literary interpretation and offers a more comprehensive understanding of how readers engage with complex texts. The framework illustrates that literary meaning emerges through the interaction of personal experience, textual plurality, cultural discourse, and reflective dialogue, thereby recognising interpretation as a collaborative and evolving intellectual activity. Through this theoretical integration, the article contributes to ongoing discussions in language and literary studies by advancing an interdisciplinary perspective that strengthens critical reading pedagogy, enriches literary interpretation, and provides a robust conceptual foundation for future research on dialogic approaches to literature in higher education.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Bakhtinian Dialogism in Literary Studies

Mikhail Bakhtin's contribution to literary theory fundamentally transformed the understanding of language, interpretation, and textual meaning by introducing the concept of dialogism. Unlike earlier critical approaches that viewed literary texts as self-contained structures with stable meanings, Bakhtin argued that meaning is never fixed or final. Instead, it develops through continuous interaction among language, speakers, readers, cultures, and historical circumstances. Every utterance, according to Bakhtin, responds to previous expressions while simultaneously anticipating future responses, making language inherently relational rather than isolated. This perspective challenged the assumptions of structuralism and formalism, shifting literary criticism from the search for definitive interpretations towards an appreciation of multiple, evolving meanings. Bakhtin's influential statement, "The word in language is half someone else's" (Bakhtin, 1981), encapsulates this philosophy by emphasising that language always carries traces of earlier voices, experiences, and cultural influences. Literary texts therefore become dynamic sites of dialogue where meanings are continually negotiated rather than permanently established.

Central to Bakhtin's literary philosophy are the interconnected concepts of dialogism, polyphony, and heteroglossia, each of which provides a deeper understanding of how literature represents human experience. Dialogism refers to the interaction of diverse ideas and perspectives that shape textual meaning. Polyphony, a concept originally developed through Bakhtin's study of Dostoevsky's novels, describes narratives in which multiple voices coexist with equal authority instead of being subordinated to a single authorial viewpoint. Heteroglossia further expands this understanding by recognising the coexistence of different social languages, cultural values, ideological positions, and linguistic registers within literary discourse. Together, these concepts illustrate that literature reflects the complexity of society by presenting competing voices rather than uniform truths. Readers are therefore encouraged to recognise ambiguity, contradiction, and diversity as integral features of literary interpretation instead of viewing them as obstacles to understanding.

The influence of Bakhtinian dialogism has steadily expanded beyond literary criticism into disciplines such as discourse analysis, cultural studies, translation studies, multilingual education, media studies, and critical pedagogy. Contemporary researchers increasingly employ dialogism to investigate how texts represent identity, power, ideology, memory, and intercultural communication. In postcolonial and diasporic literature, Bakhtin's theory has proved particularly valuable because these narratives frequently portray characters negotiating multiple cultural identities and conflicting historical experiences. Dialogism enables scholars to examine how diverse voices interact within such texts without privileging a single interpretation or ideological position. Consequently, literary criticism has

gradually moved towards recognising interpretation as a collaborative process in which readers actively participate in constructing meaning through engagement with textual plurality rather than by identifying predetermined conclusions.

The educational significance of dialogism has also become increasingly apparent in higher education. Contemporary literature classrooms encourage discussion, collaborative inquiry, and reflective interpretation instead of relying solely on teacher-centred explanations. Students are expected to compare viewpoints, evaluate contrasting interpretations, question cultural assumptions, and justify their conclusions using textual evidence. Such dialogic engagement strengthens critical thinking, intercultural awareness, empathy, ethical reasoning, and analytical independence. Nevertheless, despite its considerable theoretical influence, Bakhtinian dialogism has generally remained an interpretative philosophy rather than a systematic framework for developing critical reading skills. Most existing studies focus on narrative voice, discourse, or ideological plurality, while comparatively few explore how dialogic principles can be translated into structured literary pedagogy. This limitation becomes particularly significant when examining the fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, whose narratives are characterised by multiple voices, layered identities, cultural negotiations, and historical consciousness. Her works naturally invite readers to engage in dialogue with diverse perspectives, making them especially suitable for exploring how dialogic reading can deepen literary understanding. These observations underscore the need for a more integrated approach that combines Bakhtin's insights into dialogic meaning with reader-centred theories of literary interpretation, thereby providing a stronger conceptual foundation for critical reading in contemporary literary studies.

2.2 Rosenblatt's Reader-Response Theory and the Efferent–Aesthetic Continuum

Louise M. Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of Reading occupies a distinguished place in reader-response criticism because it redefined the relationship between readers and literary texts. Earlier literary approaches largely assumed that meaning resided either within the text itself or in the author's intended message, leaving readers with the task of discovering an already established interpretation. Rosenblatt challenged this assumption by proposing that literary meaning is created through a transaction between the reader and the text during the act of reading. According to her, a literary work does not possess a single, immutable meaning waiting to be uncovered; instead, meaning emerges as readers bring their knowledge, experiences, emotions, cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and reading purposes into interaction with the text. Consequently, every reading event becomes unique because no two readers approach a literary work with identical personal histories or interpretative perspectives. Rosenblatt's influential observation that "A poem is what the reader lives through under the guidance of the text" (1978) captures the essence of this theory by emphasising that reading is an active, experiential, and constructive process rather than the passive reception of information.

One of Rosenblatt's most enduring contributions is the Efferent–Aesthetic Reading continuum, which explains the different orientations readers adopt while engaging with texts. Efferent reading focuses primarily on acquiring information, ideas, logical understanding, or practical knowledge that can be retained after reading. In contrast, aesthetic reading emphasises the reader's lived experience during the reading process, encouraging attention to emotions, imagery, symbolism, rhythm, imagination, and personal reflection. Rosenblatt did not regard these orientations as rigidly separate categories but as complementary positions along a continuum. Readers naturally move between efferent and aesthetic responses depending on the nature of the text, the purpose of reading, and the context in which reading occurs. Literary interpretation therefore involves balancing intellectual analysis with emotional engagement, allowing readers to appreciate both the artistic qualities of literature and the broader ideas embedded within it. This flexible understanding of reading has had a lasting influence on literary pedagogy because it recognises the richness and diversity of readers' responses rather than limiting interpretation to predetermined conclusions.

The educational significance of Rosenblatt's theory has become increasingly evident in contemporary language and literature classrooms. Her ideas have encouraged learner-centred pedagogies that value discussion, reflection, collaborative interpretation, and independent thinking instead of memorisation or teacher-dominated explanations. Students are encouraged to relate literary texts to their own experiences while remaining open to alternative interpretations offered by others. Such interaction not only strengthens comprehension but also promotes empathy, creativity, interpretative flexibility, and

critical reasoning. As classrooms become increasingly multicultural, Rosenblatt's transactional perspective has gained renewed relevance because learners from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds contribute distinctive viewpoints that enrich literary discussion. Reading thus becomes a collaborative intellectual activity in which individual interpretations are refined through dialogue and reflective inquiry rather than accepted as isolated personal opinions.

Although Rosenblatt's theory transformed reader-response criticism, contemporary literary scholarship has recognised certain limitations when it is applied independently to complex literary texts. The Transactional Theory provides a compelling explanation of how individual readers construct meaning but offers comparatively less emphasis on the interaction of multiple social voices, ideological conflicts, historical narratives, and cultural discourses represented within literature. This limitation becomes particularly noticeable in the study of multicultural and diasporic fiction, where readers encounter competing identities, cultural memories, and diverse worldviews that extend beyond individual reader-text interaction. The fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni exemplifies this complexity through its exploration of migration, gender, identity, mythology, and intercultural relationships. Her narratives require readers not only to respond personally but also to engage critically with diverse cultural perspectives and historical experiences. These observations suggest that Rosenblatt's reader-centred approach becomes even more comprehensive when considered alongside dialogic perspectives that foreground the interaction of multiple voices. Such a synthesis expands the scope of transactional reading and offers a richer understanding of literary interpretation in contemporary higher education.

2.3 Critical Reading in Language and Literature

Critical reading has become one of the most significant intellectual competencies in contemporary language and literature education because it enables readers to move beyond literal comprehension towards deeper interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and reflective judgment. Unlike conventional reading, which often focuses on understanding factual information or identifying explicit meanings, critical reading encourages readers to question assumptions, recognise implicit ideas, examine evidence, compare multiple viewpoints, and formulate independent interpretations supported by textual analysis. It is therefore not a passive act of receiving information but an active process of inquiry in which readers engage intellectually with texts and continuously refine their understanding through reflection and dialogue. As Paul and Elder (2020) observe, "Critical thinking is the art of analysing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it." This perspective has significantly influenced literary education by positioning reading as a process of intellectual exploration rather than the simple acquisition of knowledge.

The concept of critical reading has evolved considerably over the past few decades in response to changing educational priorities and theoretical developments. Earlier approaches primarily emphasised textual comprehension, vocabulary development, and the identification of literary elements such as plot, characterisation, and theme. Contemporary perspectives, however, draw upon reader-response criticism, critical literacy, sociocultural theory, discourse analysis, and constructivist learning to explain how readers actively construct meaning within broader social and cultural contexts. Reading is now recognised as an interactive process involving continuous negotiation between the reader, the text, and the surrounding world. Consequently, literary interpretation extends beyond identifying what a text communicates to exploring why it communicates in particular ways, whose perspectives are represented, which voices are marginalised, and how cultural, historical, and ideological influences shape meaning. Such an approach encourages readers to appreciate literature as a reflection of complex human experiences rather than as a collection of fixed truths.

Within higher education, critical reading has become increasingly important because university students are expected to demonstrate analytical reasoning, evidence-based argumentation, independent judgment, and intellectual curiosity across academic disciplines. Literature provides a particularly rich environment for developing these abilities because literary texts frequently present ambiguous situations, conflicting viewpoints, ethical dilemmas, and culturally diverse experiences that resist simple interpretation. As readers engage with these complexities, they learn to synthesise ideas, evaluate competing arguments, identify patterns, recognise contradictions, and develop well-supported conclusions. Critical reading also strengthens communication skills by enabling learners to articulate interpretations clearly, participate confidently in academic discussions, and defend their viewpoints

using textual evidence. Consequently, universities across the world increasingly recognise critical reading as an essential graduate attribute that contributes not only to academic achievement but also to lifelong learning, professional competence, and responsible citizenship.

