



Ideals of teaching and learning in 3 Idiots: A case for critical pedagogy in higher education

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ABSTRACT

This research paper looks at the higher education learning ecosystem by examining the tropes of teaching and learning in the Bollywood film 3 Idiots released in 2009. Directed by Rajkumar Hirani, the film dealt with the academic and psychological conditions of students enrolled in higher education institutions in India. As educators, we are concerned with the various mental, emotional, interpersonal and academic areas that need attention to offer stress-free and a wide range of choices to students in the pursuit of higher education. This paper maps youth aspirations, dilemmas, and situations like unhealthy competition and student suicides that form part of the narrative of the film too. It further poses questions to all educators and administrators in higher education to reflect upon their practices and their relationships with students.

Keywords: Higher education, National Education Policy 2020, 3 Idiots, critical pedagogy, social discourse

Introduction

Films are effective mediums to communicate the cultural and political stories of the times. It contains multimodal texts and have capacity to shape the public pedagogy. Film is a distinct medium with distinct history and needs a distinct pedagogy (Chambers et al., 2018). hooks (1996) states that cinema can play a pedagogical role in the lives of many people but it depends on audiences' perception as to how they learn lessons rather than placing the responsibility on filmmakers to teach the audiences. The audio-visual nature of films helps in synthesizing messages into compelling stories through plot, theme, structure and narration. It can also put rational arguments through dialogues in order to communicate with wider audiences. Typically, stories in films keep evolving because of the social, cultural, political concerns and interests that shape the society. In that respect, films are part of society's discourse (Hodges, 2010). Likewise, Giroux (2006), offering a critical literacy perspective, said that films are texts that reflect society's concerns and hence question belief systems in real life through stories.

Teachers, teaching and learning in films

According to Ahn and Leggo (2019), Hollywood films have featured teachers in different identities but those characters are stereotypical as they present teachers as superhuman characters. These representations of teachers in films can become part of cultural codes that construct social reality (Ryan & Kellner, 1988). One cannot deny with the fact that perceptions about teachers are significantly influenced by popular culture, especially their portrayals in the film (Dalton, 2004; Resnick, 2018). For nearly a century, teachers in films were generally portrayed in a positive light. Most of the films portrayed teachers in the pivotal character and are shown as catalysts in doing their best to assist young students to grow and take a place in the world beyond school. This depiction of teachers playing a positive role was disrupted in a series of American films in the 21st century, exemplified by *Won't Back Down*, which changed the focus from the teacher to the parent/consumer, in this case an embattled underdog in Jamie Fitzpatrick.

In terms of using films as a didactic device, films portraying teachers are useful to teachers, in the first place, in helping them better their professional standards. Further, such films become sites of cultural production and critical inquiry that seek to investigate the social and cultural systems, values and educational methodologies. At times, such portrayals of teachers are satirical and sarcastic, not celebratory, as it is in the Hollywood film *Bad Teacher* (Householder, Miller & Kasdan, 2011), some as traditional and stern teachers as in *School of Life* (Milliken & Dear, 2005).

The tropes of teachers in films are varied in Bollywood films too. The film *Black* (2005) depicts Amitabh Bachchan playing the role of a tough teacher, not a bad teacher though, helping the deaf-blind girl become self-reliant. More than someone being tough, stern, traditional or liberal, the most prominent trope of teachers in films is the efforts they put in to help students pursue their goals and dreams. Films such as *Iqbal* (2005), *Taare Zameen Par* (2007), *Paathshaala* (2010), *Hichki* (2018) and *Super 30* (2019) are some of the Bollywood films in which the dominant trope of teachers is to help students achieve as well as change the perception of the society towards disability. Occasionally, films that represent the sordid conditions of education, schools, and competition are also made and they function as checkmates to condemn the prevalent unacceptable teacher-roles and identities, teaching and learning methodologies and regressive educational atmosphere on campus.

Cinema as a pedagogical tool

Cinema is a pedagogical tool as it influences diverse audiences from different socio-economic strata and regions of the world. Literature on film as a pedagogical tool is varied and encompasses different disciplines (Swimelar, 2013). Humanities has used films as pedagogical tools effectively and students find films useful to understand the subject content for teaching (Simon, 2020). Film is 'one of the few mediums left that enables conversations that connect politics, personal experiences and public life to larger issues' (Giroux, 2002, p. 7). Giroux (2011) observed that films challenge the print culture and emerged as a vibrant source of knowledge, information and entertainment. In addition, films function as an alternative creative cultural text that are not just marred by the logic of formal schooling. Films as a practical toolkit confront the dominant ideologies of the textbooks and thereby subvert and question the established ways of learning (Giroux 2011).

Further, film can communicate ideas as well as transform ‘concepts into quasi-lived experiences’ that students retain for a long time (Kuzma and Haney, 2001, p. 35). Films are also used in understanding ethical questions. Films can also be used to examine moral reasoning and serve as a doorway into ethical theory and such films, as is the film that is analysed in this paper, seeks to engage with ethical scenarios and social phenomena. According to Giroux (2008, p. 7), films, as a form of public pedagogy, ‘must be understood in terms of their political and educational character and how they align with broader social, racial, economic, class, and institutional configurations’.

