



Postcolonial Pedagogy and the Dialogic Classroom: A Critical Reflection from India

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Abstract:

This essay examines the Indian humanities classroom as both a site of postcolonial critique and a space in which the authority structures that postcolonial theory seeks to dismantle are frequently reproduced. Drawing on the work of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Audre Lorde, Derek Walcott, and Mikhail Bakhtin, it argues for a dialogic pedagogy that holds teachers accountable to the critical commitments their discipline professes. The essay proceeds through three movements: an opening reflection on the gap between scholarly self-representation and pedagogical practice; an account of classroom encounters — at a slum outreach school in Chennai and at Saint Berchmans College, Kerala — in which genuinely dialogic moments emerged; and a concluding argument for the postcolonial classroom as a site of ethical as well as intellectual responsibility. The essay notes, finally, that Kerala's pedagogical tradition offers a partial but instructive counterexample to the broader tendency of Indian higher education to reproduce the monologic classroom it nominally opposes.

Keywords: postcolonial pedagogy; dialogic classroom; India; Bakhtin; higher education; critical pedagogy

Introduction

The question of academic honesty in scholarly self-representation has received surprisingly little attention within postcolonial studies — a field that otherwise subjects discursive formations to rigorous scrutiny. Said's (1978) foundational argument in *Orientalism* — that knowledge is never innocent of the power relations within which it is produced — applies with equal force to the institutional spaces in which postcolonial knowledge is transmitted. This essay examines the Indian humanities classroom as both a site of postcolonial critique and, paradoxically, a site where the authority structures that postcolonial theory seeks to dismantle are frequently reproduced.

Recent scholarship on decolonising higher education has increasingly argued that curriculum reform alone is insufficient if pedagogical relationships remain hierarchical. Contemporary discussions emphasise that decolonisation must extend beyond reading lists to encompass classroom authority, institutional culture, and knowledge production itself (Stein et al., 2020; Jansen, 2022; Mbembe, 2023). While these studies have substantially enriched debates on decolonial education, comparatively little attention has been devoted to



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the everyday pedagogical contradictions that characterise the teaching of postcolonial literature in Indian humanities classrooms. This article seeks to address that gap.

The immediate occasion for this reflection is an international conference on Said's legacy, attended by the present author over a decade ago, at which a scholar delivered a paper foregrounding the pedagogical intimacy he claimed to share with his students. The account bore little relation to the author's own experience of those seminars, which proceeded largely as monologue. The irony is pointed: a paper invoking Said's critique of representation was itself an act of misrepresentation. That the peer-review process — with its rigorous demands for citation and attribution — offers no mechanism for verifying experiential claims is a structural lacuna worth naming. This essay takes that lacuna as its point of departure.

Research Methodology and Analytical Framework

This article adopts a qualitative interpretive methodology grounded in conceptual inquiry and reflective pedagogical analysis. Rather than presenting empirical findings derived from surveys, interviews, or classroom observation conducted within a formal research design, it develops a theoretically informed examination of selected pedagogical encounters drawn from the author's teaching experience in Indian educational settings. The objective is not statistical generalisation but critical interpretation of classroom practice through the conceptual frameworks of postcolonial studies and critical pedagogy.

Methodologically, the article combines close textual analysis with reflective practitioner inquiry. Foundational works by Edward Said, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Mikhail Bakhtin, Paulo Freire, Audre Lorde, and Derek Walcott constitute the primary theoretical corpus through which questions of authority, dialogue, language, and ethical responsibility are examined. These texts are read comparatively rather than in isolation, allowing points of convergence and tension to emerge in relation to contemporary pedagogical practice.

The classroom episodes discussed in this essay function as reflective pedagogical case studies rather than empirical data. They are not presented as representative of Indian higher education as a whole but as analytically significant moments that illuminate broader contradictions between the emancipatory aspirations of postcolonial theory and the hierarchical structures that frequently characterise classroom practice. Such an approach is consistent with qualitative educational scholarship that recognises reflective practice as a legitimate mode of knowledge production, particularly where the aim is to interrogate institutional assumptions rather than to establish causal relationships.

