

# **Do Interdisciplinary Approaches in Critical Pedagogy Mar the Beauty of Literature? With Examples from 'After the Dance' By Leo Tolstoy**

**Boddupally Giridhar**

*Faculty, Department Of English  
Cuk, Karnataka*

---

Date of Submission: 20-03-2019

Date of acceptance: 06-04-2019

---

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Do Interdisciplinary Approaches in Critical Pedagogy Mar the Beauty of Literature? Through this question, I will try to trace the 'problems' which arise in a classroom that follows critical pedagogy, especially, when interdisciplinary approaches are used explicitly. I will try to find out, if scientific and literary jargon come in the way of enjoying the beauty of literature. We proceed by discussing three important ideas: critical pedagogy, interdisciplinary concepts and beauty of literature or aesthetics.

Pedagogy is 'the science and art of teaching' in Oxford dictionary. The Encyclopedia of Languages and Linguistics defines pedagogy as 'culture specific ways of organizing formal teaching and learning'. It stands for the 'scaffolding of the sequential development of individual mental processes such as reorganizing, recalling, analyzing, creating, understanding, and evaluating', according to the modern theorists of pedagogy, who incorporate Cognitivism, theories of social interaction, social and cultural theories with pedagogy. The learner is assisted to inter-relate the existing knowledge with the acquired knowledge.

Critical pedagogy calls for something more than just the understanding. "It is aimed at helping students to develop consciousness of freedom, to be aware of the authoritarian tendencies present in the process of understanding and relating the knowledge with power and using it for constructive activities", says Dean Braa and Peter Callero quoting Ira Shor. It is believed to offer personal freedom to construct oneself and one's place in the world to the greatest extent possible. Based on the Marxist theory, it aims at recognizing and overcoming the hegemony of societal ideologies in the class room. It is yet to be questioned that the classes we claim to follow critical pedagogy, in fact follows the same hegemony of the idea that every analysis should be critical. Let us assume here, that in this case the pedagogy is actually liberating.

Interdisciplinary concepts have been discussed over and over by academicians that here, we try to choose from those, one that fits the frame in this case.

While being interdisciplinary is seen impossible to do, as it only blurs the existing authoritative disciplinary lines and boundaries to create new lines and new authorities (Fish, 1989). Many scholars believe that anything that connects to our existing knowledge is at once interdisciplinary. Fish gives an example: "... (In an interdisciplinary thought) Freud and Nietzsche have migrated respectively from psychology and philosophy to English and comparative literature. But just because you emanate from other regions (psychoanalysis, philosophy etc.) to form your interpretation, they do not cease to be foreign. (Is he hinting at disciplinary imperialism?) on the other hand there is Subha Tiwari from National Assessment and Accreditation Council blogging, "...you read a novel, a poem or anything else and it has a deep impact on you, then your response to it is bound to be interdisciplinary...you read a story about a girl and you say, 'this girl is deeply attached to her father', and then you say, 'girls are usually attached to their father' – quite an accepted fact. After you've thought it out, the psychologist comes and tells you that its Electra/Oedipus complex you're talking about, your approach becomes interdisciplinary".

These extremes, both of them, do not aid us in our study of interdisciplinary concepts as one establishes impossibility of transcending disciplines and the other proposes absence of disciplinary boundaries - trans disciplinary approach.

William .H. Newell and William .J. Green define interdisciplinary studies as inquiries which are critically drawn upon two or more disciplines and which lead to an integration of disciplinary insights. They explain this in case of pure sciences with the example of 'effects of heat' which involves insights from both physics (at macroscopic level) and chemistry (at molecular level). But as they come to Humanities, yet again they move towards a transdisciplinary approach.

Rebecca .S Nowacek explains interdisciplinary concepts using Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) with the help of 'activity systems'. They consist of four elements, the subject (a person or a group of people), the object of attention, a motive that drives activity and the meditational tools used within the system. Interdisciplinary thought can be understood as the shift from recognition of the coexistence of multiple but apparently independent activity systems to the awareness of overlap among these activity systems. Interdisciplinary work is not just slipping away from the disciplines but the work on the boundaries and intersections of disciplines. She stresses that it does not mean freedom from the constraints of discipline but awareness of constraints, complements and interrelations of limited number of disciplines. Though complex, when the theory is applied on stage, I think this presents the idea in its best sense for the current requirement.

In the current scenario, especially in the academia in the Americas and Europe, the term interdisciplinary brings in Interdisc classrooms. Here, a batch of students is taught by teachers specialized in different disciplines in the presence of each other, with more involvement of the interrelations of these disciplines. For example, in an Interdisc of with a combination of History, English and Theology, Milton's Paradise Lost and Hobbe's Leviathan is discussed in all the three classes. The students find it easier to perceive that is taught in one class in the context of another discipline.

