

*Ideology in the Classroom*  
*A Case Study in the Teaching of English*  
*Literature in Canadian Universities*

ARUN P. MUKHERJEE\*

GENERALLY SPEAKING, WE, the Canadian university teachers of English, do not consider issues of the classroom worth critical scrutiny. Indeed, there is hardly any connection between our pedagogy and our scholarly research. A new teacher, looking for effective teaching strategies, will discover to her/his utter dismay that no amount of reading of scholarly publications will be of any help when she faces a class of undergraduates. In fact, the two discourses – those of pedagogy and scholarly research – are diametrically opposed and woe betide the novice who uses the language of current scholarly discourse in the classroom. . . .

The short fiction anthology I used for my introductory English 100 class – I deliberately chose a Canadian one – includes a short story by Margaret Laurence entitled 'The Perfume Sea.' This story, as I interpret it, underlines the economic and cultural domination of the Third World. However, even though I presented this interpretation of the story to my students in some detail, they did not even consider it when they wrote their essays. While the story had obviously appealed to them – almost 40 per cent chose to write on it – they ignored the political meaning entirely.

I was thoroughly disappointed by my students' total disregard for local realities treated in the short story. Nevertheless, their papers did give me an understanding of how their education had allowed them to neutralize the subversive meanings implicit in a piece of good literature, such as the Laurence story.

The story, from my point of view, is quite forthright in its purpose. Its locale is Ghana on the eve of independence from British rule. The colonial administrators are leaving and this has caused financial difficulties for Mr. Archipelago and Doree who operate the only beauty parlour within a

\* From 'Ideology in the Classroom: A Case Study in the Teaching of English Literature in Canadian Universities' *Dalhousie Review* 66(1&2), 1986.

radius of one hundred miles around an unnamed small town. Though the equipment is antiquated, and the parlour operators not much to their liking, the ladies have put up with it for want of a better alternative.

With the white clientele gone, Mr. Archipelago and Doree have no customers left. The parlour lies empty for weeks until one day the crunch comes in the shape of their Ghanaian landlord, Mr. Tachie, demanding rent. Things, however, take an upturn when Mr. Archipelago learns that Mr. Tachie's daughter wants to look like a 'city girl' and constantly pesters her father for money to buy shoes, clothes and make-up. Mr. Archipelago, in a flash of inspiration, discovers that Mercy Tachie is the new consumer to whom he can sell his 'product': 'Mr. Tachie, you are a bringer of miracles! . . . There it was, all the time, and we did not see it. We, even Doree, will make history – you will see' (221).

The claim about making history is repeated twice in the story and is significantly linked to the history made by Columbus. For Mr. Archipelago is very proud of the fact that he was born in Genoa, Columbus's home town. The unpleasant aspect of this act of making history is unmistakably spelt out: 'He [Columbus] was once in West Africa, you know, as a young seaman, at one of the old slave-castles not far from here. And he, also, came from Genoa' (217).

The symbolic significance of the parlour is made quite apparent from the detailed attention Laurence gives to its transformation. While the pre-independence sign had said:

ARCHIPELAGO  
English-Style Barber  
European Ladies' Hairdresser (211)

the new sign says:

ARCHIPELAGO & DOREE  
Barbershop  
All-Beauty Salon  
African Ladies A Specialty (221)

With the help of a loan from Mr. Tachie, the proprietors install hair-straightening equipment and buy shades of make-up suitable for the African skin. However, though the African ladies show much interest from a distance, none of them enters the shop. Two weeks later, Mercy Tachie hesitantly walks into the salon 'because if you are not having customers, he [Mr. Tachie] will never be getting his money from you' (222). Mercy undergoes a complete transformation in the salon and comes out looking like a 'city girl,' the kind she has seen in the *Drum* magazine. Thus, Mr. Archipelago and Doree are 'saved' by 'an act of Mercy' (226). They have found a new role in the life of this newly independent country: to help the African bourgeoisie slavishly imitate the values of its former colonial masters.

These political over-  
story describes and the  
the only black mercha  
other African women  
indicates the divisive n  
the writer's purpose a  
and Doree, a device  
The fact that both of  
them keep changing t  
that, like Kurtz in *F*  
civilization. The story  
emphasize these large  
math when the native  
institutions except for

This, then, was t  
no doubt because I a  
class discussions, I asl  
hair straightening equ  
Archipelago with Co  
Mr. Tachie and Merc  
on these aspects, but  
acters in the story v  
accepting change. T  
from the restraints o  
solely on the basis  
outer world of politi  
the colonials, the co  
in their papers. As o  
perfect couple walki  
what had eluded bo  
all rolled into one r  
and hope of human  
reality.'

I was astounde  
disturbing implicati  
expatiating upon  
generalizations as c  
generalizations wer  
differences betwe  
colonizing whites a  
blacks. They enable  
similar to the ones

Though, thank  
which generalizati  
made me painfully

These political overtones are reinforced by the overall poverty the story describes and the symbolic linking of the white salon operators with the only black merchant in town. The division between his daughter and other African women who go barefoot with babies on their backs further indicates the divisive nature of the European implant. Other indications of the writer's purpose are apparent from her caricature of Mr. Archipelago and Doree, a device which prevents emotional identification with them. The fact that both of them have no known national identities – both of them keep changing their stories – is also significant, for it seems to say that, like Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, they represent the whole white civilization. The story thus underplays the lives of individuals in order to emphasize these larger issues: the nature of colonialism as well as its aftermath when the native élite takes over without really changing the colonial institutions except for their names.