Despite its recognised importance, the effective teaching of critical reading continues to present significant pedagogical challenges. In many educational contexts, literature instruction remains heavily examination-oriented, emphasising factual recall, author-centred explanations, and predetermined interpretations instead of encouraging reflective inquiry and independent analysis. Students frequently become accustomed to reproducing accepted interpretations rather than questioning assumptions, exploring alternative perspectives, or engaging critically with textual complexities. Furthermore, existing approaches often emphasise isolated dimensions of literary interpretation, such as cognitive comprehension, ideological critique, or personal response, without integrating these complementary perspectives into a unified model of critical engagement. This fragmented approach may limit students' ability to appreciate how literary meaning develops through the interaction of personal experience, textual dialogue, cultural context, and reflective reasoning.

These challenges become even more apparent when readers encounter multicultural and diasporic literature, where narratives often present diverse identities, historical memories, cultural negotiations, and ethical complexities. The fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni exemplifies such literary richness by portraying characters whose lives are shaped by migration, gender, mythology, family relationships, and intercultural encounters. Understanding these narratives requires readers to engage not only with the text itself but also with the multiple voices, cultural contexts, and ideological perspectives that inform literary meaning. Critical reading therefore becomes a dialogic and reflective process through which readers negotiate personal responses alongside broader social and cultural interpretations. This broader understanding of critical reading provides a strong theoretical foundation for developing integrated approaches that combine reader engagement, dialogic interaction, and analytical inquiry, thereby enriching literary interpretation and strengthening contemporary literature pedagogy.

2.4 Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Fiction and the Research Gap

Among contemporary Indian English writers, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni occupies a distinctive position for her insightful portrayal of identity, migration, memory, gender, and cultural transformation. Since the publication of *Arranged Marriage* (1995), her literary works have consistently explored the emotional and cultural experiences of individuals negotiating the boundaries between homeland and diaspora, tradition and modernity, and personal aspirations and collective responsibilities. Her novels, including *The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart*, *The Vine of Desire*, *Queen of Dreams*, *One Amazing Thing*, *The Palace of Illusions*, *Before We Visit the Goddess*, *The Forest of Enchantments*, *The Last Queen*, and *Independence*, illustrate the complexities of human relationships within multicultural and transnational settings. By combining realism with mythology, history, folklore, and psychological insight, Divakaruni creates narratives that resonate with readers across cultural and geographical boundaries. Her fiction therefore offers an important literary space for examining the interaction between culture, identity, memory, and interpretation.

A substantial body of literary scholarship has examined Divakaruni's works from diverse critical perspectives. Researchers have explored her fiction through postcolonial theory, feminism, diaspora studies, cultural hybridity, ecofeminism, trauma studies, mythology, identity politics, and transnationalism. Much of this scholarship has focused on the struggles of immigrant communities, women's agency, family relationships, cultural adaptation, intergenerational conflict, and the search for belonging in unfamiliar environments. Her reinterpretation of Indian mythology, particularly through *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments*, has received considerable attention for presenting female perspectives that challenge patriarchal narratives. Likewise, her historical novels have been appreciated for recovering marginalised voices and presenting alternative interpretations of India's past. Collectively, these studies demonstrate the richness of Divakaruni's literary imagination and her ability to represent the complexities of contemporary human experience from multiple perspectives.

Another notable characteristic of Divakaruni's fiction is its dialogic narrative structure. Her narratives frequently incorporate multiple narrators, shifting perspectives, intersecting storylines, and diverse

cultural voices that encourage readers to engage actively with the interpretative process. Rather than presenting characters as representatives of fixed identities, she portrays individuals whose beliefs and experiences evolve through continuous interaction with changing social and cultural environments. Questions relating to migration, gender, family, history, spirituality, and identity often remain open-ended, inviting readers to reflect critically rather than accept predetermined conclusions. This narrative openness closely reflects Bakhtin's understanding of dialogic literature, where meaning develops through interaction among multiple voices instead of emerging from a single authoritative perspective. At the same time, the emotional richness of her storytelling encourages readers to participate aesthetically while also drawing intellectual, cultural, and ethical insights from the reading experience, reflecting the principles of Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory.

Despite the considerable scholarly attention devoted to Divakaruni's writings, an important gap remains within the existing literature. Most previous studies have concentrated on thematic interpretation, ideological analysis, feminist concerns, diasporic identity, or postcolonial representation. While these investigations have significantly enhanced the understanding of her literary contributions, comparatively little attention has been given to how readers construct critical interpretations while engaging with her narratives. Reader-response studies generally emphasise personal engagement, whereas Bakhtinian scholarship primarily examines narrative plurality and dialogic discourse. These traditions have largely developed independently, resulting in limited exploration of how dialogic interaction and transactional reading together contribute to critical literary interpretation. This separation is particularly noticeable in higher education, where students require structured approaches that connect personal reflection with analytical inquiry and intercultural understanding.

The growing emphasis on critical literacy and higher-order thinking in contemporary literature classrooms highlights the need for a more integrated theoretical perspective. Divakaruni's fiction, characterised by multiple voices, layered identities, ethical dilemmas, and culturally diverse experiences, provides an ideal context for such integration. Her narratives encourage readers to negotiate meaning through continuous interaction with characters, historical memories, cultural traditions, and competing ideological viewpoints. Examining these texts through a combined dialogic and transactional perspective offers opportunities to understand literary interpretation as both an individual and a socially situated process. Consequently, Divakaruni's fiction serves not merely as the corpus for literary analysis but also as an appropriate foundation for advancing a more comprehensive understanding of critical reading that bridges reader engagement, dialogic inquiry, and reflective interpretation in contemporary literary studies.

3. BAKHTINIAN–ROSENBLATT FRAMEWORK FOR CRITICAL READING (BRFCR): THEORETICAL SYNTHESIS AND CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

3.1 Theoretical Foundation of the Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading (BRFCR)

The study of literary interpretation has undergone significant transformation over the past several decades, reflecting broader changes in the understanding of language, reading, and knowledge construction. Earlier literary criticism often regarded meaning as an inherent property of the text or as an expression of the author's intended message. Readers were therefore expected to identify predetermined meanings through close textual analysis, leaving little scope for personal interpretation or cultural negotiation. Contemporary literary theory, however, has increasingly recognised that meaning is neither fixed nor independent of the reading process. Instead, literary understanding develops through the interaction between readers, texts, and the social environments in which reading takes place. This shift has encouraged scholars to explore theories that acknowledge the active role of readers while also recognising the influence of cultural, historical, and ideological contexts on literary interpretation. Within this evolving intellectual landscape, the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin and Louise M. Rosenblatt have emerged as two of the most influential perspectives for understanding how readers construct meaning from literary texts.

Although both scholars emphasise the active nature of literary interpretation, they approach the reading process from complementary perspectives. Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of Reading explains how readers create meaning through a dynamic interaction with a literary text. According to her, reading is

a lived experience in which individual knowledge, emotions, cultural background, beliefs, and previous experiences shape the interpretation of literature. Her distinction between efferent and aesthetic reading further demonstrates that readers continuously move between acquiring information and experiencing literature emotionally, intellectually, and imaginatively. This perspective has significantly influenced reader-response criticism by establishing readers as active participants in the construction of literary meaning rather than passive recipients of textual information. Nevertheless, Rosenblatt's theory primarily concentrates on the relationship between an individual reader and a text, giving comparatively less attention to the interaction of multiple social voices, ideological positions, and cultural discourses that frequently characterise literary narratives.

Bakhtin's theory of dialogism complements this reader-centred perspective by explaining how literary meaning develops through interaction among diverse voices, cultures, and historical contexts. His concepts of dialogism, polyphony, and heteroglossia illustrate that literary texts are composed of multiple perspectives that coexist without being reduced to a single authoritative interpretation. Meaning therefore emerges through dialogue, negotiation, and continuous engagement with competing viewpoints rather than through the acceptance of fixed conclusions. Bakhtin broadens the scope of literary interpretation by demonstrating that readers inevitably engage with cultural traditions, historical memories, ideological differences, and linguistic diversity while interpreting texts. His theory therefore provides a valuable sociocultural dimension that extends beyond individual reader response and situates literary understanding within broader contexts of human communication and cultural interaction.

Despite their considerable influence on literary scholarship, these two theoretical traditions have generally evolved independently. Reader-response criticism has concentrated on the reader's personal engagement with literature, whereas dialogic criticism has focused on textual plurality and social discourse. Consequently, relatively limited attention has been devoted to examining how these complementary perspectives may be integrated into a unified conceptual model of critical reading. This separation becomes particularly evident in the study of multicultural literature, where readers are required to negotiate personal responses while simultaneously engaging with diverse cultural identities, historical experiences, and competing ideological perspectives. Such literary texts demand an interpretative approach that values both individual meaning-making and dialogic interaction. The Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading (BRFCR) emerges from this theoretical convergence. Rather than replacing either theory, the framework synthesises their complementary strengths to provide a more comprehensive understanding of literary interpretation. It recognises that readers initially construct meaning through transactional engagement with a text while continuously refining that understanding through dialogue with multiple voices, cultural contexts, and alternative perspectives. Literary reading is therefore conceptualised as an evolving process in which personal reflection, textual interaction, social dialogue, and critical inquiry function together to generate deeper interpretation. This theoretical synthesis not only bridges two influential traditions in literary criticism but also provides a stronger conceptual foundation for critical reading in contemporary higher education. By integrating individual experience with dialogic engagement, the BRFCR offers a holistic perspective that is particularly relevant for analysing the culturally layered and polyphonic narratives found in the fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, thereby establishing the conceptual basis for the framework developed in the following sections.

