

Facts versus Feelings: Teaching of Literature in Indian Classrooms

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Introduction

According to Purves (1972), literature “comprises a body of texts which a reader, or a group of readers, finds necessary to read aesthetically”. He defines it as a category where “both scripted and improvised theatre, film, television, drama and happenings” are subsumed.

Before the advent of literacy, story telling was the medium of entertainment and education. Through stories, people used to learn about faraway lands, values of life, and in the process, develop an awareness and understanding about people and life in general. With the advent of literacy, literature has been envisaged differently at different points of time. The Greeks in classical times believed it to be an agency for teaching moral values to the public. Plato, in his seminal work *The Republic*, considered poetry to be useless if it did not serve a purpose. Neo-classicals such as Pope and Johnson believed that literature played a crucial role in forming public tastes. Victorian prudery tried to use literature for teaching morals or defining the code of conduct for men and women in society, although there were exceptions such as Emily Bronte. Walter Pater broke away from this mindset to celebrate the aesthetic aspect of literature in the nineteenth century.

This preoccupation of scholars with literature across centuries underscores its centrality in our lives. With the advent of various kinds of media, literature has become very easily accessible. Also, with the passage of time, different genres and forms of writing have emerged. The twentieth century itself has been witness to the rise of various kinds of literature and we know that it is definitely not the end of the journey.

Early Theories of Literary Criticism

New Criticism – the theory that governed the teaching and learning of literature – believed in the supremacy of the text. According to New Critics, the meaning of the text resided within the text; the reader therefore occupied a subordinate role. Laying emphasis on objectivity, the New Critics called for an impersonal and “intrinsic” analysis of the text, leaving out factors such as the author’s biographical details, the socio-historical milieu of the times and of course the reader, who was in the periphery or maybe even further. Literary work was believed to be a standalone piece of art that carried meaning within itself. Within this paradigm, the analysis of the text demanded categorization of its genre, analysis of the structure of the literary work, verse forms, patterns of imagery, metaphors, and so on. Russian Formalists were more concerned with the

application of linguistics to the study of literature. They held the view that literature transforms and intensifies ordinary language and valued literary form over content.

Reader-Response Theories

In light of the new developments in the field of philosophy and psychology, New Criticism was finally succeeded by reader-response criticism. The pioneer of reader-response theories was Rosenblatt (1938) who first turned the spotlight on the reader. She emphasized the active role played by the reader in the act of reading, where meaning was “constructed” during a “transaction” between the reader and the text, thereby highlighting that both the text and the reader brought something to the text which gives rise to meaning. Further, she acknowledged and celebrated the presence of the feelings experienced by the reader while reading a literary piece, which was previously derided for being more of a “fallacy” that clouded the readers' judgement. Later, Fish (1970) also wrote that the objectivity of text was an illusion. Celebrating “affective fallacy”, he argued in favour of creating a space for the readers' personal and subjective responses. According to Fish, meaning was constructed during the readers' engagement with the text through and during the act of reading. He negated the existence of a “true” or “final” meaning, making room for multiple responses by various readers at different points of time, with each response being equally valid. Iser (1992), looked at the process of reading through the lens of phenomenology, whereby he described a literary work as having two poles—an artistic pole and an

aesthetic pole. The artistic referred to the text created by the author and the aesthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader.

While welcoming the role of feelings while reading a literary piece, Rosenblatt (1938) also acknowledged the role played by the reader's age, experience, disposition, social and economic background, gender and political and personal histories in interpreting a text. According to him, readers did not exist in a vacuum and hence neither did their perceptions and interpretations of life or a text. In propounding the concept of “stance”, Rosenblatt (1980) argued that there are two kinds of stances that a reader is likely to take while reading a text, depending on the purpose of reading—efferent and aesthetic. An efferent stance was usually taken where the purpose of reading was to take away information from a text. In contrast to the efferent stance was the aesthetic stance, where the attention was focussed more on the lived experience of the reader while reading the text, the quality of experience, the feelings evoked, and the thoughts and images populating the mind scape of the reader rather than the factual details extracted from the text. But Rosenblatt maintained that no reading of a literary piece is completely efferent or completely aesthetic; both stances exist along a continuum.

In the context of the Indian classrooms which this paper deals with, a problem arose when teachers selected and directly or indirectly promoted an efferent stance through their questions, activities or their own response to a learner's interpretation of the text. We shall now

examine implications of efferent and aesthetic readings in the context of the Indian classroom.

Situation in Indian Classrooms

The teaching of literature in Indian classrooms is usually a teacher-dominated phenomenon, where the teacher is perceived as the reservoir and hence the transmitter of knowledge (Sah, 2009). When teaching literature in class, teachers either read the text aloud themselves or ask a student to do so; they keep supplying the meanings of difficult words and make it a point to correct faulty pronunciation (Sinha, 2009). It is also common for teachers to stop after every sentence and explain it to the students without ever asking what they make of it. Then follows a series of questions and answers based on factual details from the text. For instance, if the teacher is doing Cinderella's story with the young learners, the questions may read as follows:

- Who was Cinderella?
- How many sisters did she have?
- What household chores did Cinderella have to do?
- Who helped Cinderella go to the ball?
- How did this person help Cinderella go to the ball?
- What did Cinderella leave at the ball?
- By what time was she supposed to come back from the ball?
- How did the prince find Cinderella?
- Did the prince and Cinderella live happily ever after?
- How were Cinderella's stepmother and stepsisters punished for their ill-deeds?
- What is the moral of the story?

