

Teaching and learning poetry: some pedagogical Innovations

G.P. Gayathri

Research Scholar

Dept. of English and Communication

Dravidian University – KUPPAM

“...the teaching of literature can never be as value-free as the teaching of, say, mathematics or a language skill, and as aesthetic, moral and political judgments are implicit in the enterprise...”

--Meenakshi Mukerjee, “Certain Long-Simmering Questions,” in *Provocations*.

Abstract: *Teaching Literature in English has been in practice in India since the times of colonial. However, any pragmatic and empirical verification proves that the teaching-learning of English and Literary English could not provide desired results. Set against this dismal situation, this paper reviews the pedagogical practices of Literature in general and of Poetry in specific. Consequently, the paper identifies some of the conventional pedagogical practices of Poetry and evaluates the same to realize the disadvantages thereof. Thirdly, the paper proposes some possible innovations in the pedagogy of Poetry which in the first place achieve student-centeredness, interpretative fulfillment of the subject/poem under discussion and empowering the student.*

Key Words: Pedagogical Practices (of Literature); Conventional Pedagogical Practices of (Poetry); Innovative Pedagogical Practices of (Poetry); Empowering Student

C.D. Narasimhaiah refers to a pamphlet issued by British Council in 60's which says, “Literature Matters (Retrospect and Prospect: p.15).” When literature matters, teaching literature definitely and doubly matters. Accordingly the paper attempts to review the ongoing practices of teaching literature in general, and specifically with reference to teaching poetry in English. Before further probing into the pedagogical issues of teaching literature, it shall be appropriate to take a look at the definition of poetry and the conceptual aspects of poetry.

Similar is the anxiety expressed by Meenakshi Mukerjee regarding pedagogical concerns of literature: “...*what* is taught in the classroom, *how* the text is approached, for *whom* and *why*, in the process there has inevitably been also a scrutiny of the teacher herself, sitting her in the social context of India. Literary studies do not exist in some pure realm of aesthetics and ideas, but in the world of institutional structures and political forces, conditioned by history and ideology.” (Certain Long-Simmering Questions, p.25)

Any pragmatic verification validates the concerns raised by Meenakshi Mukerjee as pointedly raised pedagogical issues like, the “what,” the “how,” the “whom” and “the why” of the teaching of literature. Though it is an unpalatable to admit, even till date, to a large extent, teaching literature seems to be a matter

of 'secrecy,' not to be revealed by the concerned teacher, and at best it can be left to the individual teacher's discretion. No doubt, respecting an individual teacher's discretion is not a problem but as a professional a teacher of literature is accountable. The paper attempts at establishing this accountability with relation to the genre of poetry.

Definition of Poetry

Literary work in which the expression of feeling and ideas is given intensity by the use of distinctive style and rhythm; poems collectively or as a genre of literature. (<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/poetry>) From this it is evident that poetry involves rhyme and rhythm. And it is needless to say that literature goes beyond these two and moves further with the imagination of the author concerned.

Nature of poetry /Poetry as a Genre

Poetry as a genre has no single definition. Poetry in various languages have varied definitions. Among the various definitions of poetry, the common factor that unite the definitions is the element of meter. At least, this was true until the arrival of free verse. Along with meter, poetry as a rule, functions on the basis of symbols, rhythm, other intricate patterns of sound and imagery, and with the help of these devices, on the whole poetry suggests meaning. The word, poetry, is derived from Greek word, "poesis," meaning "making" or "creating."

This very definition indicates the specialty of poetry as a genre. It is creativity that dominates poetry. While highlighting this definition may not be revealing much but it can be a directing and decisive factor for teaching and learning poetry since the making of a genre should decide the interpretation of it.

Among the many sub-genres of poetry, the narrative and the lyrical forms are the dominating ones. Again, under the narrative form, Epic and Ballad stand foremost. Under lyrical forms of poetry, sonnet and odes are some of the popular ones. While Epic and Ballad are narrative in nature mostly focus on the narration of incidents/events of great importance, where as lyrical forms of poetry mostly deal with expression of emotions and imaginative description of feelings and objects.