The analytical framework is informed principally by Bakhtin's conception of dialogism and Freire's critique of the "banking" model of education. Bakhtin provides the theoretical vocabulary for understanding meaning as a product of dialogue rather than unilateral transmission, while Freire offers a normative framework for evaluating pedagogical authority in terms of participation, critical consciousness, and ethical accountability. These perspectives are brought into conversation with postcolonial theory, particularly Said's analysis of the relationship between knowledge and power and Ngũgĩ's critique of colonial language politics, in order to examine how authority operates within contemporary humanities classrooms.

The study necessarily has certain limitations. It does not seek to provide empirical evidence concerning pedagogical practices across Indian higher education, nor does it claim that the classroom experiences discussed here are universally representative. Instead, its contribution lies in demonstrating how reflective analysis, when situated within established theoretical traditions, can illuminate persistent tensions between postcolonial pedagogical ideals and institutional practice. By combining conceptual analysis with carefully

contextualised pedagogical reflection, the article argues that the question of dialogue in the classroom is not merely methodological but fundamentally ethical.

1. Ngũgĩ, Language, and the Politics of the Canon

The question of language as a colonial instrument has been central to postcolonial literary studies since Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1986) *Decolonising the Mind*, in which he argued that the renunciation of English in favour of Gĩkũyũ was a necessary act of cultural decolonisation. Teaching this text in a postcolonial literature module at Saint Berchmans College, Kerala, the present author encountered a response that illustrated both the vitality and the limitations of canonical postcolonial pedagogy in the Indian context. For many students, the field remained largely bounded by Homi K. Bhabha and Said; Ngũgĩ was an unfamiliar name. The classroom debate that ensued around his renunciation of English produced a genuinely dialogic moment.

Recent discussions of decolonial pedagogy have cautioned against reducing decolonisation to symbolic curricular inclusion. Scholars increasingly argue that meaningful decolonisation requires transforming the social relations through which knowledge is produced and shared, rather than merely diversifying prescribed texts (Stein et al., 2020; Andreotti et al., 2021). Read in this light, Ngũgĩ's intervention continues to illuminate contemporary debates concerning epistemic justice and pedagogical authority.

One student argued that linguistic renunciation amounted to professional self-marginalisation: Gĩkũyũ, he pointed out, remained inaccessible to most Africans, let alone a global readership. Another defended the decision on principled grounds. A third, however, reframed the debate by reading aloud from her notebook. The passage was Audre Lorde's well-known formulation from *Sister Outsider* (1984):¹

For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support. (Lorde, 1984, p. 112)

The citation was apt. In that moment, Lorde's argument was not merely a rhetorical intervention but a demonstration of what dialogic pedagogy looks like in practice: a student, drawing on her own independent reading, reframing the terms of a debate the teacher had opened. The master's language is, as Lorde insists, his most effective instrument of control — and yet the student had used precisely that language to make the argument.

The introduction of Derek Walcott's counterargument — that English is the property of the imagination rather than of colonial inheritance² — produced an instructive complication. A student's visible discomfort at the mention of Walcott's name required no elaboration: his documented record of sexual misconduct shadows any pedagogical invocation of his work. The moment raised, in concentrated form, a problem the field has not fully resolved — how to engage with a body of work whose aesthetic arguments retain their force while the author's conduct constitutes precisely the abuse of institutional authority that postcolonial critique seeks to expose. The classroom, in this instance, became a space in which the contradictions of the literary canon were encountered not as theoretical abstractions but as ethical realities, and the teacher's responsibility was not to resolve those contradictions prematurely but to hold them open.

2. The Dialogic Classroom as Postcolonial Practice

Bakhtin's concept of the dialogic — the principle that meaning is produced through encounter and contestation rather than unilateral transmission — offers a productive framework for rethinking postcolonial pedagogy (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 259–422). In the Indian context, however, this principle is more often professed than practised. A classroom encounter from an outreach programme in a slum in Nungambakkam, Chennai,

crystallises the argument. Teaching students from severely disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, the author was challenged by an eighth-grade student on the question of women's political representation in India. When the response proved inadequate — confined to familiar and insufficient examples — the student redirected the discussion with an immediacy that no amount of postgraduate training reliably produces: 'Patriarchy is the real problem.'³

The mispronunciation did not diminish the precision of the diagnosis. What the encounter demonstrated was the extent to which genuine critical agency is independent of institutional privilege — and, by implication, the degree to which the Indian higher education system, in its current form, fails to cultivate what it claims to foster. A majority of students in Indian higher education arrive from rural or semi-rural backgrounds with limited access to quality primary schooling, a reality that official government discourse has consistently obscured. The pedagogical challenge, then, is not simply to transmit a body of knowledge but to construct conditions in which abstract theoretical discourse can take root in students' existing ways of knowing.

