

Empowering Students through the Reinterpretation of Intellectuals: A Critical Teaching Strategy for Literature Classrooms

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ARTICLE INFORMATION

The Faculty Journal of Arts
Rajshahi University
Special Volume-6
ISSN: 1813-0402 (Print)

Received : 20 February 2025
Received in revised: 16 April 2025
Accepted: 16 March 2025
Published: 25 October 2025

Keywords:
Intellectuals, Pedagogy,
Interdisciplinary, Social Role,
Literature.

ABSTRACT

This research paper aims to probe deep in the techniques of teaching the intellectuals in a literature classroom through interdisciplinary lens. From Greek literature (e.g., Antigone, Tiresias) to postmodern works (e.g., Dr. Azad, Tilo in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*), intellectuals hold pivotal roles in plot design; yet traditional pedagogy often interprets these figures as conventional characters or evaluates them primarily for their wisdom and philosophical stature. This paper, on the contrary, does not aim to denounce these methods but instead, aspires to open a new gateway for teaching these figures through critical theory and interdisciplinary studies, engaging thinkers like Edward Said, Noam Chomsky, and Pierre Bourdieu. Intellectuals should not be analyzed solely for their idealism, scholarly pursuit, or wisdom; they should also be examined for their public social roles. A character becomes a true intellectual when they challenge power and dismantle hegemonic narratives upheld by state apparatuses. For example, traditionally celebrated intellectuals like Matthew Arnold's Scholar Gypsy and Robert Browning's Grammarian cannot be considered authentic intellectuals, as they detach from the sociopolitical and material realities of their time. Conversely, Dr. Azad in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* represents an authentic intellectual, as he actively disrupts the status quo, fulfilling a critical social role even in the face of personal threat, in line with Edward Said's concept of the intellectual. By weaving these aforementioned areas together, this paper offers interdisciplinary approaches and insights into the pedagogy of literary texts—from the classical age to the present.

Introduction

Pedagogy in literary studies usually follows traditional methods and approaches; And even in teaching the intellectual figures in literature, traditional pedagogy usually focuses on the scholarly pursuits wisdom and philosophical depth of the intellectuals. In doing so in most cases, these approaches overlook the role of intellectuals as the agents of social change. This paper, on the other hand, aspires to highlight a new pedagogical strategy for teaching the intellectuals which does not only teach the intellectuals as bearers of wisdom. This paper argues that to become an intellectual, one must perform his social role and must have critical engagement with power structure. They must not devote their life for knowledge and wisdom, they also need to challenge the hegemonic nature of power and dismantle the status quo that fosters and bolsters injustice and social inequities. If anyone fails to do these roles, then, they cannot be termed as intellectual. To strengthen the argument, this paper employs an interdisciplinary mode of analysis, that means, this paper uses the lens of cultural studies, critical pedagogy and literary theories among many others to establish its points. Insights from several critical theorists like Edward Said, Antonio Gramsci, Noam Chomsky and Pierre bourdeau will be used in this paper to provide an alternative pedagogical approach.

Theoretical Framework

Before delving deep into discussion, I would like to discuss briefly the discourses I would like to use to present an alternative pedagogical approach to teaching the intellectuals. Edward Said's *Representation of the Intellectuals* provide a critical lens in interpreting the intellectuals in a different way. According to Said, intellectuals cannot "sheepishly go along with the herd", rather,

they need to “fulfil a particular set of functions in the society” (8). In doing so, they must not repose in “ivory tower” or take “solace in their illusory separation from the ugly, worldly political realities” (Sokmen and Ertur 56). Thus, Saidian intellectuals must not be “dispassionate detached observers”, on the contrary, they must be “complicit in the production of the very worldly realities” (Sokmen and Ertur 53).