Poetry, like other literary works such as prose and drama, also has its own structures, purposes, languages and general characteristics. Commonly, poetry written in verse in which consists of lines and stanza. According to Reaske (1966) at least poetry also contains of sounds devices such as rhyme, rhythm, repetition, meter, and onomatopoeia and speech of language such as simile, metaphor, hyperbole, and personification. All of the elements of parts of poetry can be used to find information or ideas in comprehending and appreciating it. The readers can start to analyze poetry or poem from poetic devices, types, sound devices, structural devices and all aspects of poetry that can be analyzed.

Based on some definitions above, it cannot be concluded that poetry has particular definition. When readers analyzed or appreciated poetry is not focused on the definition. The essence of poetry remains elusive and open to a range of definitions. The more important things of comprehending and appreciating the poetry are what the contents of poetry. Schakel and Ridl (1997:12) state, "...reading poetry differs from

reading a newspaper or a memo and a book.” Reading poetry is a process of finding particular information, ideas, experiences, message, values and themes for pleasure or serious analysis. Poems also lead the readers feel intensely, to experiences deeply, and often to extend our understanding of experiences different from the readers’ experience or to affirm own ideas and experiences of the readers.

(awinlanguage.blogspot.com/2012/04/nature-of-poetry.html)

Referring to the growth of Indian English Literature in Indian scenario, C.D. Narasimhaiah reviews the journey of it and its primary concerns: “In India ... assertion of national and racial identity had started almost a hundred years ago and by a young girl, Torn Dutt, who, to mention but one instance, crossed William Cowper's Lily and the Rose to produce a third variety of flower which she could call her own - racially and nationally - the lotus.

If Mulk Raj Anand had imbibed leftist sympathy in the London of the twenties with its relative proximity to Russia, he turned it to creative use to sensitize his own countrymen to the plight of the untouchable, the coolie and the cobbler who now began to assert their identities. If R.K. Narayan worked within the framework of the English country house comedy, he was still suffusing it with the breath of 'the harikatha performer' in his small-town street corner. And Raja Rao's hero in *The Serpent and the Rope* was most specific as he put it somewhat rhetorically, 'Let's, Indians, give to the West something of our own even if it be a tamarind seed. And not this "tom-tom" business'. Aurobindo, who had gone into seclusion, observed: '...The poetry of the Augustans was gilted copper-of good currency, but not... gold'; or 'Wordsworth was like an automobile running on insufficient petrol'; or he 'states too much and sings too little.’’ (Retrospect and Prospect, p.18)

After taking a bird’s eye view of the nature and scope of Literature in general, and Indian English Literature with special reference to teaching of poetry, an attempt is made at recalling the existing practices of teaching poetry. It may be established that the reviewing and foregrounding of the seminal features has been undertaken because the basic nature and structure of the genre, poetry, should decide the pedagogical practices of it.

I. Some traditional practices of pedagogy of poetry:

1. Interpreting a poem from commonsense prospective: It is not unusual to note that poetry is taught and interpreted from a commonsense perspective. While stating this, it must be conceded that interpreting from commonsense perspective is not altogether to be disbanded. But one must realize that interpretation must not lose critical angle of the poem.

2. Teaching as Giving away the Gist of the Poem: Teaching poetry and providing the gist of the poem straightaway cannot be construed as a good pedagogical practice, especially at higher level of teaching literature/poetry.

Exemplification of Traditional Pedagogical Practices of Poetry Applied to Teaching of *Rose* by Robert Frost

“ The rose is a rose,
 And was always a rose.
 But the theory now goes
 That the apple's a rose,
 And the pear is, and so's
 The plum, I suppose.
 The dear only knows
 What will next prove a rose.
 You, of course, are a rose -
 But were always a rose.”