However, scholars like Champoux (1999) argue that films are made for commercial and entertainment purposes and a lot of them are treated as fiction. But, hooks (1996) says that though films are made for entertainment and the world depicted is sometimes far from truth, there are meaningful takeaways. But, the rider most of the scholars underline is that films are to be consumed not passively but through critical engagement with the text and how it reflects the social conditions of the day. At the same time, one needs to question the ideologies films promote and people they marginalize as the industry is entrenched in capitalism and paternalism.

The visual and multimodal forms of films pave the way for balancing the verbal-centric forms of learning that are dominant in educational institutions (Ojamaa et al., 2019). Through compelling storytelling techniques, films evoke emotions, empathy and promote critical thinking skills (James et al., 2011). Applying critical pedagogy, this paper analyses this paper analyses the state of higher education in India by questioning the deeply ingrained mode of rote learning that form the central premise of many schools, colleges and universities.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical literacy, in the context of films, emphasizes the role of students to reflect on their surroundings. The fundamental purpose of the cinematic instructional design is to encourage reflection. Nurturing reflection encourages students to consider the whole range of human experience, prompting severe conflicts and insecurities about their future professional and personal lives. The goal is not to instruct the audience on how to adopt a particular mindset but to encourage introspection and give a platform for conversation. According to Christine Pescatore (2007) “critical literacy goes one step further, the formation of citizens who are empowered and emboldened to act as a result of their conscious enlightenment” (p.330).

Giroux (2004) explained critical pedagogy motivates students to participate “in the process of governing and engaging with important social problems (p. 124). Further, critical pedagogy provides agency to students decentering curriculum and instruction (Lewis, 2014). According to Malott (2011), critical pedagogy questions dominant form of education informed by paternalistic, euro-centric, and mechanistic approach to teaching and learning. It should include all novel and unique ways of teaching and learning methods. Incorporating cinema into the pedagogy is one such measure that seeks to strengthen critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy is imperative to realise and manifest the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and cinema has the potential to play a supportive role in classroom. Teaching through film can become an effective technique for reaching people’s emotive domains, creating reflective attitudes and connecting learning to experiences.

As part of critical pedagogy, movies help teach the human dimension essential for evolving as human beings and forming identity in young learners. The movie curriculum perspective allows for quick and direct teaching points to be made with specific scenes; it allows for the

integration of emotions into the viewing experience; it helps learners understand and recognise the main messages delivered by the movie characters regarding attitudes and human values. Metz (1977) says that the characters and events are real and not the aural and visual signifiers in a film. As we discuss critical pedagogy, Giroux himself was inspired by one of the seminal works of the Brazilian philosopher of education Paul Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which exemplifies the idea of emancipatory popular education.

Paulo Freire and Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Paulo Freire (1972) developed an approach of emancipatory education and a perspective to understand and transform oppressive structures. By claiming that actual knowledge and competence already exist within people, he flipped conventional pedagogy on its head. He states that education does not require “deposits” of information or “banking” concept of education (Freire, 1972). In the banking concept, the teacher prepares and expounds the content to students thereby summoning students to memorize and not critically reflect upon. Dialogue, critical inquiry, love for humanity, and praxis, the synthesis of critical thinking and action, are some of the essential elements to change the world (Freire, 2017). Dialogue promotes a new relationship between students and teachers, leading to the formation of a cooperative group called teacher-student or student-teacher. Such a formation works against banking system of education that is owned by teachers only. Likewise, Buber (1937) emphasises the concept of “Dialogue”. “For Buber, an educational approach based on dialogue is an approach that places appropriate weight on both the teacher and student’s roles. The role of the teacher is to set the curriculum, the framework, to set the value platform for the student, but this does not mean that the student’s interests, creativity and needs are overlooked as the student develops these within the framework set by the teacher” (Morgan & Guilherme, 2012. p. 568).

Emancipatory form of education also opposes the fact that minds are empty vessels to be filled up with information. Further, banking concept of education fosters oppression – oppression of the mind and consciousness (Freire, 2017). Freire (2017) defines the pedagogy of the oppressed as the education for practising freedom, in contrast to the education for practising dominance. Freire (2017) opposes the “banking” perspective and believes that it may lead to the dehumanisation of pupils and teachers. On the other hand, he endorses world-mediated, approach that promotes the co-creation of the learning process. According to Freire (2017), this legitimate approach to deal with institutions will enable people to recognise their shortcomings and strive to become more humanistic.

In this context, critical pedagogy of Freire opposes rote learning. At the level of higher education, rote learning functions at cross-purposes with that of academic performance (Ahmed & Ahmad, 2017). NEP 2020 highlights the evils of rote memorisation and the need for eradicating it in the Indian educational sphere by reorienting intelligence on application-based learning. Films like *Super 30* (2019) demonstrates how a teacher helps the downtrodden students grasp physics and mathematics through application based pedagogy and move away from rote learning pedagogy.

Many studies have revealed that watching films in concert with lectures help students develop ‘critical thinking and consciousness’ in higher education (Brown, 2011, p. 233). Films are being used to supplement learning in politics (Chang & Cryer, 2009) media literacy (Tisdell & Thompson, 2007) among others. Watching films provide good insights into the realities and thereby encourage students to become critically informed learners (Lee, 2016). Even as they

watch films that entertain them, some scenes can provoke them into asking questions about the film's ideologies and prejudices, or scenes of conflict between characters can evoke critical thinking among them expanding their understanding of social situations.