A similar case of interdisciplinary class we find in the classes of Social Orientation Course. The topics we include in the discussions vary from politics, economics, social psychology, and media to religion and culture. When we try to trace the history of Briton as part of English Literature in sixteenth century, politics, religion, science, geography, music, theatre and many other topics are sewn with a long thread of literary pieces. Similarly applied criticism on certain particular work or author seems to be equally colourful with a variety of disciplines getting involved. Often in the class (which questionably follows critical pedagogy), students are aware of the presence of interdisciplinary thoughts, though they may not be able to name them. In the class of Tolstoy's works, students may identify Marx, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Hegel and Derrida. But step up, and we see every interpretation we offer is a part or the whole of an idea having its roots outside literary studies or English language. The moment we see a literary text critically, measure it with different scales or examine it strand by strand, we discover that it provides 'n' number of ideas with wild interconnections in them. So essentially, any critical pedagogy is an interdisciplinary approach.

However, one of the problems that are seen in the classes following critical pedagogy is the marginalization of some students. They may either fall short in active participation or fail to trace the complete meaning of what is being discussed. This is something, despite being noticed, that is left unaddressed. I believe the root cause of this is disagreements in ideas. In a class of active brains and individualistic minds, conflicts of ideas and disagreements are natural and a desirable sign. But cases are plenty when, the disagreement is framed as due to wrong understanding. Such an experience will create a marginalized group in any class. Critical pedagogy with the aid of interdisciplinary techniques encourage accelerates and amplifies to some extent these conflicts of ideas, clashes between interpretations. When the pedagogy claims to be critical can a student come up with a simple interpretation? Will it be wrong to propose an explanation on the basis of student's personal feelings?

#### **Insights through the text:**

To present such instances of interpretative differences, let us consider the following example in Leo Tolstoy's 'After the Dance':

Taking the story only from the text provided, the following interpretations (A), (B), (C) and (D) are drawn for the question – why did Ivan lose his love for Varinka? Or what was the 'real' reason for the change that was brought in Ivan?

- (A) Ivan tries to relate himself with the father of Varinka, Colonel Peter Valdislavovich. The dance of the daughter with her father was so passionate, so admirable that Ivan is moved by it, "he and she were united in my mind in one rush of pathetic tenderness". If he could emulate her father, Ivan thinks he could attain his love. He would be able to substitute the father in the beautiful image of the dance, he had in mind, thus becoming the object of Varinka's love. The idea is shattered when he sees the parade ground scene where Peter V\_\_ ruthlessly beats up the convict or worse, gives orders to beat him up. The bloody scene revolts his mind against the man of his admiration and he realises that he could never become anything like Peter V\_\_. He altogether leaves the idea of his love with Varinka.
- (B) Ivan experiences an inexpressible joy during the party, dancing with the girl. During the dance he forgets his own bodily existence, submerged in happiness. However, after the dance, when he reaches his home, he really feels the elevated spirits. When he remembers the events of the night, he enters a dreamlike state. Seeing his brother sleeping, he pities the fellow 'for his ignorance of the bliss I (Ivan) was feeling'. On the walk, he is overwhelmed with his emotions that, all that he sees on the way, 'the very horses themselves, seemed to me stimulating and fascinating, full of suggestion'. In this elevated state, he beholds the brutal scene which must have dragged his mind down to the pits of reality of physical pain. The experience was a

traumatic one, “for I had the feeling that I was going to be really sick from all the horrors that possessed me at that sight. I do not remember how I got home...the moment I was about to sleep I heard and saw again all that had happened and I sprang up”.

- (C) Ivan sees the intimacy between Varinka and her father. Their mutual love and care strike him deeply, “...he (Peter V\_\_) too his daughter’s face between his hands. He kissed her on the forehead and brought her to me... (he) smiling kindly... replaced his sword in the sheath”. Never the less, the parade ground scene again turns his ideas upside down. He sees Peter V\_\_’s strong hand striking a soldier for ‘not bringing down his stick with sufficient strength on the red neck of the Tartar’. This furious man was just the same person who danced graciously with his daughter. Ivan perhaps realises that if that man could bring pain upon the soldier for not beating the convict hard enough (though the soldier was just being humane and could have done nothing severely, due to his persona) it was possible that if he placed himself near to Varinka, the loving father may treat Ivan with equal or rather more brutal inflictions, even if he was innocent. The image of the sword always with the father except during that dance, suggest his severity with all, save his beloved daughter.
- (D) Ivan in the dance builds up his understandings of Varinka’s father with high esteem for him. “I not only admired, I regarded them with enraptured sympathy.” The dance and later his kindness in giving his daughter’s hand in dance, all makes a deep impression in Ivan’s mind, of the smiling and benevolent face of the man. However, the same man he perceives a few hours later, supervising the brutal punishment. While the convict was taking blow after blow, crying for mercy, “the colonel marched beside him, and looking now at his feet and now at the man, inhaled the air, puffed out his cheeks and breathed out between his protruding lips...”bring new sticks!” he cried, and looking round, he saw mw. Assuming an air of not knowing me, and with a ferocious and frown, he hastily turned away.” To know that the man, who smilingly courted him and was the object of his admiration, could be capable of a dishearteningly cruel act like this brings a deep conflict in Ivan. The disillusionment makes him doubt his understanding of the world and himself.