3.2 Development of the Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading (BRFCR)

The Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading (BRFCR) has been developed through the theoretical synthesis of two complementary traditions in literary studies: Bakhtin's dialogic philosophy and Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of Reading. Rather than treating these theories as independent approaches, the framework recognises that each addresses dimensions of literary interpretation that the other leaves comparatively unexplored. Rosenblatt explains how readers construct meaning through personal engagement with a literary text, whereas Bakhtin demonstrates how that meaning evolves through interaction with multiple voices, cultural discourses, historical contexts, and ideological perspectives. Bringing these perspectives together establishes a broader understanding of critical reading that acknowledges both the individuality of readers and the social nature of literary meaning. The resulting framework therefore conceptualises literary interpretation as an interactive, reflective, and

dialogic process through which readers continuously negotiate meaning across personal, textual, and sociocultural dimensions.

The development of the BRFCR was guided by the recognition that contemporary literary education requires theoretical models capable of addressing the complexity of modern literary texts. Multicultural and diasporic narratives frequently present overlapping cultural identities, conflicting value systems, fragmented historical memories, and diverse ideological positions that cannot be adequately explained through a single theoretical perspective. Readers engaging with such texts are expected not only to understand narrative content but also to interpret symbolism, evaluate competing viewpoints, question cultural assumptions, and reflect upon their own responses. Existing reader-response models successfully explain individual engagement with literature but provide limited guidance for understanding how social dialogue and multiple textual voices shape interpretation. Similarly, dialogic theory highlights the interaction of voices within literary discourse but offers comparatively less emphasis on the experiential relationship between individual readers and literary texts. The BRFCR addresses these complementary limitations by integrating both perspectives into a unified conceptual structure that reflects the multidimensional nature of literary reading.

The framework proposes that critical reading unfolds through a sequence of interconnected intellectual processes rather than through isolated stages of comprehension. Reading begins with transactional engagement, where readers approach a literary text with their existing knowledge, beliefs, emotions, cultural experiences, and reading purposes. This initial interaction enables readers to establish personal connections with characters, themes, settings, and narrative events while simultaneously constructing preliminary interpretations. As reading progresses, these initial responses become increasingly dialogic. Readers encounter contrasting viewpoints, conflicting ideologies, cultural differences, and multiple narrative voices that encourage them to reconsider earlier assumptions and refine their understanding. Interpretation therefore becomes an evolving process of reflection in which personal experience interacts continuously with textual plurality and broader sociocultural contexts. Building upon this process, the BRFCR identifies several interconnected dimensions that collectively contribute to critical literary interpretation. Dialogic engagement encourages readers to recognise and interact with the diverse voices represented within literary texts. Transactional reading explains how readers actively construct meaning through their personal experiences and cultural backgrounds. Efferent reading supports analytical understanding by focusing on factual information, narrative development, and conceptual knowledge, whereas aesthetic reading encourages emotional, imaginative, and experiential involvement with literary language. These complementary reading orientations are further enriched through polyphonic interpretation, where readers appreciate the coexistence of multiple perspectives without seeking a single authoritative conclusion. Continuous critical reflection enables readers to evaluate assumptions, compare interpretations, and reconsider established viewpoints, while meaning negotiation facilitates the synthesis of personal understanding with broader cultural and historical perspectives. The framework ultimately promotes intercultural understanding, encouraging readers to appreciate diversity, empathy, and ethical awareness through sustained engagement with literature.

The integrated nature of the BRFCR distinguishes it from conventional models of literary reading. Rather than presenting interpretation as a linear movement from comprehension to analysis, the framework views literary engagement as a dynamic and recursive process in which readers repeatedly move between personal response, dialogic interaction, critical reflection, and interpretative refinement. Each dimension influences and strengthens the others, creating a continuous cycle of inquiry that deepens literary understanding. This conceptual organisation is particularly relevant to the fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, whose narratives invite readers to negotiate questions of identity, migration, gender, mythology, history, and cultural belonging through multiple narrative voices and perspectives. Consequently, the BRFCR provides a comprehensive theoretical model that explains not only how readers interpret literary texts but also how critical understanding develops through the continuous interaction of individual experience, textual dialogue, and sociocultural engagement.

3.3 Core Dimensions of the Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading (BRFCR)

The Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading (BRFCR) is founded on a set of interconnected dimensions that collectively explain how readers construct, negotiate, and refine literary

meaning. Rather than functioning as isolated components, these dimensions operate simultaneously throughout the reading process, enabling readers to engage with literature from cognitive, emotional, cultural, and dialogic perspectives. The framework recognises that critical literary interpretation develops through continuous interaction between the reader, the text, and the broader sociocultural environment. Each dimension contributes a distinct yet complementary role, creating a holistic approach to literary engagement that extends beyond conventional comprehension towards reflective and intellectually informed interpretation.

The first dimension, dialogic engagement, originates from Bakhtin's conception of language as an ongoing dialogue among diverse voices. Literary texts are viewed as spaces where characters, narrators, cultures, histories, and ideologies interact without being reduced to a single authoritative perspective. Readers therefore engage not only with the narrative but also with the competing viewpoints embedded within it. This dialogic interaction encourages them to question assumptions, compare perspectives, and appreciate the complexity of human experience represented through literature. Instead of seeking one definitive interpretation, readers recognise that multiple meanings may coexist, each shaped by different social and cultural contexts.

The second dimension, transactional reading, reflects Rosenblatt's understanding that literary meaning emerges through the interaction between the reader and the text. Every reader approaches literature with unique experiences, beliefs, emotions, cultural knowledge, and expectations, all of which influence interpretation. Reading thus becomes an active process of meaning construction rather than passive information retrieval. Personal experiences enable readers to establish emotional and intellectual connections with literary characters and events while simultaneously encouraging them to reflect on their own values and assumptions. Transactional reading therefore provides the individual foundation upon which deeper literary understanding is built.

Within this transactional process, the framework incorporates the complementary orientations of efferent and aesthetic reading. Efferent reading supports analytical inquiry by directing attention towards factual understanding, narrative structure, thematic development, historical context, and conceptual knowledge. It enables readers to identify key ideas, examine literary techniques, and construct logical interpretations based on textual evidence. Aesthetic reading, in contrast, focuses on the lived experience of engaging with literature. Readers respond to imagery, symbolism, emotions, rhythm, language, and imagination while appreciating the artistic qualities of the text. The BRFCR recognises that effective critical reading requires movement between these two orientations, allowing analytical reasoning and emotional engagement to enrich one another throughout the interpretative process.

Building upon these dimensions, the framework introduces polyphonic interpretation, critical reflection, meaning negotiation, and intercultural understanding as higher-order processes that deepen literary engagement. Polyphonic interpretation encourages readers to appreciate the coexistence of diverse voices without privileging a single perspective. Critical reflection enables readers to evaluate assumptions, reconsider initial responses, and develop more balanced interpretations through evidence-based reasoning. Meaning negotiation occurs when readers continuously revise their understanding by integrating personal insights with alternative viewpoints encountered within the text and through scholarly discussion. This process ultimately fosters intercultural understanding, enabling readers to appreciate cultural diversity, historical consciousness, ethical responsibility, and social empathy through sustained engagement with literature.

Together, these dimensions establish the BRFCR as an integrated framework for critical literary interpretation. Rather than progressing through rigid or sequential stages, readers move dynamically among these interconnected dimensions as their understanding evolves. Personal response stimulates dialogic inquiry; dialogic inquiry encourages reflection; reflection refines interpretation; and refined interpretation promotes deeper cultural and ethical awareness. This recursive process is particularly valuable when analysing the fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, where narratives are characterised by multiple voices, shifting identities, diasporic experiences, mythological reinterpretations, and intercultural encounters. Through the interaction of these dimensions, the BRFCR explains how literary reading becomes a process of continuous intellectual growth, enabling readers to construct interpretations that are analytically rigorous, culturally informed, and critically reflective.

3.4 Conceptual Relationships and Educational Application of the Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading (BRFCR)

The strength of the Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading (BRFCR) lies not merely in the individual dimensions it incorporates but in the dynamic relationships that exist among them. Rather than functioning as independent elements, dialogic engagement, transactional reading, efferent reading, aesthetic reading, polyphonic interpretation, critical reflection, meaning negotiation, and intercultural understanding operate as an interconnected system of literary inquiry. Each dimension influences and reinforces the others, enabling readers to progress from initial comprehension to deeper critical interpretation. Consequently, literary reading is understood as a recursive process in which readers continually revisit, revise, and refine their interpretations as they encounter new textual evidence, alternative perspectives, and broader sociocultural contexts.

The interpretative process begins when readers establish a transactional relationship with a literary text. Drawing upon their personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, beliefs, emotions, and prior knowledge, readers develop preliminary responses to characters, events, and themes. These initial interpretations are subsequently enriched through dialogic engagement, as readers encounter diverse voices, contrasting ideologies, and multiple narrative perspectives embedded within the text. Rather than confirming their initial assumptions, readers are encouraged to question them by comparing different viewpoints and recognising the complexity of literary representation. This interaction transforms reading from an individual cognitive activity into a collaborative process of intellectual exploration, where understanding develops through continuous dialogue between the reader and the text.

As readers progress through the interpretative process, efferent and aesthetic reading function simultaneously to deepen literary understanding. Efferent reading enables readers to identify narrative structure, thematic patterns, historical references, and conceptual relationships that contribute to analytical comprehension. At the same time, aesthetic reading encourages emotional engagement with literary language, imagery, symbolism, and character development, allowing readers to appreciate the experiential qualities of literature. The interaction of these complementary orientations ensures that literary interpretation remains balanced, combining logical analysis with imaginative and emotional involvement. This integration prevents reading from becoming either a purely academic exercise or an entirely subjective response, instead fostering a comprehensive understanding that values both intellectual rigour and aesthetic appreciation.