In his seminal essay, “The Responsibility of the Intellectuals”, Noam Chomsky also argues that an intellectual can never be a private one—he might have devoted himself in the pursuit of knowledge but his paramount task is to unearth the ways in which the hegemonic nature of power (state and capitalism) deceives the mass and buttresses social inequalities in a hideous way. According to Chomsky, an intellectual must be in a “position to expose the lies of the government, to analyse actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions” (Chomsky 40). Therefore, it is the task of the intellectuals to undermine the apparatuses that limit the freedom of the people. To quote Gramsci aptly, an intellectual should be an organic one who must be a “constructor, organizer, permanent persuader and not just a simple orator” (Gramsci 10). An intellectual must make a risky endeavour since she cannot rely entirely on the pre-established set of norms; and in doing so, he needs to gloss over the “easy certainties” offered by “background, language, nationality, which so often shield [one] from the reality of others” (Said xiv).

Traditional Interpretations of Intellectuals in Literature

Traditional literary pedagogy tends to concentrate on the aesthetic, philosophical, and thematic dimensions of literature, with intellectuals as carriers of wisdom or philosophical ideals. Those are undoubtedly important, but ignore the larger social and political roles intellectuals play in the narrative. By bringing critical theory to literary pedagogy, literary intellectuals can be envisioned not only as purveyors of abstract knowledge but rather as engaged agents confronting power structures, social conventions, and hegemonic ideologies.

In classical pedagogy, intellectuals are usually defined as individuals who possess strong idealism and are removed from the coarse and grotesque realities of earthly existence. There had been a wrong assumption (of course, traditionally acknowledged) that an intellectual must come from a higher scholar and intellectual background, “as best cloistered in the academy and having no place outside it” (Alam 263). They dedicate themselves to acquiring knowledge and wisdom. These interpretations of intellectuals in general overlook their social role and duties, and reduce them to simple utopian thinkers who do not involve themselves in dealing with the messy worldly affairs. Though such attempts are important to mythologize the intellectuals' status as bearers of wisdom and knowledge, such attempts overlook the intellectuals' pivotal role in defining the dominant discourses and resisting ideological power relations. Intellectual figures of the past such as The Scholar Gypsy or The Grammarian are usually depicted as being detached from the politics of their era, and this limits the way that students can identify with their literary characters.

In addition, such a romanticized understanding of intellectuals does not acknowledge changing configurations of intellectual power in the modern world. As society becomes increasingly politicized, the intellectuals' role must be redefined outside the domain of pure knowledge. Intellectuals who are unwilling to challenge prevailing political and cultural status quos are limited in their ability to create concrete change and thus become irrelevant to the burning social issues of their time.

The Need for a Critical Reinterpretation

This essay contends that intellectuals must be understood not just because of their wisdom or philosophical endeavour but because of their relationship with power and politics. Taking a cue from critical theorists such as Edward Said, Pierre Bourdieu, and Noam Chomsky, we suggest a turn in intellectual study in the literature classroom. Rather than simply complimenting intellectuals on their aloof idealism, we call for a more scrutiny of their work as critical public intellectuals who critique power, resist hegemony, and struggle against oppressive regimes. By revising the intellectual as a publicly active individual, this essay seeks to open the conventional

pedagogy to a more nuanced exploration of intellectuals' practices. Figures such as Dr. Azad in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* represent a new figure of the intellectual—one who inserts herself into political and social concerns, disrupting the status quo for justice and equality. This reorientation not only questions conventional readings but also clears the way for new avenues to teaching literature in a manner that underscores the active interaction among intellectuals, power, and society. This reconception of intellectuals in literature as active, rather than passive, idealists has significant implications for the teaching of literature in the classroom. This theoretically interdisciplinary undertaking, engaging with postcolonial studies, critical theory, sociology, and political theory, makes possible new ways of reading literary texts. By relocating the focus to intellectuals' socio-political functions, teachers can promote a more richly textured, socially conscious mode of literary analysis that provokes students to think carefully about the power relations and ideologies inscribed within the texts they read.