These questions suggest that the teacher does not recognize that while reading Cinderella's story, something must have gone on inside the minds of young learners and they may have “felt” something. All the questions listed are designed to gauge the learners' comprehension of the factual elements of the story. Sadly, this is how reading comprehension questions are usually framed at end of the chapter in many textbooks, and these are followed as the Bible for teaching. The responses to a subjective question designed to make learners think critically or from their heart may be as varied as there are learners in the class. In such a situation, handling a wide variety of responses becomes very difficult for the teacher who usually aims to arriving at one common understanding of the text. As a consequence, learners never get a voice in the classroom and they learn to align their responses with that of the teacher.

However, if we were to reconstruct this class according to the principles of reader-response theories, the class would look very different. To begin with, there would definitely be more learner talk than teacher talk. The noise level in the class may be a little high as a consequence of group work. The learners would probably be engaged in a discussion about the text with their peers or involved in some other activity. The questions asked in such a class may be as follows:

- How did you feel when you read the story?
- Which part of the story did you like the most?

- Create an alternative ending to the story.
- Which character in the story did you like the most and why?
- Compare and contrast Cinderella with another character from a different story.
- Write a letter to any character in the story.
- Draw your favourite scene from the story.
- If you were to meet Cinderella in person, what questions would you like to ask her?
- Placing Cinderella in today's context, rewrite her story.
- Write a letter to your friend telling him/her about Cinderella's story or anybody else who leads a similar life.
- If you were to become a Fairy Godmother/Godfather for a day, whose life would you like to change and how?
- Narrate the part you liked the most in the story to your partner.

All these questions are aimed at eliciting responses from learners that will help the teacher to understand their interpretation and experience of the text, and their likes and dislikes in terms of the characterization and portions of the text. In such a classroom, comprehension questions would be designed to make connections between the reader and the text and also establish inter textual connections. Inferential or extrapolatory questions would be asked instead of just factual questions. Learners

would be encouraged to make predictions, draw conclusions and infer the meanings of difficult words from the context. Most importantly, they would feel free to think and explore. However, unfortunately, despite knowing about the constructivist approach and its merits, we are still very behaviouristic in our practices. This not only inhibits learner response but also makes the class very insipid and boring for the learner, who might even develop a lifelong aversion to literature.

Further, teachers have a tendency to moralize texts. Therefore, after reading a story, they often ask a question about the moral of the story with complete disregard for the joy of reading that the learners might have felt (Kumar, 2004; Sah, 2009).

The Way Ahead

There are a lot of implications which can be drawn from this discussion around the teaching of literature in Indian classrooms. Since the change in pedagogy can primarily come from teachers, there is an urgent need to orient teachers at pre-service and in-service levels towards reader-response theories. Any desirable change in the system needs to come from the grass roots level. It is only when the teachers are aware of a particular approach will they be able to follow it.

A response-based classroom has the potential to develop life skills such as critical thinking, problem solving and empathy among its learners. Freedom of expression, a non-threatening atmosphere, acceptance from teachers and peers and stimulating classroom environment are

some of the factors that are conducive to the development of these life skills. When learners are encouraged to express themselves freely and the classroom is a democratic space, free from value judgements of authoritarian teachers and peers, they will become more active “participants” in the classroom processes.

Taking a macro perspective, such a pedagogy can also play a crucial role in improving enrolment and retention in schools where students often dropout due to teacher apathy and a hostile classroom environment, both of which can be key factors in drawing children away from school. Further, we need to modify our assessments which currently focus on fact-based questions, thereby promoting efferent reading of literature. If response-based tasks/questions are included in our assessments, they will most likely have a backwash effect on classroom teaching which will further create spaces for learners' self-expression and improve their performance.

Talking about the teaching of language in the early years, Sinha (2000) focuses on the role of materials and delineates the artificiality of texts which, due to their over-reliance on graphophonics, have no coherence or meaning. Burdened with materials which can neither be understood nor enjoyed, learners lose interest in reading and hence, do not feel motivated enough to come to school. There is an urgent need to develop materials which not only focus on whole language, but which include interesting and enjoyable texts such as stories, poems, drama, etc. Such texts (and of course their follow-up tasks)

not only have the potential to make readers think but they also evoke their personal, critical and heart-felt responses.

Conclusion

Though reader-response theories originally dealt with the teaching of literature, today their implications are many and they have a far-reaching impact. The goal of education is not to produce literate mechanized human resource. It is to develop thinking and feeling individuals with sound perceptions, analytical minds and human hearts. A democratic and free response-based classroom can help us achieve this goal to some extent.

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