The framework reaches a higher level of interpretation through polyphonic interpretation, critical reflection, and meaning negotiation. Polyphonic interpretation enables readers to appreciate that literary narratives frequently contain multiple voices representing different cultural identities, historical experiences, ethical positions, and ideological perspectives. Instead of privileging a single authoritative interpretation, readers learn to recognise diversity as an essential characteristic of literary meaning. Critical reflection encourages them to evaluate textual evidence, reconsider earlier assumptions, and examine the broader implications of their interpretations. Through meaning negotiation, readers integrate their personal responses with the diverse perspectives encountered within the narrative and through scholarly discussion, gradually constructing more nuanced and balanced interpretations. This evolving process ultimately promotes intercultural understanding, enabling readers to appreciate cultural diversity, ethical responsibility, and social empathy while recognising the interconnectedness of literature and human experience.

The educational value of the BRFCR becomes particularly evident in the teaching of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fiction. Her narratives explore migration, gender, mythology, identity, history, and cultural belonging through multiple narrators and diverse ideological perspectives. Within the classroom, the framework encourages students to move beyond identifying themes towards analysing how characters negotiate cultural differences, historical memories, and conflicting value systems. Students engage in collaborative discussions, compare interpretations, support their arguments with textual evidence, and reflect upon the influence of their own cultural experiences on literary understanding. Such practices cultivate analytical reasoning, interpretative flexibility, intercultural competence, empathy, and independent judgment—qualities increasingly recognised as essential outcomes of higher education. Consequently, the Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading extends beyond theoretical synthesis to provide a practical pedagogical model that strengthens literary instruction by integrating personal engagement, dialogic inquiry, critical reflection, and culturally informed interpretation into a

unified approach to reading. This conceptual relationship among the framework's dimensions establishes a robust foundation for advancing critical literary pedagogy and prepares readers to engage thoughtfully with the complexity and diversity of contemporary literature.

4. APPLICATION OF BRFCR TO CHITRABANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S FICTION

4.1 Applying the Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading (BRFCR) to Literary Interpretation

The Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading (BRFCR) offers a comprehensive approach to literary interpretation by integrating the reader-centred principles of Louise M. Rosenblatt with the dialogic philosophy of Mikhail Bakhtin. This integration broadens the understanding of literary reading by recognising that interpretation emerges not only through the interaction between the reader and the text but also through engagement with the multiple voices, cultural perspectives, and historical contexts represented within literary narratives. Consequently, the framework redefines critical reading as an evolving intellectual process in which readers continuously construct, examine, revise, and deepen their understanding through reflective dialogue. Rather than treating literary meaning as a predetermined outcome, the BRFCR views interpretation as an open-ended process shaped by personal experience, textual complexity, and sociocultural interaction.

The application of this framework begins with the reader's initial encounter with a literary text. Every reader approaches literature with a unique combination of experiences, beliefs, emotions, educational background, cultural identity, and prior knowledge. These personal resources influence the first impressions formed during reading and determine how characters, events, symbols, and themes are initially understood. In Rosenblatt's transactional perspective, such responses are essential because they establish the foundation for literary engagement. The BRFCR extends this understanding by proposing that these initial interpretations are not final conclusions but starting points for further inquiry. As readers continue interacting with the text, they encounter alternative viewpoints, conflicting values, and diverse cultural experiences that encourage them to reconsider their earlier assumptions and develop more comprehensive interpretations.

This process becomes particularly significant when readers engage with literary works characterised by cultural plurality and narrative complexity. Texts that portray migration, identity, gender, historical memory, or intercultural relationships rarely present a single, authoritative perspective. Instead, they invite readers to negotiate meaning by examining diverse voices and contrasting worldviews. Bakhtin's concept of dialogism provides the theoretical basis for understanding this interaction. Within the BRFCR, dialogic engagement encourages readers to recognise that every character, narrator, and cultural perspective contributes to the development of literary meaning. Interpretation therefore emerges through the interaction of these voices rather than through the acceptance of one dominant explanation. Readers become active participants in an ongoing dialogue with the text, questioning motivations, comparing perspectives, and evaluating the ethical, cultural, and historical dimensions of the narrative.

The fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni provides an especially appropriate context for applying the BRFCR because her narratives consistently explore the intersections of culture, identity, memory, and belonging. Her novels frequently portray characters negotiating the tensions between tradition and modernity, homeland and diaspora, individual aspirations and collective expectations. These experiences are represented through multiple narrative voices that encourage readers to appreciate the complexity of human relationships rather than reduce them to simplified interpretations. For example, in *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi's narration presents an alternative interpretation of the Mahabharata, prompting readers to reconsider familiar historical and mythological narratives from a female perspective. Similarly, *The Forest of Enchantments* reconstructs the story of the Ramayana through Sita's voice, challenging conventional assumptions while encouraging dialogue between traditional interpretations and contemporary understandings of gender, identity, and justice. Such narratives naturally align with the principles of dialogic reading because they invite readers to compare competing perspectives and reflect critically on established cultural narratives.

The BRFCR further demonstrates that literary interpretation extends beyond identifying themes or analysing literary techniques. Readers are encouraged to examine how language, symbolism, cultural

memory, and historical experience interact to shape meaning. Personal responses generated through transactional reading are continuously refined through dialogic engagement with textual plurality, leading to deeper critical reflection and more balanced interpretation. This recursive process transforms reading into an intellectual journey where understanding evolves through questioning, dialogue, and evidence-based reasoning. By integrating Rosenblatt's emphasis on reader experience with Bakhtin's understanding of dialogic interaction, the BRFCR provides a systematic approach to literary interpretation that is particularly effective for analysing the culturally layered narratives of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. In doing so, it enables readers to develop interpretations that are not only analytically rigorous but also culturally responsive, ethically informed, and reflective of the complex realities represented in contemporary literature.

4.2 Dialogic Engagement and Transactional Reading in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Fiction

One of the defining strengths of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fiction is its ability to engage readers in a continuous dialogue with characters, cultures, histories, and moral perspectives. Her narratives do not present reality as singular or absolute; instead, they offer multiple viewpoints that invite readers to participate actively in the construction of meaning. This characteristic closely reflects the principles of the Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading (BRFCR), where literary understanding develops through the integration of dialogic engagement and transactional reading. While Rosenblatt emphasises the reader's personal interaction with the text, Bakhtin highlights the coexistence of multiple voices within literary discourse. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive explanation of how readers move beyond literal comprehension towards reflective and critical interpretation when engaging with Divakaruni's fiction.

Dialogic engagement begins when readers recognise that every literary voice contributes to the overall meaning of a narrative. In Divakaruni's novels, characters frequently represent diverse social backgrounds, cultural identities, and ideological positions. Rather than privileging a single perspective, her narratives allow these voices to coexist, interact, and occasionally challenge one another. Such narrative plurality encourages readers to examine differing viewpoints before arriving at informed interpretations. For example, *One Amazing Thing* presents individuals from different nationalities, religions, professions, and generations who become connected through shared experiences during an unexpected crisis. As each character recounts a personal story, readers encounter multiple understandings of love, loss, faith, resilience, and human relationships. Meaning therefore emerges not from one dominant narrative but from the interaction of these diverse life experiences. This dialogic structure enables readers to appreciate literature as an open conversation rather than a closed system of predetermined meanings.

The same dialogic richness is evident in Divakaruni's historical and mythological fiction. In *The Last Queen*, the life of Maharani Jindan Kaur is portrayed through a perspective that challenges conventional historical narratives by foregrounding the experiences of a woman whose political and personal struggles have often been marginalised. Likewise, *Independence* presents the social and emotional consequences of the Partition of India through the lives of three sisters whose experiences differ according to their personal choices, geographical locations, and historical circumstances. Readers are therefore encouraged to engage with history through multiple voices instead of accepting a single official account. Within the BRFCR, this process exemplifies dialogic engagement because interpretation develops through comparison, questioning, and negotiation among competing perspectives.

Alongside dialogic interaction, transactional reading plays an equally significant role in shaping literary understanding. Every reader approaches Divakaruni's fiction with individual memories, cultural experiences, educational backgrounds, and personal values that influence interpretation. A reader familiar with Indian mythology may respond differently to *The Palace of Illusions* than someone encountering the Mahabharata for the first time. Similarly, readers with personal experiences of migration may develop stronger emotional connections with characters navigating displacement and cultural adaptation in novels such as *The Mistress of Spices* or *Before We Visit the Goddess*. According to Rosenblatt's theory, these personal experiences are not external to literary interpretation but constitute an essential component of the reading process itself. The BRFCR extends this understanding by

recognising that readers continually revise their interpretations as they encounter alternative viewpoints within the narrative and through interaction with other readers.

The integration of dialogic engagement and transactional reading transforms literary interpretation into a process of continuous intellectual growth. Initial personal responses are expanded through dialogue with diverse textual voices, encouraging readers to reconsider assumptions, evaluate contrasting perspectives, and construct more balanced interpretations. This interaction strengthens empathy, intercultural awareness, ethical reasoning, and analytical thinking, all of which are essential characteristics of critical reading. Divakaruni's fiction, with its rich cultural settings, multidimensional characters, and layered narratives, provides an ideal environment for this interpretative process. Through the lens of the Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading, her works become more than literary narratives; they become dialogic spaces where readers actively negotiate meaning, reflect upon human diversity, and deepen their understanding of literature as a dynamic interaction between personal experience and the wider cultural world.

4.3 Critical Reading through the Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework: An Illustrative Analysis of Selected Novels

The practical significance of the Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading (BRFCR) becomes particularly evident when it is applied to selected novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, whose fiction is distinguished by its narrative plurality, cultural richness, and psychological depth. Her works invite readers to engage simultaneously with personal emotions, historical experiences, cultural traditions, and ethical dilemmas, making them especially suitable for demonstrating how the framework facilitates critical literary interpretation. Through the interaction of transactional reading and dialogic engagement, readers move beyond surface-level comprehension towards a deeper understanding of the multiple meanings embedded within literary narratives. The BRFCR therefore serves not merely as a theoretical model but as a practical guide for analysing complex literary texts through reflective and evidence-based interpretation.

