Teaching Creative Writing in English: Students' Performance Assessment as Learning

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ABSTRACT

Indian English drama is often accused of being exclusionary in its impact and addressing only the select few. I analyse three play presentations by my creative writing students to argue that the use of English in a play can be a mode of subaltern resistance. I describe the students as marking their identity in opposition to the adult world, and fostering the English-speaking community of students through their performances in this extraordinary time of Covid. I submit that as English is also the language of intellection and the medium for exchange of ideas among serious-minded students, it was used appropriately against conventional and regressive forces in these plays.

Keywords: Creative writing, performance assessment, assessment as learning.

"Butcher them (the Indo-Anglian) playwrights, castrate them, and force them to write in their native Hindi or Urdu or whatever languages their fathers and mothers used to speak." (Balme, 2011, 344*)*.

Indian English drama has been considered to be the British colonial legacy, historically, and theatre practitioners in the language have been reviled for being complicit in perpetuating the dominance of the "foreign" language in the country. The situation has changed somewhat in the present time, as English is no longer the language of political power. However, it continues to be associated with cultural elitism and social exclusivity. So, Indian English drama too continues to be charged with being exclusionary in its impact and addressing only the select few.

Can the use of English in a play ever be conceptualised as a mode of subaltern resistance? In this paper, I analyse three play scripts created by groups of English Honours students from Zakir Husain Delhi College, Delhi University, and presented in my online Creative Writing classes in April-May 2021 in the form of dramatised readings. I read the students' performances in terms of the functions of performance: "(1) to entertain, (2) to create beauty, (3) to mark or change identity, (4) to make or foster community, (5) to heal, (6) to teach or persuade, and (7) to deal with the sacred and the demonic" (Schechner, 2013, 46). With special emphasis on (3) and (4), I describe the students as marking their identity in opposition to the adult world, and fostering the English-speaking community of students through their performances in this extraordinary time of Covid. I submit that as English is also the language of intellection and the medium for exchange of ideas among serious-minded students, it was used appropriately against conventional and regressive forces in these plays.

Registers of English in Delhi University Colleges and the Creative Writing Course

On a normal basis, especially when physical classes were the norm, one did not overhear too much English spoken among students in most colleges in Delhi University. Students interact mainly in Hindustani and occasionally, when in smaller, more intimate groups, speak with each other in other regional languages. English is used mainly as the formal language of the classroom and only teachers are addressed in it. Students pursuing an English Honours course, especially students coming from exclusive public schools, however, are exceptions to this rule. In such cases, conversations in trendy English or Hinglish (English with a more than liberal sprinkling of Hindi words and sentences) serve as markers of the speakers' 'hipness' among their peers. So the question of how much code mixing or switching should be permissible in creative writing assignments came up soon after the introduction of the new course. 'Modes of Creative Writing – Poetry, Fiction, and Drama' posits play scripts and screenplays as one of the three "fundamental modes" of creative writing. The course attempts to introduce students to various kinds of "conventional as well as contemporary expressions" in these genres with a view to "unlocking the writers' craft". Unlike other literature or language courses, the emphasis is on encouraging students to create original poems, stories, or scripts that have the potential of being published or, in the case of play scripts, of being performed publicly (Neira Dev, Marwah, and Pal, 2009).

At a workshop on 'Pedagogy of Creative Writing' held on 17 Feb. 2007 in Zakir Husain Delhi College and led by Professor Valerie Miner, from the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, English Department, Clayman Institute, Stanford University, teachers discussed the issue of language use with special reference to dramatic sequences. Some teachers were of the opinion that we should allow entire scenes to be written in Hindi-Hindustani, as the spoken language is an immediate reference for the writing of dialogue and many subaltern characters would never use English in real life. Besides, a lot of popular Indian English plays – especially comedies that attract younger hip audiences – are in Hinglish, and even though the usage may sound shallow and exclusionary, it is an accepted genre of Indian English theatre. We carefully went over the pros and cons of multilingual assignments. Ultimately, it was pointed out that such submissions would create a problem of assessment for the teachers and give an unfair advantage to students who are conversant in Hindi and Hindustani, compared to those who are more at home in other regional languages. The consensus was to encourage writing of plays mainly in English with more code-mixing than in fiction or poetry. This amounted to allowing the use of Hinglish, although in moderation.

