Interview

Pedagogy, Innovation, and Knowledge-Creation in the Classroom

Saloni Sharma in conversation with Saikat Majumdar

Saikat Majumdar is a novelist, academic, and commentator on the arts, literature, and higher education. He is the author of four novels, most recently, *The Middle Finger* (2022), *The Scent of God* (2019), *The Firebird/Play House* (2017/2015), and *Silverfish* (2007). His non-fiction includes two books of literary criticism, *Prose of the World* (2013), *The Amateur* (forthcoming), a volume on higher education, *College: Pathways of Possibility* (2018), and a co-edited collection of essays, *The Critic as Amateur* (2019). He is Professor of English & Creative Writing at Ashoka University and has been a Fellow at the Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Advanced Study, Newhouse Center for the Humanities at Wellesley College, and the Stellenbosch Institute of Advanced Study.

Saloni Sharma (SS): Welcome to Fortell, Prof. Majumdar. As an academic with a sustained interest in higher education, you have been a witness to several changes in the processes of education and pedagogy in the last few years. In March 2020, once the country went into the first of many lockdowns, classrooms everywhere turned digital, with varied efficacy, depending on infrastructural availability. "Online" became the norm, so much so, that the regular classroom underwent a nomenclatural transformation and was now called "offline", brought into existence by its obverse. This meant obvious and often, radical pedagogical shifts for the undergraduate classroom. What are some of the long-term changes you see consequent to this alteration of the teaching-learning space?

Saikat Majumdar (SM): A kind of disembodiment, both good and not-so-good. When we returned to campus last spring (2022), I would invite a student to speak in class by saying "please unmute", quickly correcting myself to "please speak up"! So, there is the technological disembodiment. The best part of getting back to the classroom was something like the

sensation of reuniting with family after a long separation—the palpable energy in the room made us realize the love and affection we have for one another just by being in this wonderful ecosystem of learning. And yes, we missed human company too, particularly beyond people with whom we share a daily living space. Now I know that's precious, but I also know not to depend on it all the time. We would never be in contact with friends and family who live far away if we insisted on nothing but in-person interaction all the time. It is the same with learning. Its dimension gets broadened when you can invite an out-of-town speaker to your class via Zoom, or even meet a student on a day you cannot come to campus.

In a deeper sense, I am more aware now of the difference between what I might call the body and soul of teaching. The body is the dissemination of information and the exchange of ideas, which actually can be abstracted and disembodied, and hence carried out quite well through technology, particularly if everybody participates in real time. The soul, ironically, is the physical presence. The way students become real to us when they are in a room with us physically, the way we worry about whether they are loud enough or too soft-voiced, rather than merely whether they have good Wi-Fi. The fact that they cannot turn their faces off the way they can switch off their videos. The languages of the body, and the emotions they convey, are important in the humanities classroom. I value this more than ever now.

SS: On a related note, there have been increasing intersections between literature and technology in the classroom, with extensive use of media, cinema and documentaries and other forms of AV, necessitated by newer, more inclusive syllabi. What role of technology do you foresee in the teaching of literature and creative writing?

SM: In my teaching, the new digital technologies are primarily a method; there are others for whom they also make up archives. My own archive remains human and textual, mediated of course by traditional technologies of print. I see a clear shift in interest, particularly in younger generations of students and researchers, to writing and textuality in newer, virtual and digital forms, whether online fan-fiction or social media poetry. I think it's a welcome trend – any broadening of the archive is a good thing – but it will be a loss if this leads to the marginalization of literature as print, or even older forms of performance. The modernity of print was a most miraculous thing and the consequent new forms,

such as the novel or the reading experience of poetry and plays were not merely new technological, but also unique spiritual realities.

As a writer of prose, I particularly feel indebted to this modernity. New art forms such as mixed-media or interactive texts, and those on virtual platforms, likewise bring new philosophies. However, they should not drive away the old, but continue in collaboration with them, which will enrich all. Take cinema—it took away some of the popularity of the novel in the 20th Century but eventually I think cinema and the novel lived in a kind of enriching synergy with each other. I have used cinema to teach characterization or point of view in my fiction writing classes. But it is important that the digital natives do not become complete aliens in the world of print—or even to traditional cinema, which to some of them demand too much time and attention!