Following the above-mentioned traditional practices of pedagogy, the teacher remains the center of the teaching. The teacher, as found many a time, might read aloud the poem, without actually specifying the structure of the poem including the structural intricacies and verbal/sound melody. Consequently, in one go, the teacher is seen providing the gist of the poem as interpretation. Perhaps, following the traditional practices of pedagogy, a teacher might interpret the above poem in the following manner:

This poem, written Robert Frost, is about a rose flower and its beauty. The teacher might add as part of interpretation that some other fruits like, apple, pear and plum are also considered as good rose.

II. Limitations and challenges of teaching poetry from traditional practices:

With reference to the above, the following pedagogical problems can be established:

- a. **The teaching of poem is teacher-centered:** The 21st century pedagogical turn is objecting to teacher-centeredness. Any candid review of the pedagogical practices that dominated the modern society, especially Indian society proved that it was the teacher that remained at the centre, and consequently it caused untold handicapping of the student.
 Even in the present instance, the teacher-centeredness handicaps the student and prevents the student to appreciate something that has to be done first hand.
- b. **The structure including rhyme and rhythm and technique of the poem remain unattended:** Total ignoring of the structural aspects including rhyme and rhythm makes a job half-done in the instance of appreciating a poem. As is known already it is not in the end/conclusion beauty lies. The beauty of a poem is in the development of the poem and the linguistic and aesthetic deviations a poem may take.
- c. **Interpretation or explanation is done from teacher prospective that to commonsense.**

III. Possible pedagogical innovations of poetry:

- a. **Shifting focus from teacher to student:** Since reading poetry is personal /subjective, the beauty of a poem lies in its aesthetics the very arrangement of words with appropriate accent and stress brings the justification for the poem under discussion:

For example, in the discussion of the above poem, when the student is also involved, the aesthetics will be appreciated by the student also. Secondly, the aesthetics understandably includes understanding and

appreciating the verbal play on the word and the concept, 'Rose' and the striking verbal melody, in other words, the rhyme and rhythm.

- b. **Highlighting philosophical, cultural and critical aspects of the poem:** It is self-evident that the poem is more than a play on the word, "Rose." It more importantly discusses how the conventional evaluation of beauty, which is prerogative of a rose flower is changing, and how other things like peach and plum are also taking the unique position of a rose flower. Perhaps, how recognizing aesthetics and appreciating of the same is changing. Maybe, change is inevitable, and it will affect any aspect of human life.

By way of conclusion, the outcome of this attempt can be consolidated: the poem, taken for exemplification, which looks simple, needs an approach that cannot be superficial. Hence the innovative pedagogical method of shifting the focus from the teacher to the student helps the latter appreciate the text under discussion in full. In tandem with this another important aspect is the implied complexity of a literary text cannot be hoodwinked in the name of providing the gist/meaning of a poem in a nut shell. The innovative method that is followed helps the student see and appreciate the conceptual and aesthetic complexity of the poem that is taken for discussion.

Hence it may be reiterated that contemporary pedagogy is for empowering the student, and there has been urgent need to do so in Indian context. At this juncture, it may not be out of place to recall the fact that nearly 15 years of teaching/learning English, applicable to a majority of students, the students concerned are remaining inactive both in their communicative and interpretative skills. This situation demands an urgent and frank evaluation of the ongoing pedagogical practices including the ones that are in practice in teaching English Language and Literature.

References

Mukerjee, Meenakshi, "Certain Long-Simmering Questions." *Provocations*. Chennai: Orient Longman, 1993.

Narasimhaiah, C.D. "Retrospect and Prospect." *Provocations*. Chennai: Orient Longman, 1993.

Reaske, Christopher. *How to Analyze Poetry*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966.

Schakel, Peter and Ridl. *Approaching Poetry: Perspectives and Responses*. Bedford: Macmillan, 1997.

Web Sources

<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/poetry>

awinlanguage.blogspot.com/2012/04/nature-of-poetry.html
