

TEACHING LITERATURE TO COLLEGES STUDENTS IN INDIA: NECESSITY AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Our times have mercifully seen a return to literature in the academic curricula in colleges and universities. The overmuch focus so far on science and technology and the popularity of postmodern ethos denying all hierarchies had resulted in decline of appreciation of values in society. We are at present in a world which cares only for material success and this has led to phenomenal rise in crime and cruelty all over the world. The academic administrators too have felt that in order to turn the tide and create a humane society, study of literature is essential for the youth. But teaching literature has a lot of real problems -- from the use of mobile phone in classroom to copy-pasting material from the Net for submissions. Half-baked knowledge culled from the Net makes students overconfident. Under these circumstances, the teacher is expected to employ strategies to win over the students by relating the classroom teaching to their interest in building up a career. Based on the long experience of the writer in the field of teaching literature, this paper suggests some real-time solutions to such problems as also methodologies befitting various sub-genres.

Keywords: Liberal arts, value education, net-fixation, classroom problems.

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INTRODUCTION

The return of students to arts and humanities in colleges and universities in some parts of north India is a welcome development. The present disheartening employment scenario seems to have taken some sheen off the hitherto popular science/commerce disciplines, so that it is not entirely love of arts that has impelled students in this direction. However, the value of literature in arts stream must be recognized per se. The shape that the curricula of Liberal Arts courses has taken in some new age universities in India like Flame, Jindal or Ashoka is different as these follow

the interdisciplinary route. History repeats itself, though with a bit of makeover. So, the current version of liberal arts, intruding even into physical sciences and management subjects, is taking the place of old curricula of arts education. Making it viable and career-worthy is still the concern of educationists and other stakeholders. The objective of this write-up, however, is to discuss the value of literary studies as also the problems faced in teaching literature in college classes in an ordinary state-run college/university, where the traditional syllabi continues to be taught the traditional way.

The support for arts and humanities comes from academics, social scientists and philosophers who feel that this kind of education is necessary to instil values in young generation. It is a general belief that the regard for human values has taken a plunge in these so-called postmodern times. It is not uncommon to read every morning the news of some incident displaying utter lack of sensitivity on the part of one or the other. Take, for example, the news of broad daylight murders due to road rage without any bystander intervening, a friend killing another for some petty monetary gain, a father raping a girl throwing all individual and social norms to the wind, or a schoolchild murdering a fellow student to get exams postponed!

It is a general belief that the sensational, sexual, violent and valueless content out in the digital world has undermined morals, ethics and values. Demand for unchecked freedom by the ‘I, me, mine’ – focussed youth, for whom the lessons for living are dished out by media and internet rather than by parents and teachers, seems to be responsible for undermining the respect for values. By values is meant the entire domain of human values which are discussed these days but sadly, social, moral and spiritual values are placed at the same level as individual and professional values.

The summum bonum of all moral and social values is the interiorization of human sensitivity. The modus operandi of literature in cultivating human values in students is through sensitizing them to the ‘other’, through the application not only of reason but over and above it, imagination where the reader puts him/herself in the position of a character and learns to empathize with the latter, be it a man, woman, or even animal. Well-known philosopher Martha Nussbaum rightly comments, “I defend the literary imagination precisely because it seems to me an essential ingredient of an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own” (Nussbaum 1995: xvi). In her book, *Cultivating Humanity*, she places man in the globalized world and notes that for the world citizen, “the cultivating powers of imagination” are essential to place ourselves in the situation of other people with different perspectives. (85). Nussbaum even flags literature for its potential to make contribution to public reasoning – something for which legal arguments alone are supposed to be qualified these days. She takes up Charles Dickens’ novel *Hard Times* as a case study in her book *Poetic Justice*, and debunks the myth that literary imagination is unscientific, irrational, emotional, partial and local in nature. What she has at the back of her mind is the potential of literature to sensitize us towards the good of others.