Method

This research paper examines the pedagogy of cinema through a textual analysis of the Bollywood film *3 Idiots* (year). Qualitative textual analysis gathers information about how people make sense of the world (Alan McKee, 2003). Many studies have used textual analysis as a method to study how audiences interpret media products as they access it (Smith, 2017). This study analyses the texts of film, especially those scenes that expound on higher education system, learning and teaching practices, parents and their imposition of their interest on children, academic pressure and depression that lead to students committing suicide etc. Even though made for popular consumption as an entertaining Hindi feature film, *3 Idiots* touches upon the malaise that has deeply affected the Indian education system with an undue emphasis on cognitive learning, rote learning and reproduction of information without understanding. The film reflects the current state of higher education wherein the student has not been at the centre of education and her/his learning and actualisation needs have been ignored.

The author also interviewed respondents selected directly and through online questionnaire. The respondents were selected using convenience and purposive sampling with an intent to include people from different walks of life such as educational practitioners, special educators, parents and viewers at film festivals. People who were selected for interviews included special educators, counsellors and parents based in Mumbai. Communication with the Maharashtra Dyslexia Association (MDA) was instrumental in accessing this group of respondents through their network. In addition, another group comprising general audiences based in Chennai were also selected with the help of Ability Foundation, which organises a bi-annual disability film festival, 'Abilityfest'. The author participated in this film festival's last three editions and interviewed audience members. She sent a request to Ability Foundation to help access viewers-citizens, and the organisation shared their database of audiences who had given comments and feedback on the film screenings.

About the film *3 Idiots*

The film *3 Idiots* (2009) centres on the lives of three engineering students, Rancho played by Aamir Khan, Raju Rastogi played by Sharman Joshi, and Farhan played by R. Madhavan. The three share a room in the college hostel where their friendship begins. Raju and Farhan are depicted as academically mediocre students from modest backgrounds studying engineering under family pressure. Rancho hails from an affluent family and is shown to be an independent thinker who loves to learn. He loathes the conventional obsession with rote learning and the practice of getting marks to pass an exam.

With his unconventional approach to education, Rancho is disapproved by Professor Viru Sahastrabudhhe (Virus), the dean of the college, played by actor Boman Irani. The dean's mantra for success is to acquire good grades. This brings both of them at loggerheads with each other throughout the film. On the other side Chatur, a classmate, is the dean's favourite for he follows the rules mindlessly.

The film portrays the contemporary Indian education system which stresses academic performance and churning out students who mug up facts to pass examinations and become qualified to get jobs. Today's students carry the burden of competition, fear of failure and following a predefined career path that is not of their choice but a path prescribed to be financially stable. The extreme levels of stress and competition lead to self-doubt, depression and anxiety in the students. As a result the joy of learning, understanding, out-of-the-box thinking and questioning is lost.

3 Idiots draws the viewers' attention to the inner worlds and outer struggles of students studying in a college of engineering. The film also highlights the trauma of students being unable to score high marks in examinations and the serious issue of suicides amongst students who are unable to cope with the pressure of expectations of parents and teachers.

Analysis and Discussion

Liberal choices versus institutional pressure

Does education enable the unfolding of a learner's innate potential and express their aptitude and interest in the subject of their choice? Let us take a close look at some of the scenes of 3 Idiots to examine how the film touches upon the choices available to and exercised by youth in higher educational institutions. The film has highlighted that if a student loves his subject and follows his heart, then he/she is more likely to perform better because he/she feels no fear of failure nor the competitive pressure to come first. This is first expressed through Farhan's voice-over in the film as he introduces Rancho and his attitude towards learning and education.

Farhan's voice-over: Hum sab toh college sirf degree paane ke liye jaate the Degree nahin hogi toh naukri nahin hogi. Naukri nahin hogi toh koi baap apni beti nahin dega. Bank credit card nahin degi. Duniya respect nahin degi. Lekin woh saala college degree ke liye nahin, sirf padhne ke liye aaya tha. Usse na last aane ka darr tha, na first aane ka laalach.

(We all used to go to college just so that we could get a degree. Because if we won't have a degree, then we won't have a job. If we don't have a job nobody will want their daughter to marry us; the bank won't give us a credit card; the world will not give us any respect. But he came to college only to study, not for the degree. He was never scared of failure, nor greedy for top marks)

Rancho was never afraid of exams. All that mattered to him was his love for the subject and learning in general. Rancho explains to Farhan that if his passion lies in photography, how can he be a good engineer? Rancho elaborates with the examples of Indian icons, Lata Mangeshkar and Sachin Tendulkar reaching success following their passion. Through the use of these common examples, the film comments on the need of the Indian education system and society to give freedom of choice and encouragement to students to follow their dreams.

Rancho: Ae. Pata hai main first kyun aata hai?(Do you know why I come first?)

Farhan: Kyun? (Why?)

Rancho: Kyunki mujhe machino se pyaar hai. Engineering mera passion hai. Tera passion pata hai kya hai?

(Because I love machines; engineering is my passion. Do you know what your passion is?)

Further, there are many Indian youth who don't pursue their dreams and aspirations due to family and societal pressure. The screenplay shows how Farhan had written a letter to his favourite wildlife photographer, Istevan in Hungary, with whom he wanted to intern but never posted that letter. Through Farhan's story, the film brings out the importance of learning for the joy of learning and not following the herd for getting marks and earning money. This is the point that the makers have tried to instil again and again into the audience through different scenes. Learning under societal pressure or to satisfy the cultural imaginaries of parents and other people disrupt the energy of love in learning killing the liberal choices of individual learners (Liston & Garrison, 2004).