In my classes I encourage the students to imagine the audiences they are addressing while creating plays and use the kind of language that would be most appropriate to their chosen theme and objectives. In the past years my students had widely used Hinglish, and I was fairly certain that this year too, although the classes were online, I would get at least a couple of riotous scripts in that register. I was in for a surprise.

In the Jungle of Amazon

(Presented by Zeba Naaz, Samiya Ansari, Khushi Kumari, and Shahnawaaz)

I was taken aback when the first play to be presented in class, which was entitled 'In the Jungle of Amazon', eschewed the Indian context altogether. The characters had names like Marvel, Ben, and Ronaldo, and the play was set fantastically in the Amazon rainforest. Later, I discovered that it was adapted from RL Stine's novella *Deep in the Jungle of Doom* from the 'Give Yourself Goosebumps' game series intended for children between eight to 12 years. The book has a choice of 25 endings, but the team of four students who had worked on the script had picked one of the four "good" endings to bring their play to a happy conclusion. Mini, who transformed into a beast in the jungle, becomes human again – but only just – by consuming the magical fire fruit. The adults remain out of the reckoning: the teacher is so shocked by the goings on that she faints, retaining no memory of the events after she comes to, and the parents refuse to believe Mini's story. The students read the play energetically, entering the make-believe world by speaking in faux accents. There was no effort whatsoever to be 'natural' or follow the rhythm of English as it is actually spoken in India. It was as though they had regressed a few years and were reliving their childhood in provincial English-medium schools where students are trained to speak as native speakers of English presumably would.

It was difficult for me to not think of the second wave of Covid in India in the context of the story. A lot of young people, including many of my students, had fallen ill this time and it was being attributed to the risks they were taking by their refusing to confine themselves to the home. Mini's transformation into a scary beast during her sojourn in the jungle and then again into a human being seemed to be a thinly veiled metaphor for contracting the dreaded disease and then being cured miraculously. I asked myself two questions: Was this collective regression a reaction to the kind of control and blame that young people are being subjected to these days? Were the students trying to recreate the insular world of English-medium schools to counteract the attribution of responsibility for the pandemic in the real-life multi-lingual world? The evident enjoyment of the play by the class makes me think that the answer would be in the affirmative for both questions.

The Loop

(Presented by Fida Fathima, Sandra Antony Pullan, Ardra Manoj, and Ansu Merin Joseph)

The second presentation, entitled 'The Loop', directly took for its subject contemporary problems facing society. In the introduction to the play, the students observed, "'The Loop' deals with the present pandemic – the Covid 19 – and how it is affecting *us*" (emphasis mine). The play represented corrupt politicians, crony capitalism and the hapless common people in the time of the pandemic. The most touching moment in the presentation was the suicide of a young boy. An image of a listless hand was projected on screen as the weeping parents read out his final message to them:

Paa..maa..

Sorry... I can't survive in this world of inequality. I studied hard for a better tomorrow. That hope pushed me forward. Now I can't move a step. Because there is no way left for my education. This world will not give me opportunities even if I deserve it. Then why should I live

With love

Dhruv

It was extremely poignant that it is the young boy who bears the brunt of a corrupt and exploitative system that has impoverished and enervated his parents. The team's decision to stick to standard English while representing characters who would have normally conversed with each other in a regional language seemed to be highly appropriate, especially at this emotional moment. There were no local details to situate the play in a particular part of the country or deflect the attention of the viewer to any specific real-life event. The use of standard English and expunging of all local colour or detail from the situation made it appear like a pronouncement on the pan-Indian state of affairs. The play came out as a searing criticism of the country from the perspective of the youth with all their idealism.

The Social Construct

(Presented by Shiva Sagar, Lopamudra Tamuli, Nitesh Banjara, Navas Shareef, Ansha Pradhan, Dawa Tashi, and Farooq Choudhary)

The final play to be presented, 'The Social Construct', brilliantly brought out limitations of upper middle-class parents when confronted by their articulate and socially committed daughter. In this play, the language of liberal education that has made the young woman question conventional values clashes effectively with the language of conformism used by her parents.