Similar sentiments have been expressed by the rationalist revolutionary of pre-independence times, Lala Har Dayal in his book *Hints for Self Culture*. Even though his book is a plea for rationalism, he concedes that “...in a deeper sense, Art and Ethics are one. Art releases and

liberates you from your individual self, and merges you in the Social Self. This psychic experience or upheaval is the essential condition of moral growth. The highest Art and the highest Ethics are thus identical” (132). As to how it operates, Harvard Professor of Aesthetics Elaine Scarry, in her book *The Body in Pain* applies it to war situation and, in the words of a scholar,

...associates the imagination with compassion, self-effacement, and sees it as a force which distributes and projects the facts and responsibilities of human sentience, the human body and responsibilities into the external world. Whereas the practices and discourses of torture and war push pain and sentience into isolation and invisibility in the service of their political and cultural agendas, the truly creative work of civilization consists in externalizing the sentience and in empathetically sharing it. (Habib 208-9).

Discourses of war and torture in domains other than literature deal with them matter-of-factly without any empathy. A post-war scenario is imagined by Scarry, when all civilizational achievements have been put to naught, she puts faith in the valuable potential of literature. She feels that if war and torture destroy the artefacts of civilization, it is imagination which creates them in literature because literature stands for creativity.

Apart from the power of imagination, literature studies man as a whole as it deals with all aspects of human life. Literature alone refuses to split man as in other branches of knowledge where man is studied in parts: he is either a biological being, or a chemical being, or an economic being, or a political being, or a social being, but never the complete man; in a nutshell, the complete whole having all these facets of his being as the inseparable parts of a living organism. This is what distinguishes literature.

Last but not the least, the emphasis on beauty and aesthetics in literary studies is very important, for its own sake, if not for anything else. For votaries of literature, it is like a Kantian categorical imperative. Scarry, in her lecture titled *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999: 30) delivered at Yale University, goes great lengths to emphasize the impact of beauty in human life even as she rues that the discourse of beauty over the last two decades has all but vanished from the humanities. She underlines the “radical decentering” that happens at the sight of something or somebody beautiful: “...the fact that we look at beautiful persons and things without wishing to be ourselves beautiful is one of the key ways in which – according to philosophers like Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch – beauty prepares us for justice” (38). In other words, it helps us to adopt an ethical, objective disposition. Be that as it may, the fact is indisputable that beautiful things do stir up beautiful feelings in human heart and that the sense of beauty or aesthetics is a key component in literary studies.

One of the issues around academy has been the onslaught on the status of the author. Jacques Derrida’s stress on deconstructive approach to literature took the baton away from the author. This was perfected by the likes of Roland Barthes who pronounced the death of the author with the result that the *word* now lay at the mercy of the reader. The reader was, to start with, at liberty to read a text; now the interpretation devolved on him and the subject in this case was constituted by the prevailing discourse. Critic Geoffrey Galt Harpham holds the recent theory

responsible for the death of the author, thereby denuding literature as product of an expressive subject. The theory of mimesis respected since Plato had leant the artist the credit for creativity, even though in part as it linked his work to the work of God, and what is more in it the artist “realized his own true and essential nature” (Harpham 9).

All said and done, in these postmodern times, no agency is attributed to either the author or the reader. With this deconstructive scenario, nothing is sacrosanct, least of all the word in the book of morals! Now this kind of philosophy is alright for musing, but in practice, things come out much differently. The whole domain of copyright law will come down crashing if the author was really believed to be dead! The fact is that even Roland Barthes, the author of the essay “Death of the Author” is said to have himself claimed copyright to the article.

PROBLEMS FACED IN CLASSROOM

Having discussed the need to delve into literature to sensitize ourselves with a view to empathizing with the ‘other’ in society and nature through the glimpse of beauty and cultivation of human values, let us now turn to the practical side of teaching literature in college classes. There are, of course, some spoilers which are common to any class. The biggest problem a teacher faces while teaching any subject in class is when he wants the students to study certain readings, but they are riveted to internet. This Net-fixation, whether through mobile or laptop, in the form of surfing or chatting consumes a considerable time in a day. Reading is a discounted activity in digital age.