An illustrative example can be found in *The Palace of Illusions*, where Divakaruni retells the Mahabharata through the voice of Draupadi. Readers familiar with the traditional epic often approach the novel with established assumptions regarding the principal characters and events. However, the narrative immediately challenges these assumptions by presenting Draupadi's personal reflections, emotional struggles, and intellectual insights. Through Rosenblatt's transactional perspective, readers interpret the narrative by connecting Draupadi's experiences with their own understanding of identity, justice, gender, and social expectations. Simultaneously, Bakhtinian dialogism encourages readers to recognise the coexistence of multiple voices within the narrative, including those representing duty, power, loyalty, ambition, and moral responsibility. Rather than accepting a single interpretation of the epic, readers compare these perspectives and negotiate meaning through critical reflection. The framework thus transforms the reading process into an exploration of how history, mythology, and personal experience interact to shape literary understanding.

A similar interpretative process is evident in *The Forest of Enchantments*, where the familiar narrative of the Ramayana is reconstructed through Sita's perspective. Instead of merely revisiting a celebrated mythological text, readers are encouraged to reconsider long-standing cultural assumptions concerning sacrifice, obedience, justice, and womanhood. Transactional reading enables readers to respond emotionally to Sita's experiences, while dialogic engagement encourages them to examine how her voice interacts with traditional representations of other characters. The coexistence of multiple viewpoints prevents readers from reaching immediate conclusions and instead motivates them to evaluate differing interpretations supported by textual evidence. Through this process, literary interpretation becomes increasingly reflective, demonstrating the recursive movement between personal response, critical inquiry, and dialogic understanding that characterises the BRFCR.

The framework is equally effective in interpreting Divakaruni's contemporary and historical novels. In *Independence*, for example, the Partition of India is portrayed through the experiences of three sisters whose lives are shaped by contrasting personal decisions and historical circumstances. Rather than presenting Partition solely as a political event, the novel foregrounds its emotional, cultural, and human consequences. Readers initially establish personal connections with the characters through transactional engagement before gradually recognising the diverse historical, religious, and ideological

perspectives represented throughout the narrative. Similarly, *The Last Queen* reconstructs the life of Maharani Jindan Kaur from a viewpoint that challenges conventional historical accounts, encouraging readers to examine questions of leadership, colonialism, gender, and resistance through multiple interpretative lenses. In both novels, literary meaning emerges through continuous interaction between reader experience and textual plurality rather than through predetermined historical conclusions.

The BRFCR therefore demonstrates that critical reading involves far more than identifying themes or analysing literary techniques. It encourages readers to synthesise emotional engagement with analytical reasoning while remaining attentive to cultural diversity and historical complexity. As interpretations evolve through dialogue with characters, narratives, and alternative viewpoints, readers develop greater interpretative flexibility, intercultural awareness, and ethical sensitivity. This integrated process strengthens higher-order thinking by encouraging readers to question assumptions, evaluate evidence, recognise ambiguity, and appreciate the coexistence of multiple truths within literature. When applied to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fiction, the framework illustrates how literary texts become dynamic spaces for intellectual exploration, where personal experience and dialogic interaction work together to produce interpretations that are critically informed, culturally responsive, and academically rigorous. Consequently, the Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading offers a valuable analytical approach for understanding contemporary literature while simultaneously enriching the teaching and learning of literary interpretation in higher education.

4.4 Pedagogical Value and Interpretative Significance of the Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading (BRFCR)

The Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading (BRFCR) extends beyond theoretical integration by offering a practical pedagogical model that supports the teaching and learning of literature in contemporary higher education. As universities increasingly emphasise critical thinking, intercultural competence, collaborative learning, and reflective inquiry, literature classrooms are expected to cultivate skills that enable students to interpret texts from multiple perspectives rather than merely reproduce established interpretations. The BRFCR responds to these educational expectations by positioning literary reading as an interactive process that combines personal engagement, dialogic inquiry, analytical reasoning, and cultural understanding. Consequently, the framework provides educators with a structured yet flexible approach to developing students' interpretative abilities while encouraging meaningful engagement with complex literary narratives.

One of the principal educational strengths of the BRFCR lies in its ability to transform the role of students from passive recipients of information into active participants in literary interpretation. Traditional approaches to literature teaching frequently emphasise author-centred explanations, thematic summaries, or examination-oriented responses that encourage students to memorise accepted interpretations. Although such methods may improve factual knowledge, they often provide limited opportunities for independent thinking or critical engagement. The BRFCR challenges this instructional model by encouraging students to construct interpretations through continuous interaction with literary texts and with one another. Classroom discussions become dialogic spaces where diverse viewpoints are welcomed, evaluated, and refined through evidence-based reasoning. Students learn to appreciate that literary interpretation is not the discovery of a single correct answer but the thoughtful negotiation of multiple perspectives supported by textual evidence.

The framework also promotes a balanced integration of cognitive, emotional, and cultural dimensions of learning. Through Rosenblatt's transactional perspective, students establish personal connections with literary characters, events, and themes by relating them to their own experiences, beliefs, and values. These initial responses create emotional investment in the reading process and motivate deeper engagement with the text. Bakhtinian dialogism subsequently broadens this individual perspective by encouraging students to consider alternative interpretations, cultural contexts, historical influences, and ideological differences represented within the narrative. As learners compare their own responses with those of their peers and with the multiple voices embedded in the text, they gradually develop greater interpretative flexibility and intellectual openness. This balanced interaction between personal reflection and dialogic inquiry strengthens critical thinking while simultaneously fostering empathy and respect for diverse perspectives.

The pedagogical value of the BRFCR becomes particularly evident when teaching the fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, whose narratives naturally encourage discussion, reflection, and intercultural dialogue. Novels such as *The Palace of Illusions*, *The Forest of Enchantments*, *Independence*, and *The Last Queen* present readers with complex questions relating to identity, migration, mythology, gender, history, and social justice. Instead of directing students towards predetermined conclusions, educators can employ the framework to facilitate collaborative exploration of these themes through close textual analysis, reflective writing, group discussions, and comparative interpretation. Students are encouraged to examine how different characters represent contrasting viewpoints, how cultural traditions influence individual choices, and how historical events shape personal identities. Such activities enable learners to appreciate literature as a living dialogue between the text, the reader, and society rather than as a static body of information to be memorised.

Beyond literature classrooms, the BRFCR contributes to broader educational objectives associated with twenty-first-century learning. The framework develops higher-order cognitive abilities such as analysis, evaluation, synthesis, interpretation, and reflective judgment while simultaneously promoting intercultural competence, ethical awareness, communication skills, and collaborative learning. These competencies are increasingly recognised as essential attributes of graduates who must navigate culturally diverse academic, professional, and social environments. By integrating Bakhtin's dialogic philosophy with Rosenblatt's transactional approach, the BRFCR provides a comprehensive pedagogical model that bridges literary theory and educational practice. It demonstrates that critical reading is not simply an academic exercise but a lifelong intellectual process through which individuals engage thoughtfully with diverse ideas, challenge assumptions, appreciate cultural plurality, and construct meaningful interpretations of both literature and the wider human experience. Consequently, the framework represents a significant contribution to contemporary literary pedagogy by offering an inclusive, intellectually rigorous, and culturally responsive approach to the teaching of critical reading in higher education.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Revisiting the Research Gap and Theoretical Integration

The present study originated from the recognition that existing approaches to critical reading, although theoretically valuable, do not fully explain the complex interpretative processes required for analysing contemporary multicultural and polyphonic literary texts. The increasing diversity of literary narratives, particularly those addressing migration, gender, cultural identity, historical memory, and postcolonial experiences, demands a critical reading model that acknowledges both the active role of the reader and the dialogic nature of literary discourse. While numerous studies have examined reader-response criticism and dialogic literary theory independently, relatively few have attempted to integrate these perspectives into a unified framework capable of explaining how readers construct, negotiate, and refine meaning through continuous interaction with literary texts. The Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading (BRFCR) was therefore conceptualised to address this theoretical gap by combining the complementary strengths of Louise Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory and Mikhail Bakhtin's Dialogic Theory.

The literature reviewed in this study demonstrated that Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory transformed literary criticism by redefining reading as a dynamic interaction between the reader and the text. Rather than treating literary meaning as an objective entity embedded exclusively within the text, Rosenblatt argued that meaning emerges through the transaction that occurs during the act of reading. Every reader approaches a text with distinctive experiences, emotions, cultural values, educational backgrounds, and personal beliefs, all of which contribute to interpretation. This perspective shifted attention from author-centred criticism towards reader-centred engagement and established the reader as an active participant in constructing literary meaning. However, the present study also observed that transactional reading primarily explains the individual reader's engagement with the text and provides comparatively limited attention to the multiple ideological, cultural, and social voices that interact within literary discourse. Consequently, although Rosenblatt's theory effectively explains personal meaning-making, it does not fully account for the dialogic relationships that influence interpretation in culturally complex narratives.

Conversely, Bakhtin's Dialogic Theory offers a broader understanding of literary discourse by emphasising that every text is composed of multiple voices, perspectives, and ideological positions that continuously interact with one another. Through concepts such as dialogism, heteroglossia, and polyphony, Bakhtin demonstrated that literary narratives do not present a single authoritative truth but instead encourage readers to encounter competing viewpoints and negotiate meaning through dialogue. His theory explains how language reflects cultural diversity, historical circumstances, and social interaction, making it particularly valuable for interpreting contemporary multicultural literature. Nevertheless, Bakhtin's work focuses primarily on the dialogic structure of texts and pays comparatively less attention to the cognitive and emotional processes through which individual readers experience and interpret those textual voices. As a result, while dialogism effectively explains the plurality of literary discourse, it does not fully describe how readers personally construct meaning during the reading process.