SS: In your book, *College* (2018), you have written about the stark division between the consumption and production of knowledge in the Indian academic culture. Considering the insistent push given to the agenda of "productivity" and "employability", what relevance do literature and the liberal humanities have and how does one address this split between consumption and knowledge-creation?

SM: In hindsight, perhaps "consumption" and "production" were not the best terms to use to describe learning and the generation of new knowledge. They fall too neatly into the model of capitalist production, which has admittedly enriched the high-powered Western university but now seems to have completely engulfed its soul and reshaped it as a ruthlessly corporatized entity. One of the biggest strengths of Indian higher education is that its public university system has lived and thrived outside this mercenary culture, having inherited a great infrastructure of Nehruvian socialism. It is an old, rusty, heavily bureaucratized structure, overly dependent on the colonial model of examinations, and it is highly uneven, depending on location and individual practitioners, but for most of us educated in this system, it has worked quite well.

When I described the stark division between learning and creation of knowledge in the Indian post-secondary system, I was indicating the incompleteness of learning if you just drove students to mechanically "consume" (and here the terms feels right) knowledge with a view to game the exam system, which is an old colonial inheritance we should have changed a long ago. Consequently, this also affects the larger function of the university as a generator of new knowledge, as the

Humboldtian model pioneered in early 19th Century Berlin.

But you're right, terms such as "productivity" and "employability" are just as quickly bureaucratized and corporatized. This is an infinitely large and complex problem. Evaluating the imaginative, scholarly, scientific output of the university—not to mention the pedagogical and the social contributions—is an enormously difficult task whose demands are moreover, ceaselessly changeable. Honest peer-review is one way to go, but it never removes the elements of the subjective and the personal, even in the more "objective" and "empirical" disciplines. In literature and the liberal humanities, one can replace "productivity" with "creativity", but I find the latter term increasingly unsatisfying as well, what with the hubris and personal grandeur of Romantic creation from nothingness. Knowledge and value in the arts and humanities is necessarily neither radically new nor aggressively individualistic, but forms of love, care, play, pleasure, and courage. These are not immediately quantifiable, but their touch and presence are felt throughout life, and across generations.

SS: This makes me wonder about the role of the student as a stakeholder. The learner needs to be an active participant and not just a passive recipient of information. How far do you think our undergraduate programmes and the systems that generate them are looking out for the socio-cultural and linguistic variability of the learner? Do we have any means of ensuring the same?

SM: If we take the Socratic model as normative then of course, we want students to be active participants. However, there are many ways of being an active participant. There is the model of the Humboldtian University in which the university's job is knowledge creation; not just teaching existing knowledge but creating new knowledge. I see that as enactable on a person-to-person level. Is the student just consuming knowledge and regurgitating it at the examination or is he/she thinking and creating new knowledge? An effective intervention is that of making a distinction between a research question and an exam question. Or you can abandon the question altogether, you give the student a research question or you make them come up with their own research question. That is already pushing them towards knowledge creation.

In India the system has been too binarized. The student only consumes knowledge till they are at the M.A. programme, and suddenly, for their PhD, they are expected to come up with a research mindset. The transformation cannot be so rapid. The process needs to start earlier,

while they are still undergraduates. This process, of course, is much more resource intensive and takes much more time and patience on part of the teacher. It is much harder to do this in the large classrooms that are the norm now. Once we bracket out the back story of indigenous models of learning, which is really a different and much more complex question, if you accept this model of critical thinking as the desirable model, then this is the way to go to privilege the student as a stakeholder.

SS: What impact does your very specific positioning as academic, essayist and novelist have on your experience of teaching-learning?

SM: It's tempting to emulate Toni Morrison and say: I read books, I teach books, I write books—it's one job! There is indeed a larger seamlessness whose beneficiary one invariably becomes. But it takes time to get here, and the initial friction between an intellectual and artistic identity can be confusing, especially when mistaken as symbiosis. I think it's mostly about finding one's voice, which subsequently unites you as a novelist, essayist, and teacher. Fiction requires you to assume multiple voices sometimes, but that's a different matter.

My teaching style is generally informal and conversational, and that is often the style in my essays as well. These elements enter fiction too, but the difference is that fiction sometimes practices a moral irresponsibility, even a kind of a political chaos that one does not inhabit in one's citizenship as a teacher or a debating intellectual. A couple of my novels have been described in terms of a darkness I cannot recommend as a way of living. I see myself as a continuous participant in the process I would call aesthetic education, both as a teacher and a student, often at the same time. It is hard to separate these things sometimes.