Rancho: Arre. Engineering chhod aur wildlife photographer ban. Woh kaam kar jisme tera talent hai. Agar Lata Mangeshkar ke father ne usko bola hota ki tu fast bowler ban ja, yah Sachin Tendulkar ke father ne usko bola hota ke tu singer ban ja, toh soch woh aaj kahaan hote. Tu samajh raha hai? Main kya bol raha hoon?

(Quit engineering and become a wildlife photographer. Work on a job that you have a talent for. If Lata Mangeshkar's father had asked her to become a fast bowler, or Sachin Tendulkar's father had asked him to become a singer, then imagine where they'd be today. Do you understand what I'm saying? Idiot loves animals but wants to get married to machines).

The film emphasises the issue by showing a drunk Rancho giving early advice to Mona's unborn child about the harsh reality waiting for him on the other side and the severity the child might have to face at the hands of its grandfather, Professor Virus.

Rancho (to the baby in the belly): Oye champ, tu andar hi reh bhai. Bahaar bohut cirucs hai. Aur yeh circus ka ring master hain na, tera nana, woh hunter ghumayega aur bolega bhago. Life is a race. Bhago. Engineer bano. Lekin tu wohi ban na jo tera dil bole. Zyaada darayega na, toh apne dil pe haath rakhna aur bolna 'All is Well'.

(Champ, you should just stay inside. Outside life is like a circus. And the ringmaster, your grandfather, will whip the hunter and tell you to run. Life is a race, become an engineer. But you do what your heart tells you to do. And if he scares you too much, place your hand on your heart, and say 'All is well').

The scenes above describe how one must follow, not only in education but also in life, the field wherein one's talent and passion lie. But the solution to the problem is not so easily achieved. When Farhan learns that his photography role model has invited him for an internship, he is overjoyed until he realises that his father would never permit him. But Rancho insists that he follows his heart rather than live with regrets. Therefore, instead of going for engineering college placements, he goes to convince his father to let him follow his passion. In the conversation that follows, the film reflects the common parents' mindset towards financial stability and success. His parents admonish Farhan that he will regret the decision when he sees that his friends are wealthier than him in the future.

Farhan: Engineer banke frustrate ho jaoonga. Phir zindagi bhar aapko kosoonga. Behtar yahi hai na ki main apne aap ko kosoon abba.

(I may become a frustrated engineer. Then I will curse you my whole life. Isn't it better that I curse myself?)

The above scenes from 3 Idiots bring out the frustration of the youth in their inability to follow academic and vocational paths of pursuit based on their interests, aptitude and aspirations. This frustration and the resultant trauma have often been the triggering point for many student suicides. India has one of the highest suicide rates in the world in the age bracket 15-29, which is a disturbing result of the pressures on today's youth.

Depression, anxiety and suicide: Effects of conventional teaching and apathy

Another scene in the film shows the college principal Virus denying Joy, a final year engineering student, extension in deadline to submit his project. Joy meets the Professor in the corridor and eagerly asks him about the convocation dates. He excitedly tells him that he is the first engineer from his village and everyone wants to come for the convocation. Virus quipped asking Joy to call his father.

Virus tells Joy's father that Joy won't be graduating this year as he has missed all the deadlines with an unrealistic project and tells him that there would be no need for train reservations, and he hangs up. Joy is very troubled and tells Virus that he is very close to cracking it if only Virus would agree to look at his project once, but Virus is adamant and says he will only accept it if it is submitted in time. Joy's request for an extension goes unheard even when he explains that his father had had a stroke and hence couldn't concentrate on the project for two months. In a cold-shouldered response, Virus, asks Joy if he had stopped eating or doing other mundane things for two months. Virus exhibits apathetic attitude coloured with an act of dehumanisation when he said that on a Sunday afternoon, his son had fallen off a train and died, and on Monday morning, he had given a lecture in the college. Joy, looking agonised, dumps his project in the bin and leaves.

This scene highlights the teacher's lack of empathy and how weak the bond between a teacher and student is in the current education system. Empathy is a trait that can bring about positive interactions between students and teachers (Arghode, Yalvac, & Liew, 2013; Barr, 2008). According to Tettegah and Anderson (2007), empathy is the "ability to express concern and take the perspective of a student, and it involves cognitive and affective domains of empathy" (p. 51). Here, the teacher is portrayed more like a machine than an actual human being with feelings and does not allow the student to express his concern nor intends to understand the issue from the student's perspective. Further, we see that the teacher Virus fails to display empathy and therefore ceases to be a caring teacher. And this may be the truth for many teachers and institutions in our country.

The scene where they find out that Joy has committed suicide highlights the pressure and performance anxiety faced by students, who are pushed to "quit" or "give up" because they feel there is no other option. They are forced to conform to the expectations and diktats of the unfriendly system that revolves around academic performance emphasizing on marks. Ultimately, the pressure gets too much to handle for many.

Students with low self-esteem fear failure that outweighs the desire for success, resulting in cautious behaviour. Their self-protection orientation inclines them towards low-risk safe situations (McLean, 2003, p. 45).