The present study argues that these theoretical limitations are complementary rather than contradictory. Rosenblatt foregrounds the reader's transaction with the text, whereas Bakhtin foregrounds the dialogic interaction among voices within the text. When considered independently, each theory provides only a partial explanation of critical literary interpretation. However, when integrated, they offer a more comprehensive understanding of how readers engage intellectually, emotionally, culturally, and ethically with literary narratives. The Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading therefore emerges as a conceptual synthesis that combines transactional engagement with dialogic inquiry, enabling readers to interpret literature through both personal reflection and critical interaction with multiple textual voices. This integration moves beyond the traditional distinction between text-centred and reader-centred criticism by recognising that literary meaning develops through continuous negotiation between readers' lived experiences and the diverse perspectives represented within the text. The necessity of such an integrated framework becomes particularly evident when analysing the fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Her novels consistently challenge readers to negotiate multiple cultural identities, historical narratives, gendered experiences, mythological reinterpretations, and diasporic realities. These narratives cannot be adequately interpreted through a single theoretical lens because they simultaneously demand emotional engagement, contextual understanding, dialogic interpretation, and critical reflection. The BRFCR responds to this complexity by providing a systematic interpretative model that accommodates both the reader's evolving responses and the multiplicity of voices embedded within the narrative. In doing so, the framework addresses an important theoretical gap within critical reading research and offers a more holistic approach to literary interpretation. It not only strengthens the conceptual relationship between Rosenblatt's and Bakhtin's theories but also establishes a new perspective for examining contemporary literature that is culturally layered, ideologically diverse, and dialogically constructed. Consequently, the BRFCR represents a meaningful theoretical advancement that broadens the scope of critical reading studies while providing a robust foundation for literary scholarship, classroom pedagogy, and future empirical research.

5.2 Discussion of the Dimensions of the Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading (BRFCR) and Their Interrelationship

A significant contribution of the present study lies in the conceptual development of the Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading (BRFCR), which reconceptualises critical reading as a multidimensional and interconnected interpretative process. Unlike conventional approaches that emphasise either textual analysis or reader response independently, the BRFCR demonstrates that meaningful literary interpretation emerges through the continuous interaction of four interrelated dimensions: Reader Transaction, Dialogic Engagement, Polyphonic Interpretation, and Critical Reflective Meaning Construction. These dimensions should not be understood as isolated stages that occur sequentially. Rather, they function as mutually reinforcing processes through which readers progressively deepen their understanding of literary texts. The discussion of these dimensions reveals that critical reading is an iterative process of reflection, dialogue, evaluation, and meaning-making, particularly when readers engage with culturally and ideologically complex literary narratives.

The first dimension, Reader Transaction, establishes the initial foundation for literary interpretation by recognising that every act of reading begins with the reader's personal engagement with the text. Consistent with Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory, this study argues that readers inevitably approach

literature with their own experiences, cultural backgrounds, emotions, beliefs, and prior knowledge. These individual characteristics influence the questions readers ask, the characters with whom they identify, and the meanings they initially construct. However, the BRFCR extends this transactional perspective by suggesting that personal responses should not be viewed as fixed or complete interpretations. Instead, they represent provisional understandings that remain open to revision as readers encounter additional perspectives within the narrative. Consequently, Reader Transaction serves as the point of entry into critical reading while simultaneously creating opportunities for deeper interpretative inquiry.

The second dimension, Dialogic Engagement, broadens the interpretative process by encouraging readers to interact critically with the multiple voices and perspectives embedded within literary discourse. Drawing upon Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, the framework recognises that literary narratives rarely communicate through a single authoritative voice. Instead, characters, narrators, cultural traditions, historical experiences, and ideological positions coexist and interact throughout the text. Dialogic Engagement therefore requires readers to move beyond personal reactions and examine how different voices question, complement, or challenge one another. Through this interaction, readers become active participants in an intellectual dialogue that promotes analytical thinking, intercultural understanding, and ethical reflection. Rather than searching for a single correct interpretation, they learn to appreciate the coexistence of multiple perspectives and the complexity of literary meaning.

The third dimension, Polyphonic Interpretation, represents a further development of dialogic inquiry by focusing on the coexistence of diverse and often competing interpretations within literary narratives. Polyphony, as conceptualised by Bakhtin, acknowledges that literary texts contain independent voices that retain their distinct identities instead of being subordinated to a dominant authorial viewpoint. Within the BRFCR, this principle encourages readers to recognise ambiguity, contradiction, and ideological diversity as essential features of literary interpretation. Readers are therefore required to evaluate different viewpoints, compare conflicting arguments, and synthesise textual evidence before constructing balanced interpretations. This process strengthens higher-order cognitive abilities by encouraging analytical reasoning rather than simplistic acceptance of predetermined meanings. Polyphonic Interpretation thus transforms literary reading into a reflective dialogue where understanding develops through comparison, negotiation, and critical evaluation.

The final dimension, Critical Reflective Meaning Construction, represents the culmination of the interpretative process while simultaneously initiating further cycles of inquiry. At this stage, readers integrate their transactional experiences, dialogic interactions, and polyphonic analyses to develop interpretations that are intellectually rigorous, culturally informed, and ethically responsible. Importantly, the framework does not regard meaning as a final or absolute conclusion. Instead, interpretations remain open to reconsideration as readers encounter new textual evidence, alternative cultural contexts, or additional scholarly perspectives. Critical reflection therefore becomes a continuous process of evaluating assumptions, refining interpretations, and expanding intellectual understanding. This recursive nature distinguishes the BRFCR from linear models of reading by recognising that literary interpretation evolves through repeated engagement rather than a single act of comprehension.

The interrelationship among these four dimensions constitutes the principal theoretical innovation of the BRFCR. Reader Transaction initiates engagement with the text; Dialogic Engagement broadens interpretation through interaction with multiple voices; Polyphonic Interpretation encourages the evaluation of competing perspectives; and Critical Reflective Meaning Construction synthesises these experiences into a comprehensive understanding while remaining receptive to further dialogue. Together, these dimensions create a dynamic interpretative cycle that reflects the complexity of contemporary literary reading. When applied to culturally layered narratives such as those of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the framework enables readers to appreciate the interconnectedness of personal experience, cultural diversity, historical consciousness, and ethical reasoning. Consequently, the BRFCR offers a comprehensive conceptual model that advances critical reading theory by integrating reader-centred engagement with dialogic literary interpretation, thereby providing a more holistic explanation of how meaning is continuously negotiated within literature.

5.3 Interpretative Insights from Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Fiction

The application of the Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading (BRFCR) to the fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni demonstrates the framework's capacity to facilitate a multidimensional understanding of literary texts that are culturally diverse, historically layered, and ideologically complex. Divakaruni's novels consistently challenge readers to move beyond literal comprehension by engaging with multiple narrative voices, alternative historical perspectives, evolving cultural identities, and intricate ethical dilemmas. The present study argues that these characteristics make her fiction particularly suitable for validating the proposed framework because meaningful interpretation cannot be achieved through either reader-centred or text-centred approaches alone. Instead, her narratives require an interpretative process in which readers actively negotiate meaning through the interaction of personal experience, dialogic inquiry, and critical reflection.

One of the most significant interpretative insights emerging from this study is that Divakaruni's fiction exemplifies polyphonic narration, where multiple voices coexist without being reduced to a single authoritative perspective. In novels such as *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments*, mythological narratives are reconstructed through the voices of Draupadi and Sita, respectively. Rather than merely presenting alternative versions of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, these narratives invite readers to reconsider familiar cultural traditions from perspectives that have historically remained marginalised. Through the BRFCR, readers begin with their own cultural assumptions and literary experiences, but these initial responses are gradually reshaped as they encounter competing viewpoints embedded within the narrative. Consequently, interpretation becomes a dialogic process in which traditional understandings interact with contemporary perspectives, enabling readers to appreciate the complexity of mythological reinterpretation instead of accepting inherited narratives uncritically.

A similar interpretative process is evident in Divakaruni's historical fiction, particularly *The Last Queen* and *Independence*, where history is presented not as a fixed sequence of political events but as a lived human experience shaped by diverse social voices. The experiences of Maharani Jindan Kaur in *The Last Queen* and the three sisters in *Independence* illustrate how historical events acquire meaning through individual lives, emotional struggles, and cultural memory. Within the BRFCR, readers are encouraged to move beyond factual understanding and examine how historical narratives are influenced by gender, power, colonialism, family relationships, and ideological conflict. Such an approach transforms historical fiction into an interactive space where readers continuously compare official historical discourse with personal narratives, thereby developing a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between history and literature.

The study further reveals that diasporic identity constitutes another important dimension through which the BRFCR enhances literary interpretation. Novels such as *The Mistress of Spices* and *Before We Visit the Goddess* portray migration as an ongoing negotiation between cultural continuity and personal transformation rather than as a simple geographical movement. Characters often experience tensions between homeland and adopted country, family expectations and individual aspirations, as well as tradition and modernity. The transactional dimension of the framework enables readers to relate these experiences to their own understanding of identity and belonging, while dialogic engagement encourages them to appreciate the multiple cultural voices influencing the characters' decisions. As a result, readers develop interpretations that acknowledge cultural hybridity, emotional displacement, and evolving identities without reducing these experiences to simplistic oppositions.

Another important insight concerns Divakaruni's sustained exploration of female agency and identity. Across her fiction, women are portrayed not merely as participants in social and historical events but as individuals who question inherited traditions, negotiate personal choices, and redefine their identities within changing cultural environments. The BRFCR enables readers to examine these narratives through multiple interpretative lenses by recognising the interaction between individual experiences and broader social structures. Rather than portraying gender solely as a theme, the framework demonstrates how female voices actively reshape literary discourse by introducing alternative interpretations of power, justice, responsibility, and selfhood. Readers therefore engage with these narratives not simply as stories of empowerment but as dialogic explorations of identity situated within complex cultural and historical contexts.

Collectively, these interpretative insights affirm the effectiveness of the Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading in analysing Divakaruni's fiction. The framework demonstrates that

literary meaning is constructed through the continuous interaction of reader experience, multiple textual voices, cultural knowledge, and reflective interpretation. It encourages readers to question assumptions, evaluate competing perspectives, and appreciate the coexistence of diverse interpretations within a single narrative. Consequently, the present study establishes that Divakaruni's fiction not only illustrates the practical applicability of the BRFCR but also validates its theoretical proposition that critical reading is fundamentally dialogic, transactional, and reflective. Through this integrated approach, literary interpretation becomes an intellectually rigorous and culturally responsive process capable of addressing the complexity of contemporary multicultural literature.