Methodology

The methodology for this research is a combination of literary criticism with interdisciplinary approaches from critical theory, sociology, and political theory. Employing a combination of close reading techniques and theoretical application, this paper will analyze intellectuals in literature not simply for philosophical or scholarly values but also for their actions of challenging power structures in society and dominant ideologies.

The methodology of the research is designed to provide a close and critical reading of the way the intellectuals operate in the texts, specifically from the perspective of power relations and socio-political resistance. This study is based on close reading, a very common practice in literary studies that entails a thorough and detailed reading of the text. The intellectuals are the subject of the close reading. This will involve looking carefully at how these people are portrayed, how they interact with other characters, and how they interact with the social and political questions of their day. The second part of the methodology is to submit the chosen texts to frameworks of critical theory. This will enable the comprehension of intellectual roles that surpass their wisdom or scholarship, but rather focus on their socio-political involvement. A comparative examination of intellectuals in various literary eras—classical literature, i.e., Greek tragedies, and modern postmodern literature—is undertaken in this study. The aim is to trace the development of the intellectual selves in literature from the aloof, idealized intellectuals of classical literature to the activist figures of postmodern literature.

Reimagining the Intellectual: From Detached Idealist to Political Agent

One of the most significant conclusions of this research is the evolution of intellectual character from the classical, abstract idealist to the politically engaged agent of contemporary postmodern fiction. In classical literature such as *Antigone*, intellectuals like Tiresias represent traditional forms of wisdom, operating primarily within the parameters of the prevailing social and political order. Tiresias, though highly knowledgeable, does not contest or combat the powerful forces at play. His knowledge is framed as passive and prophetic, bringing insight without active engagement in the political crisis unfolding around him. He has a critical role to play in the drama but is not actively confronting the social or political forces at work. He fails to uphold “his country’s laws and the justice of heaven” while standing on “a razor’s edge” (Sophocles 136).

In contrast, postmodern intellectuals like Dr. Azad in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* actively confront oppressive political regimes and hegemonic ideologies. Dr. Azad represents a new kind of intellectual who not only questions authority but also seeks to uproot power structures that perpetuate inequality and injustice. First and foremost, Roy brings to the fore the character of Dr. Azad, who displays an intellectual agency against state-based violence, capitalism, neo-imperialism, detrimental traditions, the caste system, and other pressing issues of contemporary India. Roy precisely lists the issues for which he is on a hunger strike:

I am fasting against the following issues: I am against the Capitalist Empire, plus against US Capitalism, Indian and American State Terrorism/ All Kinds of Nuclear Weapons and Crime, plus against the Bad Education System/ Corruption/ Violence/ Environmental Degradation and All

Other Evils. Also I am against Unemployment. I am also fasting for the complete obliteration of the entire Bourgeois class. (126)

He is a radical protester who is on his “eleventh year, third month and seventeenth day of his hunger strike”, and due to this, he has become “almost two-dimensional” (125). His physical appearance amalgamated with his deteriorating physical condition is so crudely visible that he, in the words of the narrator, “looks like the desolate flag of a defeated country” (125); and this deteriorating physical condition closely reflects the image of contemporary India which is plunging deep in the ocean of injustice and oppression. He gets several life threats but he never compromised anything with truth and freedom, and like a true Saidian Intellectual, he resists against state-based violence and capitalism.

Furthermore, Tilo is another intellectual who resists against Indian Army’s atrocities in Kashmir intellectually. She could have lived her life in rest, peace, and relaxation, but she risked her life and even faced torture from the military due to her spirit of resistance. She is unlike her ex-husband Naga and her bureaucratic friend Biplab, who succumbed to the power. On the other hand, she, with her utmost, helped Musa so that he could carry on his fight against the Indian army. She also aims to empower the masses, which is, according to Simon During, a truly intellectual activity. During contends: “intellectual work [is] supposed to support and facilitate the proletariat’s coming to power against both the market and its ally, the nation-state” (During 4).