This is when the film starts questioning the education system, the complete disregard for students' mental health and capabilities and the indifference to their true potential. It highlights

the fact that our education system is not geared to build those skills which will come in handy to face real-life situations later on in life by encouraging students to engage in active questioning and explore beyond textbook learning. Instead, it is entirely centred on memorising textbooks to score high marks. It also clearly brings out the need for teachers to be trained to adopt newer teaching methods where learning in a classroom becomes a joyful and or interesting process.

There is undoubtedly a need to change Indian society to remove the stigma attached to failure so that more students pursue their careers fearlessly. And once this stigma against failure is abolished, the students will get the space to be creative, experiment and follow their hearts' desire, and pursue their dreams. Even if a chosen path may not turn out to be good, learning that takes place through experience, loss, success or mistake paves the way for a student to emerge victorious in life and career. It is important to "treat mistakes as essential steps to competency by linking failure to factors that students can repair" (McLean, 2003, p.127).

Teachers also need to be sensitised towards the emotions, struggles and fears of students. A teacher apart from imparting knowledge to young impressionable minds should also be a mentor for students. If teachers fail in caring for students, the educational system is at fault. Policy decisions to correct measures, especially to prevent students from taking extreme steps of ending their lives, need to be taken. Such policy decisions should strive towards making teachers more caring than merely disseminating knowledge.

After Joy's death Virus asks Rancho if he blames him for Joy's suicide.

Virus: Ek student pressure nahin le pata, toh hum zimedaar kaise? Waise life mein kayi pressures aayenge, toh kya tum hamesha doosron pe dosh daaloge?

(If a student is unable to cope with the pressure, how are we at fault? Will you always blame others for the pressures/obstacles that will come up in your life later?)

Rancho, however, tells him that he's not blaming him, but blaming the system. He reads out some statistics off a piece of paper:

Rancho: Main aapko dosh nahin de raha hoon sir, main actually system ko dosh de raha hoon. Sir, mere paas kuch statistics hain sir. India suicides mein number one hai sir. Har daed ghante mein koi na koi student suicide attempt karta hai sir. Yahaan pe students bimari se kam aur suicide se zyaada marte hain. Kuch toh galat ho raha hai na sir.

(I'm not blaming you, sir, I'm blaming the system. Sir, I have a few statistics with me here. When it comes to suicides, India is no. 1, sir. A student attempts suicide every 1.5 hours. Here, students are dying more of suicide than illness. Something is going wrong somewhere, isn't it, sir?).

In another scene, Raju decides to take his life when Virus compels him to turn against Rancho in order to be saved from expulsion. But an already scared and overloaded Raju, can't take the pressure. So, when he is given seven minutes to decide his fate, he takes an unfortunate decision. He has flashbacks and thoughts about his father, mother, sister and Rancho. He looks flustered and scared. Crying, he walks towards the window. His leg gets entangled around a cord, which pulls when he jumps out of the window. He is in a coma for a long time following the attempt.

The issue of student suicide is a real and pressing issue. The system needs to realise that if its students are being forced to take such a drastic step, a reconstruction of the system needs to take place with immediate effect.

Critical pedagogy: Emancipating from rigid structures

The film, in one of its scenes, comments on this aspect through a conversation between Rancho and the errand boy, MM. Rancho explains MM that one doesn't need fees to go to school, but only a uniform. Rancho gives MM money and tells him that he should buy the uniform of whichever school he likes, and quietly go and sit in the class. There are so many students, nobody would notice.

This is a common picture of many Indian schools where the teachers are often not able to build a rapport with each student. The film clearly makes a statement that the education system needs to radically change and has to become more students centric and that the educators must re-haul the entire education system to a stage that holds the student-teacher connection at its core.

Besides the teacher-student rapport, the film exhibits that our education system is deeply rooted in rote learning, to the extent that teachers encourage and give recognition to those who can memorize facts and definitions. Students who question the concepts taught and seek a deeper understanding of the subject receive no support and are often demoralized.

The active learner and the passive learner, in *3 Idiots*, are respectively represented by Rancho and Chatur. The film's pronounced comment on the passive learner, that hooks (1994) decried, comes in the scene where Chatur mindlessly recites a version of his speech that was cunningly altered by Rancho. The example of an active learner is shown through the scene in which the professor writes the word 'MACHINE' on the board, and asks the class: "What is a machine?"

Chatur raises his hand, but the professor finding Rancho smiling from ear to ear, asks him to define Machine.

Rancho: "A machine is anything that reduces human effort, sir."

Professor: "Please elaborate."

Rancho: "Har woh cheez jo insaan ka kaam aasaan kare, yah waqt bachaye, woh machine hai sir."

(Everything that makes a human's work easier or saves time is a machine.)

Chatur gets up and recites a long complicated definition that the professor appreciates. Chatur gloats sitting down.

Rancho: "Lekin sir, maine bhi toh woh hi bataya tha sir, aasaan bhaasha mein."
(But sir, I said the same thing, in a simpler language)

Professor: "Aapko agar simple bhaasha pasand ho toh arts and commerce college join ki jiye."

(If you like simple language, then go and join an arts and commerce college)

Rancho: "Lekin sir, matlab bhi toh samajh mein aana chahiye? Aise kitaabi definitions rath ke kya faayda?"

(But sir, the meaning should be understood as well right? What is the point of mugging up definitions from books?)