5.4 Theoretical, Pedagogical, and Scholarly Contributions of the Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading (BRFCR), Limitations, and Future Research Directions

The present study contributes to contemporary literary scholarship by proposing the Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading (BRFCR) as an integrated conceptual model that advances the understanding of critical literary interpretation. Although both Louise Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory and Mikhail Bakhtin's Dialogic Theory have individually influenced literary criticism and language education for several decades, their combined potential for developing a comprehensive critical reading framework has received limited scholarly attention. By synthesising these complementary theoretical perspectives, the present study extends existing knowledge beyond traditional reader-centred and text-centred approaches and establishes a multidimensional framework capable of explaining how readers construct, negotiate, and refine literary meaning through continuous interaction with diverse textual voices. Consequently, the BRFCR represents an important theoretical advancement in critical reading research by demonstrating that literary interpretation is simultaneously transactional, dialogic, polyphonic, and reflective.

From a theoretical perspective, the framework broadens the scope of reader-response criticism by incorporating the dialogic complexity of literary discourse into the process of meaning construction. Rosenblatt's theory successfully explains how readers actively participate in creating literary meaning through their experiences and responses, whereas Bakhtin's theory explains how multiple voices, ideologies, and cultural perspectives interact within literary texts. The BRFCR bridges these complementary perspectives by illustrating that effective literary interpretation requires both personal engagement and dialogic negotiation. This theoretical integration provides a more comprehensive explanation of critical reading than either theory offers independently. As a result, the framework contributes to literary studies by reconceptualising critical reading as an evolving process of interaction among readers, texts, cultural contexts, and competing ideological perspectives rather than as a search for fixed or predetermined meanings.

The framework also makes a significant pedagogical contribution by offering an innovative model for literature teaching in higher education. Contemporary classrooms increasingly emphasise critical thinking, intercultural communication, collaborative learning, and reflective inquiry as essential graduate attributes. The BRFCR aligns closely with these educational priorities by encouraging students to become active interpreters of literature instead of passive recipients of information. Through the integration of Reader Transaction, Dialogic Engagement, Polyphonic Interpretation, and Critical Reflective Meaning Construction, the framework enables learners to analyse literary texts from multiple perspectives while supporting their interpretations with textual evidence and contextual understanding. Such an approach transforms literature classrooms into dialogic learning environments where students develop analytical reasoning, ethical judgment, intercultural awareness, and intellectual independence. The framework therefore possesses considerable potential for curriculum design, literature pedagogy, teacher education programmes, and critical reading instruction across multidisciplinary educational contexts.

The present study further contributes to scholarly research on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fiction by demonstrating that her novels provide an ideal literary context for validating the proposed framework. While previous scholarship has examined themes such as feminism, diaspora, mythology, identity, migration, and postcolonial consciousness in her works, relatively limited attention has been given to the interpretative processes through which readers engage with these multilayered narratives. The BRFCR addresses this gap by illustrating how readers negotiate diverse cultural voices, historical experiences, mythological reinterpretations, and ideological tensions during literary interpretation.

Consequently, the framework not only enriches the study of Divakaruni's fiction but also establishes a methodological foundation for examining similarly polyphonic works by other contemporary postcolonial and multicultural writers.

Despite these contributions, the study acknowledges certain limitations. First, the BRFCR is developed as a conceptual framework grounded in established literary theories rather than through empirical classroom investigation. Accordingly, its educational effectiveness remains to be validated through experimental and qualitative studies involving students, teachers, and diverse learning environments. Second, the framework has been illustrated primarily through the fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Although her novels effectively demonstrate the applicability of the model, further studies are necessary to determine its relevance across different literary genres, linguistic traditions, historical periods, and cultural contexts. Finally, the quality of dialogic interpretation may vary according to readers' literary competence, cultural knowledge, and educational background, suggesting that effective implementation of the framework requires appropriate pedagogical guidance and contextual support.

These limitations provide valuable opportunities for future research. Subsequent studies may empirically investigate the effectiveness of the BRFCR in enhancing students' critical reading competence, interpretative writing, dialogic participation, and intercultural understanding within higher education. Comparative research could examine the applicability of the framework to other postcolonial, diasporic, historical, and world literature authors, thereby testing its adaptability across diverse literary traditions. Researchers may also explore its integration into digital learning environments, collaborative online reading platforms, and technology-assisted literature classrooms, where dialogic interaction increasingly occurs through virtual communication. Furthermore, interdisciplinary investigations combining literary studies, educational psychology, cognitive linguistics, and digital humanities may extend the explanatory potential of the framework by examining how readers construct meaning within emerging multimodal and AI-assisted reading environments. Collectively, these future directions indicate that the Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading represents not merely a theoretical synthesis but a sustainable foundation for advancing literary scholarship, critical reading pedagogy, and interdisciplinary research. Accordingly, the present study concludes that the BRFCR offers a coherent, innovative, and academically robust conceptual model capable of enriching both literary interpretation and critical reading instruction while opening new avenues for future scholarly inquiry.

6. EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading (BRFCR) offers important implications for literature education by presenting a comprehensive approach to critical reading that aligns with the evolving objectives of higher education. Contemporary universities increasingly emphasise the development of analytical thinking, intercultural competence, reflective learning, and collaborative problem-solving alongside disciplinary knowledge. Within this educational context, literary studies are expected to cultivate learners who can interpret texts critically, appreciate diverse cultural perspectives, and engage thoughtfully with complex social issues. The BRFCR responds effectively to these expectations by integrating reader-centred engagement with dialogic literary inquiry, thereby transforming literary reading into an intellectually interactive and culturally responsive learning experience.

One of the primary educational implications of the framework is the redefinition of the learner's role in literature classrooms. Traditional literature teaching has frequently been characterised by teacher-centred instruction, where students are expected to memorise themes, character analyses, or accepted critical interpretations for examination purposes. Such practices often restrict independent interpretation and discourage active engagement with literary texts. The BRFCR challenges this conventional approach by positioning students as active participants in the construction of literary meaning. Through transactional engagement, learners connect literary experiences with their own cultural backgrounds, values, and personal experiences. Subsequently, dialogic interaction encourages them to compare these responses with multiple textual voices and the interpretations of their peers. This process promotes intellectual curiosity, reflective inquiry, and analytical reasoning rather than passive knowledge acquisition.

The framework also has significant implications for the teaching of multicultural and postcolonial literature. In increasingly diverse classrooms, students encounter literary texts representing unfamiliar cultures, languages, religions, histories, and social experiences. Conventional interpretative models sometimes encourage learners to evaluate these narratives through their own cultural assumptions, resulting in limited or superficial understanding. The BRFCR addresses this challenge by encouraging readers to recognise literature as a dialogic space where multiple cultural perspectives coexist and interact. Students are guided to question stereotypes, examine historical contexts, appreciate cultural diversity, and negotiate alternative viewpoints before arriving at informed interpretations. Consequently, literature becomes an effective medium for developing intercultural sensitivity, empathy, and global citizenship, which are increasingly recognised as essential competencies in twenty-first-century education.

The pedagogical value of the framework is particularly evident when teaching the fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, whose narratives explore migration, mythology, gender, identity, historical memory, and cultural transformation. The BRFCR provides educators with a structured methodology for facilitating classroom discussions around these complex themes. Rather than directing students towards predetermined interpretations, teachers can encourage reflective reading journals, collaborative discussions, comparative textual analysis, role-based interpretation, and dialogic debates that enable learners to explore competing perspectives supported by textual evidence. Such learner-centred strategies strengthen higher-order cognitive skills including analysis, synthesis, evaluation, interpretation, and critical reflection while simultaneously improving communication and collaborative learning abilities.

Another important implication concerns assessment practices in literature education. Traditional assessment often prioritises factual recall or reproduction of established literary criticism. The BRFCR suggests that assessment should instead evaluate students' ability to justify interpretations, analyse multiple perspectives, integrate textual evidence, and demonstrate reflective thinking. Assessment activities may therefore include analytical essays, dialogic response papers, reflective portfolios, group presentations, literary discussions, and comparative interpretation tasks that measure students' capacity to construct informed and balanced literary interpretations. Such assessment practices better reflect the multidimensional nature of critical reading promoted by the framework.

The framework also has considerable relevance for teacher education and professional development. Literature teachers require not only subject knowledge but also the pedagogical skills necessary to facilitate dialogic learning environments where diverse opinions are respected and critically examined. The BRFCR encourages teachers to function as facilitators of inquiry rather than transmitters of fixed interpretations. By promoting evidence-based discussion, reflective questioning, and collaborative interpretation, educators can cultivate classrooms that value intellectual openness, ethical reasoning, and cultural inclusivity.

Beyond literature education, the principles underlying the BRFCR possess interdisciplinary relevance. Critical reading is an essential competency across disciplines such as history, sociology, law, political science, education, communication studies, and cultural studies, where learners must analyse multiple viewpoints and evaluate complex textual information. Accordingly, the framework offers a transferable model that supports critical literacy across higher education while preparing students to participate thoughtfully in increasingly multicultural and information-rich societies. The educational implications of the BRFCR therefore extend beyond literary criticism, positioning critical reading as a lifelong intellectual practice that fosters analytical competence, intercultural understanding, reflective judgment, and responsible academic engagement.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although the Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading (BRFCR) offers a comprehensive conceptual model for understanding literary interpretation, the present study acknowledges several limitations that should be considered when evaluating its scope and applicability. Recognising these limitations not only strengthens the transparency of the research but also identifies important directions for future scholarly investigation.

The first limitation arises from the conceptual nature of the study. The BRFCR has been developed through theoretical synthesis by integrating Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory with Bakhtin's

Dialogic Theory and illustrating its applicability through the fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. While this conceptual integration provides a strong theoretical foundation, the framework has not yet been empirically validated through classroom implementation or experimental investigation. Consequently, the educational effectiveness of the framework remains to be examined through qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method research involving students, teachers, and diverse educational contexts. Empirical validation would provide evidence regarding its influence on learners' critical reading ability, interpretative reasoning, dialogic participation, and reflective thinking.

