

Ideology in the classroom

Arun P. Mukherjee

- The author examines the connection between pedagogy and scholarly research. Reading of scholarly publications is not any help in the classroom. The discourses of pedagogy and scholarly research are diametrically opposed and woe betides the novice who uses the current scholarly discourse in the classroom.

- The author, as a professor, introduced a story by Margaret Laurence entitled 'The Perfume Sea' in his classroom. He found that education had allowed the students to neutralize the subversive meanings implicit in a piece of good literature.

- The main characters in the story are Mr. Archipelago and Doree who operate a beauty parlour in Ghana on eve of independence from British rule. After the white clients have gone, Mr. Archipelago and Doree face financial crisis. They transform the beauty parlour for the local clients, they install hair straightening equipment and buy make up suitable for the African skin.

- Mr. Archipelago and Doree have found new role in the life of the newly independent country to help the African bourgeoisie slavishly imitate the values of its former colonial masters. The story emphasizes the nature of colonialism as well as its aftermath when the native elite takes over without really changing the colonial institutions except for their names. Mr. Archipelago and Doree represent the whole white civilization.

- The author asked his students about the symbolic significance of the hair straightening equipment and other aspects of the story. They based their essays on other aspects such as how believable and likeable the two characters were.

- The two characters were not evaluated by the students on colonial context, but on the basis of their emotional relationship with each other. The world of political turmoil, the class system of the colonials, the contrast between wealth and poverty were not pointed out in the students' papers.

- The teacher's interpretation of the story was on his ideological ground whereas students' interpretation was based on general human values.
- The students devoted their attention to expatiation upon the anxiety and hope of humanity and other such generalizations as change, people, values, reality etc.

- The teacher realized that the students' generalizations were ideological which enabled the students to efface the differences between people. They enabled them to believe that all human beings faced dilemmas similar to the ones faced by the two main characters in the story.

- The teacher realized that the students' analysis was in the time honoured tradition of that variety of criticism which presents literary works as universal. The test of a great work of literature is that it speaks to all times and all people. The discussion of literature depends heavily upon the universal 'we' (human beings), the human condition, the plight of modern man.

- This is prophylactic view of literature. From this perspective, even the most provocative literary work is emptied of subversive content.