However, irrespective of the interpretations developed, Ivan tries to dig in the ‘bad memories’ in his mind with the label ‘not-understandable’. He runs away from all that reminds him about the scene, his love, his plans for career and everything.

One may accept or reject, any or all of the given interpretations. It is possible to come up with more interpretations. However, we note that all these are at some points working with ideas of psychology or at another level, with ideas of philosophy, with or without definite shape and form for the connections. But it is sure that we are thinking, working, beyond the text with the help of it. Let us see the important images we draw to form these interpretations, in a rough way.

- (A) The dance between the father and the daughter, their intimacy, Ivan’s admiration for the father, the cruelty
- (B) The ecstasy during the dance, excited state of mind, the heavy blow from the scene of cruelty
- (C) The dance between the father and the daughter, their intimacy, the power of the father, the cruelty
- (D) The dance between the father and the daughter, Ivan’s admiration for the father, the cruelty, the severe attitude of the father

Here we see that all of the four have the image of the dance, and the cruelty. All the four can be seen as working complementarily, or as implications of each other. They may even seem different from each other by huge gaps. All the four do not negate the other, but project their own significance. The images are different in different cases. In (B) the image of the father hardly appears. In (A) and (D) we see the focus more on the father and less on the girl. Whenever, we give importance to one image and stress its importance, we are blind to some others. Similarly whenever we focus on any one conflict or connection between the disciplines, very often the rest of the connections and conflicts are left obscure. This seems to be one of the short comings of interdisciplinary approach.

Are there any disagreements with these four interpretations? For sure, it is quite possible that one can call any one or all of them far-fetched. It is also possible to select any one of these or a new interpretation and call it the ‘right’ reading of the text. In a class, like is said earlier, conflicts between interpretations are unavoidable.

What may be the reason? We must realize that it is not the interdisciplinary approach that has brought the conflicts. In fact such an approach helps in moving beyond the boundaries, or at the least, near the margins of it, to look at the text taking different angles and levels, and analyzing it with definite reasons, pathways and objectives. The real reason may be simply differences in the individual readers and their readings, because one is comfortable or instinctive about a certain approach that suits his reasoning and individuality. This can be observed easily. The general understanding may be this, that the text bears the ‘real points’ which we put together to form the ‘real interpretation’ which gives the ‘true’ meaning. The ‘real points’ show us the approach we should adopt to get the meaning; while it is more likely that that we first decide the approach and then search for the real points to get the meaning which has already been labelled ‘true’ the moment we chose the approach.

When two look from their own perspectives, they are bound to get their own 'true points', their own images, giving different interpretations. Fish calls these univalent interpreters as interpretive communities. For example, a supporter of (B) totally fails to consider the role played by the father in the mind of Ivan, because it does not contribute much to his emotional state. One who believes in (D) would find it needless to focus more on the love between Ivan and Varinka. Like we saw previously, the 'points' and images we see are different because they are obtained with different objectives; we have already decided the points and images that we are looking for (Fish, 1980). For the same reason it would be meaningless to call any one interpretation as farfetched or much thought out. Likewise, the spontaneity of an interpretation cannot qualify it as the 'real meaning'. The methods by which one understands or finds 'the points' in the text is developed over years and is practiced in every action of life (Hazlitt, 1824). The thing that triggers a particular approach in a person may be different. Sometimes, the text, the words, the characters, the events, and the background of the text, the different allusions it suggests, the author or simple some foreign image brought into the mind of the reader. These approaches no longer narrow ways, join the boulevards of literary criticism. The text is fought for, between different schools of criticism. The most outrageous among these seems to be that of affective fallacy. But later it was also said by its proponent, Monroe .C. Beardsley, that "it does not appear that critical evaluation can be done at all except in relation to certain types of effect that aesthetic objects have upon their perceivers". Again aesthetics is something that we consider subjective (here we come to the third idea) and no two persons enjoy a literary piece in the same way. It is very well to remember that the aesthetic effect of a piece is not to be slighted by the army of reason and rationality. In fact a person will be capable of giving reasons for the aesthetic pleasures he receives and likewise show beauty in reasoning. The 'art for art's sake' was proposed by Immanuel Kant with as much reason and credibility as Schopenhauer criticized it.