Tapping the mobile button becomes an instantaneous activity whenever interest is lost in classroom teaching. It could be possible even otherwise because a student has some other mental engagement. However, things don’t stop at that. When a student finds an interesting picture or tit-bit on the mobile screen, s/he deems it a divine duty to pass it on to friends. At times, a giggle would start and spread across the class like the notes on a piano, but it might be a joke at the poor teacher’s cost! The addiction to and dependence on mobile entails other problems. The students are now much closer to the teacher than they used to be. Teachers also behave like friends towards them. Come the final exam, and at the dead of night, your phone rings. The student at the other end is asking, “What’s the syllabus of exam tomorrow?”

Then, there is the problem of information overload. When there are millions of giga bites of information of students’ interest available on the Net, along with chat platforms of hundreds of friends, the classroom study takes a back-seat. This has two side-effects:

One, the Net-fixation is responsible for reduced span of time on any single item of study. Literature demands intense engagement whereas the present digital generation has a very extensive field of information of varied types at its command which the students like to surf ever so cursorily. The students lose not only the information provided in the class if they are not attentive, but also the cultivation of analytical and critical skills that are the tools needed to amass knowledge in the real sense.

Two, Net-fixation also involves accepting whatever is there on the Net, even the half-baked stuff. Due to this, the students do not take classroom teaching seriously. They believe that even if they are not attentive in class, they can always “get it from the Net”. So great is the impact of Web that some students seem totally mesmerized by it. I once had two students in my class who argued against classroom teaching simply because “learning through Web is so much cute, comprehensive and convenient. Why take the trouble of coming to college for classes?” said one! Students have to be made to understand the utility of being together in a class, where the collective gusto and curiosity has an infectious effect. Besides, they could appreciate the personal dialogue with the teacher, and overall educational environment and infrastructure available on the campus as against lonely study in a closed room at home!

We must not gloss over the drastic changes that have occurred during the Corona times. What was called ‘Net fixation’ earlier has surely become a necessity since teaching went online, and is still continuing at the time of writing this piece. On the positive side, students have had access to lectures from faculty sitting elsewhere in the world. They have also had a surfeit of books and material available, sometimes without charge, on the Web. Besides, Movies based on classics have always been a big draw. But these bounties were available to a serious student. This is not to underrate the problems that hogged the new system, what with the lack of access to an android or laptop, internet connectivity, power issues felt by a large population of students across India. The need to learn and be proficient in the use of new digital platforms came up at both ends of the teaching-learning process. Managing the attention of students in online classes was also a big challenge because despite the clear instructions from the head of institution to keep the cameras on, there always was the excuse of poor connectivity dished out by non-serious students. In this kind of environment, the teachers who had good communication skills and had the insight to make pedagogy interesting had a bit of success.

SOME SUGGESTIONS

The teacher is responsible for cultivating in students the interest in literature, and that is a herculean task in this technology-driven, career-focussed, self-interest-oriented age. But if we are able to link these aspects with literature, then surely our task becomes easier. If the students are made aware of the importance of literature in shaping their personality and their future by improving their communication skills and making their language more impressive and beautiful, then only they would like to have a serious engagement with literature. When they understand that learning literature will enable them to think in a more comprehensive manner because literature takes in all aspects of life to comment upon, they will most likely choose to study literature. This is not difficult for a teacher to point out. In fact, a number of management experts have drawn upon literature to buttress their assertions.¹

The most attractive attribute of literature is its ability to entertain students. This can and should be easily capitalized on in class. I believe that students’ connect with literature is always there to a small extent as they watch movies in a big way. Mostly, these are thrillers or romantic films that are liked by a large majority of students. Condelezza Rice, former US Foreign Secretary while appearing on a TV show clarified why she had not published a book and gone in for a film (on foreign policy): “We thought of publishing the book but they said, ‘Nobody reads a book

these days” (Zakaria). A teacher can make use of this fascination for films, as for example, at the starting of the new session, the students can be shown a movie based on any good novel. There are all-time great literary texts turned into movies, as for example, Shakespeare’s plays or Fitzgerald’s novels or Mahesh Dattani’s plays.