Mrs Sharma tries to force her daughter Nidhi to appear "feminine", use make-up and dress attractively like other girls. Nidhi brings up the very different kind of expectations that her parents have from "dada" (her older brother):

Nidhi: but if some men want to do the same. Let's talk about dada only. If tomorrow he comes back from the US and tells you that he would like to wear lipstick and some nail paint then would you let him?

Mrs Sharma: Why even think of situations that are never going to happen? And besides, your dada is an epitome of a perfect male. Have you seen his biceps? Not just the young girls, even the ladies from our apple pie club enquired about him when he came back home for the last vacation. Had such a hard but glorious time declining all those marriage proposals that came our way. But that idiot rejected them all! Oh, almighty am I not to have some peace before I die!

Nidhi: Okay Mom great then. I am going to the gym from tomorrow onwards too then. If dada's biceps can bring you so much elation then why should I not try lifting some kilos, right?

Mr Sharma: HAHAHAHAHAHAH

Mrs Sharma: What are you laughing at ha? Does she think whatever I am saying is a joke?

Nidhi: no mama. nooo. I take you very seriously and in all my seriousness I would like to warn you that your idea of beauty is gendered! Because you can neither tolerate me growing biceps nor can you imagine dada putting on some makeup with those perfect biceps!

For the life of her, Mrs Sharma cannot see how her ideas echo the dominant ideology of gender. For her, it is "natural" for women and men to be different and for the lower caste, poor people to have criminal tendencies as she goes on to proclaim later in the play. The phrase "social construct" sounds like a foreign language to her. Her lack of higher education is underlined in the play, but as an upper middle class, higher caste woman, and a parent, she exercises restrictive control over her daughter. Nidhi's extensive vocabulary is her only weapon and she wields it deftly: scoffing at her "Intermediate-pass" mother and appealing to her good-natured but highly conventional father. Even though she fails to persuade her parents, the audience is convinced of the falsities of their views and is completely won over to her side by the end of the play.

This was the only play where an effort had been made to write dialogue naturally or in the kind of English that is actually spoken by members of the upper middle classes and in institutions of higher education. It is thereby noteworthy that Nidhi uses no Hinglish whatsoever. I would submit that this was done to highlight her earnestness and social commitment and steer the character clear from any hint of flippancy. Nidhi is contrasted with the young girls who her mother is holding out as exemplars, and who have presumably bought into the social construct of femininity. Nidhi uses the English of the classroom to challenge this conventional and elitist point of view.

The Learning from the Performances

What struck me most about the collective exercises done by my students was their adherence to mainly standard English; their occasional assumption of Anglicised accents while presenting the play; and a complete absence of any kind of code-switching or code-mixing that past experience would have led me to expect. I relate this earnest use of English to the extraordinary situation that we are facing. At a time when the students' identity as autonomous adults is severely compromised due to the pandemic situation that keeps them confined to the home, performances in English may have provided the opportunity for escape from family and societal pressures, as well as worked as a safe space to critique the conventional adult world. This was also indicated by the stories of the three plays that represented youthful worlds at odds with adult worlds.

Dramatic performances in English are often dismissed as activities involving only privileged sections of society. However, the position of English as the language of higher education and intellection in Indian society renders such assertions simplistic. The potential of English to challenge conformism, and even corruption, becomes especially evident when it is pitted against entrenched injustices. In the three play presentations described above, competence in the language and its creative use empowers the marginalised youth by providing an escape

from an unbearable situation into fantasy; by providing the vantage point to critique corruption in political circles; and finally, by enabling them to assert the doctrine of universal human rights. The group of children enjoying a forbidden adventure in the jungle, the boy whose hopes of higher education have been dashed due to Covid, and the girl who wants to dress sensibly and work for the under-privileged, are characters that arise from liberal and progressive ideas and were performed appropriately in standard English, the language of higher education in the country.

It also needs to be emphasised that performance is by itself a very effective mode of social communication. The students of creative writing deployed it through these characters to inscribe their desire for a free and equal society at a time of crises when our systems have revealed themselves to be particularly feudal and iniquitous. They reaffirmed the students' community by meeting in groups and airing their views to their peers who could be relied upon to empathise with their value system. Their use of the register of English that they share as students of English Honours can thus be seen as a rightful claim for space in a system bent on squeezing out youthful desire and idealism.

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