Professor: “Aap kitaab se zyaada jaante hai? Kitaab mein yeh hi definition hai. Aur agar aapko pass hona ho toh aap yeh hi likhenge.”

(You think you know more than the book? This is the definition given in the book. And if you want to pass this class, it is the definition you will write.)

Thus, the film brings out the fact that unorthodox questions or any deviation from structured learning is highly discouraged. Teachers are programmed to follow fixed syllabuses and are in a rush to complete the course that they have been given to complete in a preset academic year.

Education is not only learning from books, memorizing some facts, but also learning how to look, how to listen to what the books are saying, whether they are saying something true or false. All that is part of education. Education is not just to pass examinations, take a degree and a job, get married and settle down, but also to be able to listen to the birds, to see the sky, to see the extraordinary beauty of a tree, and the shape of the hills, and to feel with them, to be really, directly in touch with them (Krishnamurti, 1974).

He further states, “one must differentiate, separate learning from acquiring knowledge. Acquiring knowledge makes you mechanical but learning makes the mind very fresh, young, subtle. And you cannot learn if you are merely following the authority of knowledge. Most educators, right through the world, are merely acquiring and imparting knowledge and so are making the mind mechanical and incapable of learning. You can only learn when you do not know. Learning only comes into being when there is no fear and when there is no authority” (Krishnamurti, 1974).

Farhan tries to emphasise the importance of learning for the joy of learning and not following the herd for getting marks and earning money. This is the point that the makers have tried to instill again and again into the audience through different scenes.

Raju is yelling at both Rancho and Farhan, saying he needs good grades, that he doesn't have a rich father, etc. Rancho tells him that it's a game that Virus is playing, divide and rule, but Raju doesn't listen to him. Raju then crosses his line, tells him that he won't do everything Rancho says, and that Farhan is his “chamcha.” He laments the same way his mother was lamenting. Tells them that it's been five years since his mum even bought a saree. All this through a scene where they are pooping, shaving, etc.

Rancho: “Arre Raju, Hum log padhenge. Jee laga ke padhenge. Leking sirf exam pass kare ke liye nahin. Kisi mahapurush ne kaha hai ki kamyab hone ke liye nahin, kaabil hone ke liye padho. Success ke peeche mat bhaago, excellence ka peeche karo. Success jhak maarke tumhare peeche aayegi...”

(Raju, we will study hard. And study with all our concentration. Not to just pass these exams. A great man has said that you must study to be skilled and not to be successful. Do not run behind success, but aim for excellence. Success will be forced to run behind you.)

The following scenes show that the director has tried to equate the caste system with the ranking system. The Indian education system is obsessed with the rank system, which could be due to too few opportunities and too many applicants. The number of good colleges is far less

than the number of students who apply for them so for such a large scale, ranking becomes a doable filter. There are fewer opportunities in non-academic areas in the areas like sports, arts, and music and these are hardly promoted by the government. One is not guaranteed to earn a livelihood so academics turns out as a safer option. There is also a lot of social status and pressure, while scoring good marks earns one respect scoring low marks increases the pressure from parents and peers.

Rancho: “Sir, yeh rank ke hisaab se baithna zaroori hai kya?”

(Sir, is it so necessary to sit according to our ranks?)

Rancho: “Sir, mujhe toh poori grading system se problem hai sir. Aisa lagta hai koi caste system hai sir. A grade students baadshah, C grade students ghulaam. It’s not nice sir.”

(Sir, I have an issue with the entire grading system. I feel like it’s some kind of caste system. Students with an ‘A’ are kings, students with ‘C’ grades are slaves. It’s not nice sir.)

Rancho: “Haan hai na sir. Results jo hai na, woh notice board pe lagana hi nahin chahiye sir. Kisi ki kamiyan, kisi ki khaamiyaan hum kyun sabke saamne khule aam pesh karein? Abhi sir, aapke blood test mein agar hemoglobin kam nikle, toh doctor aapko tonic dega, yaa apki report tv pe dikhayega?”

(Yes I do. The results should not be put on the noticeboard. Why should we present someone’s weaknesses, someone’s failure so openly? If in you have a haemoglobin deficiency showing on your blood test, will the doctor broadcast it on TV or will he just give you a tonic for it?)

Rancho: Grade creates divide. Abhi dekhiye, main first aaya hoon, main aapke saath mein baitha hoon. Mere dost bechare last aaye hain toh unko peeche daal diya hai, kone mein.”

(No sir. That’s not what I meant. But grade creates a divide. Now see here, I’ve come first, so I’m sitting here next to you. My poor friends, who came last, have been thrown at the back corner.)

Rancho: “Jobs toh mil jayegi sir. Koi toh company hogi jo machino ko nahin, insaano ko naukri de. (looks at chatur while saying this). Aisa nahin hai sir, jobs mil jayega. I guarantee it.”

(They will get jobs, sir. There must be some company that employs humans and not machines. Jobs they will get, I guarantee it.)