SS: You have been consistently engaging with the state of education in your essays and columns. How do you see the peculiar case of the face-off between public and private universities in terms of both syllabi and pedagogical innovation?

SM: There shouldn't be anything like a face-off, really. The role of private universities—and I mean genuine philanthropies, not profiteering outfits—can only be a small one in any country, and definitely so in a vast, developing nation like India. Only public universities can educate this nation. Private universities, however, can play small but important roles. Their financial independence from the government creates room for more adventurous research and pedagogy, which is also generally

well-supported due to favourable teacher-student resources. The face-off you are talking about, that which we see today, is really between degraded versions of both—depleted, resource-drained, embattled, and corrupted public universities, and profiteering private institutions of questionable quality and ownership. It is an unfortunate situation created by unsympathetic governments and greedy businesses. With an exploding youth population and a sizeable middle class, higher education is rich business that many are busy exploiting.

SS: Would it be correct to infer that the role of the teacher in your fiction, particularly *The Middle Finger*, your last novel, is that of mentor and facilitator, encouraging academic questions as well as the questioning of social structures? You have also written about how the traditional educational system assigns students a place of subservience, undermining their potential and uniqueness. Is your fiction an attempt to destabilize the same?

SM: I think that's a wonderful reading of this novel! This novel started out as a desire to rewrite the Drona-Ekalavya myth as a contemporary college campus novel—particularly the version unearthed by Wendy Doniger where it is Arjuna, not Drona, who cheats Ekalavya, while Drona promises prowess to the tribal warrior. Drona's closeness to Ekalavya there got mediated, in my mind, by the discussions in Plato's *Symposium* as intimacy between teacher and student as a mediator of knowledge. There were powerful contemporary realities that I had experienced, such as race in America and caste in India, that made me want to reinvent these myths as contemporary stories. So yes, as you can see, in my very bending of the Ekalavya myth, with the defining question as to who gets access to the teacher and to knowledge, I'm trying to break away from these traditional structures. But I am too interested in contemporary reality around us to stay committed to myths, so as the novel progressed, it took a life of its own, and many other questions, including those of poetic creativity and its reachability, came into it. Fiction is a university of instability. Destabilization is perhaps the natural order of things there. One doesn't have to try too hard.

SS: Allow me to close with a somewhat banal question, please. At a time when "innovation" has become a catchphrase and success is defined rather severely, as per a pre-determined matrix of achievements, what is the role of the teacher in this classroom of the future?

SM: My experience in the humanities has been that it is impossible to

separate pedagogy from personality. I think you teach the best when you follow the lead of your personality. My classes, for instance, are very conversational, as are my public talks. I have seen a range of possibilities in the classroom. There are teachers who do the one-sided lecture most efficiently. They take charge and they are brilliant at it. Then, there are others like me who are thinking through the problem with students. In classes that require more extensive background knowledge, I try to bring that knowledge and I lay out the architecture of the field in a short lecture and then go back to the conversational model. I see myself as a facilitator, as a kind of a social-coordinator of the process of knowledge formation. This is even more true when I'm doing creative writing, which is very workshop-driven. I am not there to tell the students what kind of writers they should become but to point to the processes of exchange through which they can form communities, and what they can be looking out for, as they find their own writing voices.

I don't think there is any one role of the teacher. I think it changes according to the personality of the teacher. It also changes according to the subject. For instance, if you teach literary theory, you will need to lecture more because you cannot just expect students to find things on their own. It is a dense and complex subject where they need a fair amount of background lecturing, but when it comes to reading a literary text, the Socratic method of asking what the student thinks and why they think that, is still the best. There is a lot of learning that happens in this process for me and for the student. The role of a teacher depends on what you are teaching and who you are as a human being. Teaching the humanities is really about foregrounding the human being that you are and, of course, the human beings you are teaching, so that the human element should never be left behind. The humanity of the subject and the humanity of the participants should speak to each other.

SS: It couldn't have been said better. The teacher as facilitator and participant in learning is perhaps the direction all of us need to be headed in. Thank you for your valuable insights and for your generosity with your time, Prof. Majumdar. It has been an absolute pleasure.

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