## II. CONCLUSION

So what can be done? Interestingly, (I believe) critical pedagogy through interdisciplinary work can itself be the antidote for disagreements in between different interpretive communities. The very fact that it brings in disagreements, that such interpretations are capable of producing and resisting disagreements, shows that the class provides large space for many more like them. A class which has a hot discussion of the four interpretations, can at the end of the day, learn to accept the possibility of such interpretations, if not accept them completely. That four interpretations comes up and the pedagogy facilitates the accommodation of such different interpretations is in itself gives hope. The lesson taken, students will be encouraged to leave their view for a while and take a walk towards other points and see the text from another point of view impartially. In time, students will develop their range of perception of a text and (I think) they will be able to develop their own techniques of shifting and changing the perspective and be more liberal and liberated in their thoughts.

This will also answer the question of hegemony in the class. That critical analysis calls for only the psychoanalytic interpretations or the Marxist interpretations, will take a step back and invite any interpretation to discover its own potential and strength with the help of everyone.

So, do interdisciplinary approaches in critical pedagogy mar the beauty of literature?

If one is ready to accept that criticisms and interpretations as potential siblings of other criticisms and interpretations, answer is NO; criticism through interdisciplinary approaches can only improve the beauty of literature, let alone Tolstoy's works, any literary work; Tolstoy's are more so.

End note:

Criticism itself is sometimes seen as the sworn enemy of aestheticism. Many scholars own that the very act of explaining the brilliance of a work ends up in arguments and disagreements and they forget to enjoy the work at the end. Since I hear that psychologists believe that in literature, objectivity is a myth, we can please ourselves saying the idea about criticism is always subjective. 'It is always better sometimes to respect some partialities and prejudices' says Iser; well let it also be tempered with reason.

In case of Tolstoy's works, it was delightful to observe something interesting as this: sometimes it is felt that the work explained in any way other than from 'simple' behavioural studies would harm the wholeness of the story ( After the Dance, Albert), retaining its ambiguities and doubts; at other instances it seems no extend of explanations could bring out the beauty of the work satisfactorily (HadjiMurad, Kreutzer Sonata, Father Sergius); yet there is another set of stories which give feeling that let anyway it be interpreted, that all would say the same thing. It would be all completely in sync and the text would remain as it was, wholesome. These stories (I believe) speak about the universal themes, which are applicable everywhere, all the time, and can be analysed anyway but would say the same thing (How Much Land Does A Man Need, Little Girls Wiser Than Men, Where Love Is God Is and other shorter stories. These works (Tolstoy's 'classics' I would call them) are fire proof, which come out of the flames of criticism and analysis (or dissections), intact and unaltered in all times to come.

### REFERENCES

- [1]. Abrams, M. H. and Harpham, Geoffrey Galt : *A Glossary Of Literary Terms*
- [2]. Braa, Dean, and Callero, Peter. "Critical Pedagogy and Classroom Praxis", 2006.
- [3]. Fadila, Dalia. "Ways to See Literature: Reader Response and New Critical Theory as Two Ways Of Teaching Literature, A Study"
- [4]. Fish, Stanley: *Is There A Text In This Class?*"What Makes An Interpretation Acceptable?" 1980.
- [5]. Fish, Stanley. "Being Interdisciplinary Is So Very Hard to Do", 1989.
- [6]. Gabel, Susan. "Some Conceptual Problems with Critical Pedagogy", 2002.
- [7]. Hazlitt, William. "On Genius and Common Sense", 1824.
- [8]. Newell, H. William, and Green, J. William. "Defining and Teaching Interdisciplinary Studies", 1982.
- [9]. Nowacek, S. Rebecca. "A Discourse-Based Theory of Interdisciplinary Connections", 2005.
- [10]. Nowacek, S. Rebecca. "Why Is Being Interdisciplinary So Very Hard to Do? Thoughts on the Perils and Promises of Interdisciplinary Pedagogy", 2009.
- [11]. *Oxford Dictionary, The*.
- [12]. Wikipedia.

IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) is UGC approved Journal with Sl. No. 5070, Journal no. 49323.

Boddupally Giridhar. "Do Interdisciplinary Approaches in Critical Pedagogy Mar the Beauty of Literature?With Examples from 'After the Dance' By Leo Tolstoy." IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS). vol. 24 no. 04, 2019, pp. 22-26.