Freirean-based humanising pedagogy gives importance to the humanity of the learner. Freire (1972) believed that through critical pedagogy, based on a problem-posing education, students would acquire a critical consciousness that would enable them to see the “structural inequalities that condition our lives” and then further grasp the concept that these structures made, can be remade. Such a critical consciousness symbolizes the fruition of critical pedagogy in restoring the individuality of its student along with the knowledge that “his actions alone cannot reconstitute reality” but that his actions must be “in accordance with those of others” (Freire, 1972, p. 85)

As we have seen, popular culture, especially movies, shapes the way audiences at large perceive teachers (Resnick, 2018). In the film, Rancho's conversation with the dean about the grading system shows the film portraying the critical consciousness of Rancho. Even though, part of the system, he questions and attempts to bring a change knowing that a social change cannot be achieved alone. Therefore, he repeatedly questions Virus, who in the film represents the structural rigidity of the education system.

Throughout the movie, the principal or vice chancellor Virus, metaphorically represents the current Indian system of education. And the brief glimpse of the other teachers also that we get, comes across as rigid, strict, unsympathetic and stern. So through the negative portrayal, they are trying to emphasise the importance of bringing in sensitization, care, and empathy on the educators' part, to make sure the young generation has a wholesome and worthwhile education and life.

“Now what is the function of an educator? Is it merely to give you information, knowledge, or is it to bring about this intelligence in you? That is the function of a teacher, of an educator, not just to give you a lot of data, knowledge, but to show you the whole expanse of life, the beauty of it, the ugliness of it, the delight, the joy, the fear, the agony. So that when you leave this place, you are a tremendous human being who can use your intelligence in life, not just a thoughtless, destructive, callous human being. The function of your teachers is to educate not only the partial mind but the totality of the mind; to educate you so that you do not get caught in the little whirlpool of existence but live in the whole river of life. This is the whole function of education. The right kind of education cultivates your whole being, the totality of your mind. It gives your mind and heart a depth, an understanding of beauty” (Krishnamurti, 1974).

Thus, the film brings out the fact that unorthodox questions or any deviation from structured learning are highly discouraged. Teachers are programmed to follow fixed syllabuses and are in a rush to complete the course that they have been given to complete in a preset academic year. Instead of teaching life skills to students, mugging up concepts is encouraged for scoring high marks even if the concepts are not understood. This film depicts the rigidity of the teachers, who are unable to provide a conducive environment for learning. It also brings to light the fact that students try to appease the teachers as they have absolute power over the students' scores which are crucial to attaining degrees.

Responses of teachers, parents and educators to 3 Idiots

In this research, the author interviewed some audiences directly and through the medium of an online questionnaire that was devised and sent to a select group of people. The first group comprised educators based in Delhi, including heads of teacher training colleges, faculty in various education departments and institutions such as IGNOU , NCERT , NUEPA , Jamia Millia Islamia and the University of Delhi.

The respondents gave their views on various aspects of education presented in the film. This includes a critique of the film. Om Talreja (Assistant Vice President at Accenture Services and a parent) says the film has strongly communicated the need to de-stress our higher education system and get back to the basics of talent instead of rote learning as is the apparent requirement for a successful career.

Dr. Minoti Chatterjee (Former Principal, Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi) says that this film is a serious comment on our system of education – its teaching practices, rat-race competition and wrong choices of careers made and forced on children. The film, she adds, also inspires innovation and creativity through the role of the protagonist.

3 Idiots, in Vijay Dodeja's (Structural Engineer, Western India Wire Industries) opinion, was also a cult film for the youth, bringing a whiff of fresh air for the stereotypical engineer/doctor/MBA options that families are stuck in.

Ms. Susan George (special educator at the Maharashtra Dyslexia Association) comments that 3 Idiots was an average movie. She supports her position by pointing out that the youth's suicide could have been dealt with and shown better. The principal and his daughter's roles also, she believes, had scope for further development.

Ms. George's comment is elaborated by the response from Vijay Dodeja, who similarly remarks that the suicide part and its flimsy reason buildup were disturbing and could have been handled in a better way. He defends his view by pointing out that youth with a vulnerable mindset and impatient attitude could pick up wrong signals or messages from disturbing scenes, as shown in the film. Dodeja suggests a message of calmness and patience would have been a wiser alternative. He also comments on the Principal's character to be somewhat exaggerated in viciousness.

The constant use of the word 'balatkar' (rape) as a joke in the film is rather inappropriate, remarks Dr. Minoti Chatterjee (educationist). According to her, it is unappealing as she finds it sexist and demeaning to women.

B Moses Herick (Psychotherapist, Dyslexia Language Therapist and Special Education Teacher) finds that although the film has well established the aspirations of the present youth, it has also given a wrong message that trouble mongers will be successful and sincere students will never succeed.

Raghu Rajan (teacher-trainer at Aerospace Combat Operations and parent) maintains that although the film was overall well-made, in reality, one does neither find such intelligent and bright characters like Rancho nor such contrast role like that of Madhavan. Rajan asserts that the film could have been made realistic but also imagines that perhaps then it would not have been so popular, nor could it have conveyed the message so powerfully.

The film has established its success in bringing up significant issues about higher education, teaching practices, cut-throat competition and family's oppressive expectations and responsibilities, to mention a few. On this note, Shamsa Dhamani's (special educator) response draws attention to a considerably important aspect: the film covers way too many issues and conveys too many messages that have perhaps left the audience unfocused on any issue in particular after viewing.

Key observations

The observations are summarized for five key research questions in this study.

How is the role of a teacher and the teacher-student relationship represented? Does it reflect common perceptions or instead offer fresh insights?