This, then, was the aspect of the story in which I was most interested, no doubt because I am myself from a former colony of the Raj. During class discussions, I asked the students about the symbolic significance of the hair straightening equipment, the change of names, the identification of Mr. Archipelago with Columbus, the *Drum* magazine, and the characters of Mr. Tachie and Mercy Tachie. However, the students based their essays not on these aspects, but on how 'believable' or 'likable' the two major characters in the story were, and how they found happiness in the end by accepting change. That is to say, the two characters were freed entirely from the restraints of the context, i.e., the colonial situation, and evaluated solely on the basis of their emotional relationship with each other. The outer world of political turmoil, the scrupulously observed class system of the colonials, the contrasts between wealth and poverty, were non-existent in their papers. As one student put it, the conclusion of the story was 'The perfect couple walking off into the sunset, each happy that they had found what had eluded both of them all their lives, companionship and privacy all rolled into one relationship.' For another, they symbolized 'the anxiety and hope of humanity . . . the common problem of facing or not facing reality.'

I was astounded by my students' ability to close themselves off to the disturbing implications of my interpretation and devote their attention to expatiating upon 'the anxiety and hope of humanity,' and other such generalizations as change, people, values, reality, etc. I realized that these generalizations were ideological. They enabled my students to efface the differences between British bureaucrats and British traders, between colonizing whites and colonized blacks, and between rich blacks and poor blacks. They enabled them to believe that all human beings faced dilemmas similar to the ones faced by the two main characters in the story.

Though, thanks to Kenneth Burke, I knew the rhetorical subterfuges which generalizations like 'humanity' imply, the papers of my students made me painfully aware of their ideological purposes. I saw that they help

us to translate the world into our own idiom by erasing the ambiguities and the unpleasant truths that lie in the crevices. They make us oblivious to the fact that society is not a homogeneous grouping but an assortment of groups where we belong to one particular set called 'us,' as opposed to the other set or sets we distinguish as 'them.'

The most painful revelation came when I recognized the source of my students' vocabulary. Their analysis, I realized, 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, according to this tradition, is that despite its particularity, it speaks to all times and all people. As Brent Harold notes, 'It is a rare discussion of literature that does not depend heavily on the universal "we" (meaning we human beings), on "the human condition," "the plight of modern man," "absurd man" and other convenient abstractions which obscure from their users the specific social basis of their own thought . . .' (Harold 1972: 201).

Thus, all conflict eliminated with the help of the universal 'we,' what do we have left but the 'feelings' and 'experiences' of individual characters? The questions in the anthologies reflect that. When they are not based on matters of technique – where one can short circuit such problems entirely – they ask students whether such and such character deserves our sympathy, or whether such and such a character undergoes change, or, in other words, an initiation. As Richard Ohmann comments:

The student focuses on a character, on the poet's attitude, on the individual's struggle toward understanding – but rarely if ever, on the social forces that are revealed in every dramatic scene and almost every stretch of narration in fiction. Power, class, culture, social order and disorder – these staples of literature are quite excluded from consideration in the analytic tasks set for Advanced Placement candidates.

(1976: 59–60)

Instead of facing up to the realities of 'power, class, culture, social order and disorder,' literary critics and editors of literature anthologies hide behind the universalist vocabulary that only mystifies the true nature of reality. For example, the editorial introduction to 'The Perfume Sea' considers the story in terms of categories that are supposedly universal and eternal:

Here is a crucial moment in human history seen from inside a beauty parlour and realized in terms of the 'permanent wave.' But while feminine vanity is presented as the only changeless element in a world of change, Mrs. Laurence, for all her lightness of touch, is not 'making fun' of her Africans or Europeans. In reading the story, probe for the deeper layers of human anxiety and hope beneath the comic surfaces.

(Ross and Stevens 1988: 201)

Though the importance of 'a crucial moment in history' is acknowledged here, it is only to point out the supposedly changeless: that highly elusive

thing called 'feminine' the desired identification regardless of the barrier deeper layers of human took more seriously than to effectively eliminate

This process results in a 'prophylactic view of work, when seen from content. After such trouble for the people industrial complex, for misery of those who d

The editor-critic t young minds will not functions and how lite relationships, the edito that human beings and course of history, that

Surely, literature regarding the ideology of the patrons and the a social institution and a transmitter of the questions no place in c

thing called 'feminine vanity.' The term performs the function of achieving the desired identification between all white women and all black women, regardless of the barriers of race and class. The command to probe 'the deeper layers of human anxiety and hope' – a command that my students took more seriously than their teacher's alternative interpretation – works to effectively eliminate consideration of disturbing socio-political realities.

This process results in the promotion of what Ohmann calls the 'prophylactic view of literature' (63). Even the most provocative literary work, when seen from such a perspective, is emptied of its subversive content. After such treatment, as Ohmann puts it, 'It will not cause any trouble for the people who run schools or colleges, for the military-industrial complex, for anyone who holds power. It can only perpetuate the misery of those who don't' (61).

The editor-critic thus functions as the castrator. He makes sure that the young minds will not get any understanding of how our society actually functions and how literature plays a role in it. Instead of explaining these relationships, the editor-critic feeds students on a vocabulary that pretends that human beings and their institutions have not changed a bit during the course of history, that they all face the same problems as human beings. . . .

Surely, literature is more than form? What about the questions regarding the ideology and social class of the writer, the role and ideology of the patrons and the disseminators of literature, the role of literature as a social institution and, finally, the role of the teacher-critic of literature as a transmitter of the dominant social and cultural values? Have these questions no place in our professional deliberations?