By comparing characters such as Dr. Azad based on Edward Said’s intellectual-as-critic theory, it is evident that contemporary intellectuals in literature are depicted as individuals who interact with their socio-political environment and are opposed to oppressive systems. He becomes, in Said’s words, “a disturber of the status quo” (Said x). This change demonstrates general social evolution, in which intellectuals today are required to assume more active roles in confronting political institutions, as opposed to merely disseminating theoretical knowledge.

Interdisciplinary Pedagogy: Expanding the Teaching of Intellectuals in Literature

This essay argues that the teaching of intellectual literary characters can be greatly enhanced through the incorporation of interdisciplinary thinking. By employing critical theory, sociology, and political theory in the interpretation of intellectual characters, educators can provide students with a more complex, socially conscious comprehension of such characters. Instead of presenting intellectuals as emblems of wisdom or philosophy, students can analyze how such characters engage with and confront the social, political, and cultural forces that construct their worlds. This interdisciplinary methodology can be used by teachers to get students to critically consider the intellectual’s role in literature and society. Through a consideration of works that present intellectually active characters, students can examine the interaction between knowledge, power, and resistance, developing a more sophisticated appreciation of the ways that intellectuals can reflect and challenge societal norms. This method not only makes students look at literature in a wider sense but also makes them reflect on the role of intellectuals in modern political and social movements.

Implications for Literature and Society Today

The treatment of intellectuals in literature is not an academic pursuit; it has practical applications in how we understand the place of intellectuals in modern society. In modern society, intellectuals still perform significant functions in influencing public opinion, opposing political oppression, and challenging social norms. Literature, as a mirror of society, offers a significant window through which one can view the changing role of intellectuals and their dynamics with power. By studying characters such as Dr. Azad and Tilo, one can better grasp how intellectuals would respond to such issues as political corruption, social justice, and resistance to oppression. What is learned from such literary characters can translate into real activism and political engagement because individuals are given the encouragement to utilize their intellectual capacities to question power and struggle for social change.

Conclusion

This research has traced the development of the intellectual's function in literature, from the aloof, idealized characters of classical literature to the activist, socially engaged catalysts for change in postmodern literature today. With the application of an interdisciplinary approach using critical theory, sociology, and political theory, the research has shown how literary intellectuals are not merely representatives of wisdom or sheer intellect, but active agents that engage and meet the socio-political power configurations of their times. Through the close reading and analysis of classical texts, such as *Antigone*, and postmodern works like Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the study has demonstrated that intellectuals evolve from passive carriers of knowledge to active critics of power. Figures like Tiresias in *Antigone* embody traditional intellectuals who offer wisdom but do not actively resist or challenge authority. Such characters as Dr. Azad and Tilo in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* are figures for intellectuals who use their knowledge and position to challenge oppressive systems, defy authoritarian power, and become involved in social justice. Such characters portray the figure of the modern intellectual as someone who needs to challenge hegemonic ideologies and fight for social change. In addition, the pedagogical implications of such an approach have been considerable. Through the introduction of interdisciplinary concerns to the teaching of literature, educators are more able to enable students' critical analysis of intellectuals' roles in society and literature. This approach enables students to become involved with literature in a manner that is not only intellectually stimulating but also socially and politically engaged. It compels them to explore where knowledge and power intersect, and how intellectuals can resist or impact the political and social forces of their era. Finally, this project underscores the role of intellectuals in literature as not just philosophical or scholarly entities by themselves but also as essential agents of social change. Whether in ancient literature or modern works of literature, intellectuals serve a fundamental role of questioning societal norms, analyzing power, and effecting change. By reexamining these figures through a critical, interdisciplinary approach, we better understand their role in literature and how they might be translated into the world in which we live today. In brief, the fictional intellectual is not a stable, romanticized entity but a dynamic, active presence in the socio-political debate. As this research has shown, intellectuals in fiction can make, unmake, and contest the power formations of their era, and their work as agents of social transformation is as pertinent today as it ever was.

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