In 3 Idiots, there is an apparent absence of a healthy student-teacher relationship. The only teacher given much importance and screen time is the principal who is both a caricature and also the main antagonist of the story. He is shown to be extremely ruthless and particular in conforming to academic norms of excellence at the cost of students' mental health and real learning. Even while offering realistic and exaggerated portrayals of teachers and pedagogical styles, the film has been able to offer fresh insights as commented by many of the audience-citizens.

Where and how does this film break off from the conventions of the Hindi cinema genre?

There is some use of stereotypes such as the conventional teacher in an Indian school or college. There is the use of hackneyed humour and sometimes used in an offensive and insensitive manner. 3 Idiots also uses the traditional song-dance routine at various instances and outdoor locations. It is observed that this film does not break off from the conventions of the Hindi cinema genre and is therefore relatable for mass consumption.

How are stars used to ignite critical thinking and foster agency, if at all, in audiences?

The star, Aamir Khan has lent his star persona to the benefit of the film's portrayal of the intended messages. A large number of Indian and international audiences including their fan following have led to increased circulation and popularity of the films. Therefore, the presence of a film superstar has been pivotal in drawing a large number of audiences and helping the films' commercial and pedagogical successes.

Does this film express values and concerns in a non-didactic yet compelling and engaging way? If so, does it offer a new model of scholarship, pedagogy and community building?

As the Bollywood films are based on offering a popular form of entertainment and use all the cinematic elements including cinematography, use of sound and music, editing, acting, scriptwriting and direction, audiences are drawn to watch the narratives of these films. The filmmaker (producer and director) have deftly woven issues and ideas of a pedagogical import into the text of the film. In doing so, these commercially successful films have shown the way of meaningful filmmaking. Meaningful in the sense of having consciously communicated ideas that can trigger public debate and discussion amongst viewers-citizens. Thereby, the possibility of creating digital communities has emerged wherein audiences have posted their thoughts and comments and shared them with each other.

Specifically, what are the views and responses of educators and parents?

Parents and educators have been greatly responsive to the film. Some of the educators and parents have been critical, especially with the way the message is delivered in 3 Idiots. But largely, this film has been an eye-opener for both the teaching and the parent community.

Conclusion

Cinema alone cannot transform society or the unprogressive practices that afflict learning and teaching today. A lot of thought, discussion and actual implementation of progressive educational and pedagogical practices are needed to enable an authentic transformation of the way we learn and teach. Cinema can be an effective pedagogical tool and it has played that role across the globe for some years. However, there is no escaping addressing the real issues which can be done with real-life resolutions.

This paper brings out the ways in which 3 Idiots reveals the dark corners of learning through memorization. It is a historical malady that needs to be countered with creative and aesthetic approaches. The narrative of the stern Professor realizing the need for allowing students to learn through application or parents understanding the passion of their wards is powerful, and makes a case for cultural literacy and policy. The film through its potential to impact readers seeks to transform instruction from a monotonous delivery by teachers to that of sustained engagement

between teachers and students. In this context, 3 Idiots addressed the social issues of the day. The rise of coaching centres for NEET, JEE and the like has limited the awareness of students to the possibility of academic options, especially distancing them from liberal arts education programmes. Drawing on the film, there is an urgent need to relook at the prevailing practices related to the significant areas of the teacher-student relationship, learner-centred pedagogy, needs and aspirations of learners, creating of conducive learning environments, parental support and understanding, state of higher education, the state of education for those with learning disabilities, different abilities and recognizing and nurturing multiple intelligence.

Giroux (2011) in his article argues that films apart from providing a pedagogical space also opens up the possibility for them to make interventions. Further, films also emphasise on the need for engendering literacy that addresses the political and pedagogical ways in which knowledge, discourse, images and values are constructed and enter our lives. Cinema as a pedagogical tool can facilitate reflection and proactive action in educational policymakers, educators, parents along with audience-citizens who can bring in necessary changes in the Indian 'eduscape'.

The film also brings out the need in our society to have a greater tolerance and acceptance of failure in academic situations. Very often, this fear of failure itself restricts the students from achieving their true potential and forces them to stick only to the hard and fast rules of society.

The researcher also offers the following suggestions:

Films like this one considered for the research should be publicly shown in schools or college campuses, followed by interactive sessions with the young audiences. This would help build active citizenship through reflection on issues represented through these films. Additionally, documentary films should also be screened to sensitise the youth and children. The film by narrating the tension between rote learning and creative learning becomes a tool to draw on for teacher-educators. This approach is compatible with the National Education Policy 2020 of the Indian government wherein emphasis is laid on learning through application

Notes on Contributor

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NOTES

1. Maharashtra Dyslexia Association is a not-for-profit organization committed to securing the rights of students with dyslexia to an appropriate education. Also known as a 'Specific Learning or Language Disability', dyslexia literally means 'difficulty with words'.
2. A bi-annual disability film festival organised by the Ability Foundation, Chennai.
3. A distance learning national university located in IGNOU road, Maidan Garhi, New Delhi, India. The university was established in 1985 with a budget of 20 Million, when the Parliament of India passed the Indira Gandhi National Open University Act, 1985 (IGNOU Act 1985).

IGNOU is run by the central government of India.

4. National Council of Educational Research and Training is an autonomous body of the Government of India. It acts as a nodal agency for achieving the goals of Universalisation of Elementary Education.

5. Formed in the year 1979. In 2006, NUEPA was made a university with the present name of the National University of Educational Planning and Administration.

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