The students are a game for the length of the movie but if that becomes the end of study of a novel, then it is no good because literature study based on movie viewing is not a substitute for reading the text. Movie cannot give all that is there in the text by way of linguistic description. For one, any movie makes use of very little portion of the printed word in the text. Screen is no substitute for it for the simple reason that it offers little scope for the play of a student’s imagination. But viewing movies is resorted to in the hope that it will inspire students to read the original literary texts.

The real reading of novel must take place and in this, the teacher can take up some interesting or important sections of the novel in the class, comparing these to the movie and marking the similarities and dissimilarities due to the difference of medium. The large variety of themes covered in fiction is a feature that is bound to fascinate students. The teacher has to be well informed about the range of themes and styles of different literary works. In fiction, for example, we find novels covering areas like socio-political problems, economic issues, individual psyche, history, myth, travel, adventure, crime, etc. Students can be motivated to take up for study any novel of their choice. To start with, it could be from the domain of popular fiction if not serious fiction.

Teaching of complex texts like poetry makes students value the importance of the teacher and take literature class more seriously. From ‘light to serious’ should be the guiding principle here too. One can point to some popular songs and build upon students’ interest in poetry. A clincher in poetry class is experimenting with writing a simple poem like a limerick in the class. The teacher starts the first line or two lines and the students are invited to extend the poem with teacher’s guidance. At the level of learners of poetry, the cultivation of love for words has to be cultivated so that they enjoy poetry.

The more important literary features of the poem have to be located by the students after a general lecture on these has been delivered by the teacher. Rendition of poetry by well-known poets like T.S. Eliot or Keki Daruwalla also makes the students interested in good literature. While role-play in teaching a drama in class is a common way to win over students’ attention, movies based upon stage plays are available in abundance. The students should be asked about the impact after they have read a literary composition or watched a movie. They can share their experiences and relate to happenings around the world. That will generate interest in students for literature.

While teaching literature, the intent and focus of the teacher must be to highlight the human aspects rather than the political or economic aspects of literature. The function of literature has always been to “impart culture, refine sensibility and develop the mind,” says a respected teacher. (Dahiya 81). So, when the teacher discusses a character from a play, he discusses the human aspect, the moral strength as also the weaknesses of the character. The teacher has to be

above board and be a model for students, because only then the message of the humanities is passed on effectively to students. The cultivation of a cultured mind and aesthetic insight is possible through canonical works or serious literature rather than popular literature. For one, popular culture is reflected in popular fiction and students relate easily to it. That can and should be treated as a stepping stone to the study of serious literature.

While discussing the teaching-learning process, it is a pre-requisite that the teachers must have calibre and should be devoid of political motives. In every age, erudite and competent teachers have been venerated by students and society and that is their greatest reward. It also means that a teacher has to be scrupulous in attending to his duties as a teacher and not miss classes or take the teaching process in a non-serious manner. The effort on the part of the teacher should be to cultivate literary aesthetics through which the students can be sensitized to human predicament. The threat of terror overtaking the world or artificial intelligence-inspired machines replacing humans more and more presents an unnerving scenario. It is the sensitive mind today that might ensure a sensitive machine tomorrow.

Notes

There are a number of such scholars like Devdutt Pattanaik (writer of *Business Sutra: A Very Indian Approach to Management*), who banks upon Indian mythology to draw appropriate lessons for management. Psychologists often take fictional narratives as case studies, as for example, Michael Hallsworth and Elspeth Kirkman's "A Tale of Two Systems: 19th Century Behavioural Insights from Poe, Austen and Dickens" <https://behavioralscientist.org/undiscovered-country-for-behavioral-scientists/>

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