A second limitation concerns the literary scope of the present investigation. The framework has been illustrated primarily through selected novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni because her fiction exemplifies dialogic plurality, multicultural narratives, historical reinterpretation, and polyphonic storytelling. Although these characteristics effectively demonstrate the practical applicability of the BRFCR, the findings cannot automatically be generalised to all literary traditions. Different genres, historical periods, linguistic traditions, and cultural contexts may present distinct interpretative challenges. Future studies should therefore examine the applicability of the framework to other postcolonial, diasporic, historical, feminist, and world literature authors in order to evaluate its adaptability across broader literary contexts.

Another limitation relates to the diversity of readers. Literary interpretation is influenced by readers' educational background, cultural identity, language proficiency, literary competence, and personal experiences. Readers possessing different levels of literary knowledge may engage with dialogic texts in different ways, producing varied interpretations of the same narrative. Although the BRFCR recognises interpretative plurality as an essential feature of critical reading, successful implementation of the framework may require appropriate instructional support to ensure that dialogic discussion remains analytically rigorous and textually grounded. Future investigations should therefore explore how learner characteristics influence the effectiveness of the framework across different educational levels and multicultural learning environments.

The framework also presents opportunities for expanding research into digital and technology-mediated learning environments. Contemporary literary engagement increasingly occurs through online discussion forums, virtual classrooms, collaborative annotation platforms, and AI-assisted learning systems. These emerging contexts introduce new forms of dialogic interaction that extend beyond traditional face-to-face classrooms. Future research may therefore investigate how the BRFCR can be adapted to digital learning environments and whether technology-enhanced collaborative reading further strengthens dialogic interpretation, critical reflection, and intercultural communication.

Another promising direction involves interdisciplinary research. Because the framework integrates literary theory with educational philosophy and critical reading pedagogy, it has the potential to contribute to disciplines such as language education, cognitive psychology, communication studies, cultural studies, educational technology, and digital humanities. Future scholars may examine the cognitive processes underlying transactional and dialogic reading, investigate the relationship between critical reading and metacognition, or explore how artificial intelligence can support dialogic literary interpretation while preserving human reflective judgment.

Longitudinal and comparative studies would further enhance understanding of the framework's educational value. Researchers may compare the effectiveness of the BRFCR with existing critical reading models, investigate its impact on learners over extended instructional periods, or evaluate its application across undergraduate, postgraduate, and teacher education programmes. Cross-cultural studies involving readers from different linguistic and national backgrounds may also provide valuable insights into how cultural diversity influences dialogic interpretation and meaning construction.

Despite these limitations, the present study establishes the Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading as a theoretically coherent and pedagogically relevant conceptual model that addresses an important gap in critical reading scholarship. The identified limitations should therefore be viewed not as weaknesses but as opportunities for continued scholarly development. Future empirical validation, interdisciplinary collaboration, and comparative literary research will further strengthen the explanatory potential of the framework and extend its contribution to literary studies, language education, and critical literacy research. Ultimately, the BRFCR provides a robust foundation for future investigations seeking to understand how readers negotiate meaning through the dynamic interaction of personal experience, dialogic engagement, and culturally situated literary interpretation.

8. CONCLUSION

The present investigation has established the Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading (BRFCR) as a comprehensive conceptual model for understanding the multidimensional nature of literary interpretation. By integrating Louise M. Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory with Mikhail Bakhtin's Dialogic Theory, the study has demonstrated that critical reading extends beyond conventional models that privilege either the reader's subjective engagement or the textual structure independently. Instead, literary interpretation emerges through a continuous interaction between readers' lived experiences, multiple textual voices, sociocultural contexts, and reflective inquiry. This theoretical integration contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and continuously reconstructed during the process of literary reading.

The study has demonstrated that critical reading should be viewed as a dynamic intellectual practice rather than a linear act of textual comprehension. Literary meaning does not reside exclusively within the text, nor is it created solely by the reader. Instead, meaning develops through a dialogic transaction in which readers actively negotiate the plurality of voices, ideological positions, cultural traditions, and historical experiences represented within literary narratives. This perspective broadens existing understandings of reader-response criticism by incorporating Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism, heteroglossia, and polyphony into the interpretative process. Consequently, the BRFCR offers a holistic explanation of literary engagement by recognising that effective interpretation requires personal reflection, dialogic interaction, analytical reasoning, and cultural awareness to function simultaneously. A major contribution of the study lies in the conceptualisation of the four interconnected dimensions of the BRFCR: Reader Transaction, Dialogic Engagement, Polyphonic Interpretation, and Critical Reflective Meaning Construction. These dimensions collectively redefine critical reading as a recursive process in which interpretation evolves through repeated interaction between the reader and the text. Reader Transaction establishes the initial interpretative relationship by acknowledging the influence of readers' experiences, beliefs, and prior knowledge. Dialogic Engagement expands this interaction by encouraging readers to examine multiple voices and ideological perspectives embedded within literary discourse. Polyphonic Interpretation enables readers to recognise ambiguity, contradiction, and the coexistence of diverse viewpoints, while Critical Reflective Meaning Construction synthesises these experiences into informed, balanced, and contextually grounded interpretations. Rather than functioning as independent stages, these dimensions operate as an integrated interpretative cycle that reflects the complexity of literary understanding.

The application of the framework to the fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has further demonstrated the interpretative strength and practical relevance of the BRFCR. Divakaruni's novels represent culturally layered narratives characterised by mythological reinterpretation, historical reconstruction, diasporic experiences, gendered identities, and multicultural negotiations. Such narratives demand interpretative approaches capable of accommodating multiple perspectives without reducing literary meaning to singular or predetermined explanations. The study has shown that the BRFCR enables readers to engage critically with these narratives by integrating personal responses with dialogic inquiry and contextual analysis. Through this process, readers develop interpretations that acknowledge the coexistence of competing cultural voices while remaining grounded in textual evidence and critical reasoning. The analysis therefore confirms that Divakaruni's fiction provides an appropriate literary context for illustrating how transactional reading and dialogic interpretation operate as complementary dimensions of critical literary engagement.

The investigation has also extended the theoretical boundaries of both Reader-Response Criticism and Dialogic Literary Theory. Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory successfully explains the active participation of readers in constructing literary meaning, whereas Bakhtin's Dialogic Theory illuminates the plurality of voices and ideological interactions that characterise literary discourse. The integration of these perspectives demonstrates that neither theory independently provides a complete explanation of critical reading. Their synthesis offers a more comprehensive interpretative framework capable of explaining how readers negotiate personal experience, textual plurality, cultural diversity, and historical consciousness throughout the reading process. This theoretical contribution enriches literary criticism by establishing meaningful connections between two influential traditions that have generally been discussed independently within literary scholarship.

Beyond its theoretical significance, the study contributes substantially to literature pedagogy by presenting a learner-centred model for critical reading instruction. The BRFCR aligns closely with the educational priorities of contemporary higher education, where critical thinking, intercultural competence, reflective learning, collaborative inquiry, and ethical reasoning are increasingly recognised as essential graduate attributes. The framework encourages literature classrooms to move beyond teacher-centred transmission of established interpretations towards dialogic learning environments where students actively construct meaning through discussion, reflection, textual analysis, and collaborative interpretation. Such an approach strengthens higher-order cognitive abilities while simultaneously promoting empathy, cultural sensitivity, intellectual openness, and evidence-based reasoning. Consequently, the BRFCR offers a pedagogically robust foundation for enhancing literary instruction and critical literacy across diverse educational contexts.

The study also contributes to the broader field of postcolonial and multicultural literary studies by demonstrating that culturally complex narratives require interpretative frameworks capable of recognising plurality, hybridity, and dialogic interaction. Contemporary literature increasingly represents multiple identities, contested histories, linguistic diversity, and evolving cultural realities that cannot be adequately understood through singular theoretical perspectives. The BRFCR addresses this need by providing an inclusive interpretative model that accommodates the complexity of multicultural literary discourse while maintaining analytical rigour and textual accountability. In doing so, the framework supports a more nuanced understanding of literature as a dialogic space where cultural identities, historical memories, ethical questions, and individual experiences intersect continuously. Although the investigation has established a strong conceptual foundation, it also opens new directions for future scholarly inquiry. The framework provides opportunities for empirical validation within literature classrooms, comparative applications across diverse literary traditions, interdisciplinary investigations involving educational psychology and digital humanities, and examinations of critical reading within multilingual and technology-enhanced learning environments. Such future research will further strengthen the explanatory capacity of the framework while extending its relevance to broader educational and literary contexts.

In conclusion, the Bakhtinian–Rosenblatt Framework for Critical Reading (BRFCR) represents a meaningful advancement in contemporary literary scholarship by offering a coherent, multidimensional, and theoretically integrated model of critical reading. The study has demonstrated that literary interpretation is fundamentally dialogic, transactional, reflective, and culturally situated, emerging through the continuous interaction between readers, texts, historical contexts, and multiple voices. By synthesising the complementary insights of Rosenblatt and Bakhtin, the investigation has broadened the theoretical understanding of critical reading while simultaneously establishing a pedagogically relevant framework for literary education. The BRFCR therefore contributes not only to reader-response theory and dialogic literary criticism but also to critical literacy, postcolonial literary studies, and higher education pedagogy. Ultimately, the framework reaffirms literature as a dynamic space for intellectual inquiry, cultural dialogue, ethical reflection, and lifelong learning, offering a sustainable foundation for future scholarship in literary interpretation and critical reading research.

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ETHICAL DECLARATIONS

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Not applicable. This study is a conceptual investigation based exclusively on published scholarly literature and does not involve human participants, animals, or identifiable personal data.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable.

Availability of Data and Materials

No datasets were generated or analysed during this study. All information supporting the findings is derived from publicly available published sources cited in the reference list.

Competing Interests

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All authors contributed substantially to the conceptualisation, theoretical development, literature synthesis, manuscript preparation, and critical revision of the study. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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