Contemporary research in higher education similarly identifies dialogic learning as central to inclusive and transformative pedagogical practice. Rather than treating students as passive recipients of knowledge, recent scholarship argues that meaningful learning emerges through collaborative knowledge production, reflexive engagement, and critical participation (hooks, 2021 edition; Zembylas, 2021; Biesta, 2022). Bakhtin's account of dialogism therefore remains remarkably relevant within current discussions of democratic education.

Ngũgĩ's argument in *Decolonising the Mind* extends beyond language to the broader structures of knowledge transmission. His account of the 'psychological violence' perpetrated by colonial pedagogy — more insidious, he suggests, than physical coercion — resonates in the contemporary Indian context, where the humanities classroom has become a contested site (Ngũgĩ, 1986, p. 9). In several northern states, official curricula have been revised to marginalise or efface the Mughal period; the systematic renaming of cities and landmarks reflects an agenda in which historical memory is instrumentalised for political ends. The educational apparatus, in such a climate, is no longer a neutral site.

Against this background, the persistence of genuinely open pedagogical spaces in Kerala acquires a particular significance. A state with a long tradition of political literacy and among the highest literacy rates in India, Kerala offers a partial but instructive counterexample to the broader tendency of Indian higher education to reproduce the monologic classroom it nominally opposes. Inside the classroom, in the author's experience, dissenting voices and genuine dialogue remain possible — and remain, in the current political climate, a form of quiet resistance. Recent studies of Indian higher education have highlighted persistent inequalities associated with language, caste, region, and institutional access, even as enrolment has expanded considerably (Altbach & de Wit, 2023; Tilak, 2022). Kerala occupies a distinctive position within this landscape because of its comparatively high literacy rates and longstanding investment in public education. While these structural advantages should not be romanticised, they provide conditions under which dialogic pedagogical practices may be more readily cultivated than elsewhere.

3. Towards a Pedagogy of Accountability

The argument of this essay is ultimately a modest one. Following Freire's (1970, pp. 71–86) account of the 'banking' model of education as a form of oppression, and Said's (1994, p. 11) insistence on the intellectual's obligation to speak truth to power, this essay argues that the dialogic classroom is not merely a pedagogical ideal but an ethical commitment. A pedagogy that performs critical engagement whilst reproducing the monologic authority of the colonial classroom is not a neutral failure; it is a form of bad faith — and one that postcolonial literary studies, as a discipline, has been insufficiently willing to name.

Postcolonial literary studies has been more successful at theorising the structures it opposes than at transforming the institutional conditions within which it operates. The peer-review process does not verify the experiential claims of pedagogical self-representation. The canon continues to include figures whose conduct contradicts the values their work articulates. And the classroom, for all its potential as a contact zone in Pratt's (1991, p. 34) sense, remains vulnerable to the authority of the teacher who controls it. These are not reasons for despair. They are, rather, the conditions under which a genuinely postcolonial pedagogy — one accountable to its own stated commitments — remains urgently necessary.

Ngũgĩ's observation that the coloniser's most durable weapon was not the machete but the classroom retains its provocation. The question it poses to contemporary practitioners of postcolonial pedagogy in India is not merely theoretical: it is a question about what we actually do when we close the door and face our students. The dialogic classroom does not resolve that question, but it refuses to evade it. Recent scholarship on decolonising universities consistently reminds us that institutional transformation requires changes in pedagogical practice as much as curricular reform. The dialogic classroom proposed here therefore contributes to contemporary debates that view decolonisation not as a completed achievement but as an ongoing ethical and institutional process.

Notes

¹ The Lorde passage is from 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House,' originally a paper delivered at a conference on feminist theory in 1979, subsequently collected in *Sister Outsider* (1984).

² Walcott's formulation appears in 'The Muse of History' (1974), collected in *What the Twilight Says* (1998): 'The English language is nobody's special property. It is the property of the imagination: the property of the language itself.'

³ The student's original phrasing was 'parchiarchy,' a mispronunciation of 'patriarchy.' The formulation is preserved here without correction as the substance of the observation was entirely clear in context.

Disclosure Statement

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