CHALLENGES FACED BY ADVANCED LEVEL ENGLISH TEACHERS WHILE TEACHING *LIFE OF PI*

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, there has been a significant growth of Magic Realist fiction in the international market evidencing that it is one of the most sought-after writing styles. The current General Certificate of Education (G.C.E.) Advanced Level English syllabus in Sri Lanka which was introduced in 2017 too includes a fictional novel belonging to the genre of Magic Realism; Life of Pi by Yann Martel. It is a clear deviation from Realism and is also the only truly Post Realist/Magic Realist text in the syllabus, and it is an unfamiliar genre from a teacher's perspective because the English syllabus until 2017 always contained fiction inclined towards Realism. In such a context, it seemed worthwhile exploring how challenging the introduction of Magic Realism has been to the relevant teachers. Accordingly, this study investigated on the challenges faced by a group of teachers that teach Life of Pi to G.C.E. Advanced Level students who offer English and on the possible strategies that could be employed to overcome them. The data collected from four such teachers were analysed using a thematic analysis based on the six-phase approach framework proposed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke making this study exclusively relying on qualitative research methods. Analysis of the results indicated the lack of teacher training and insights on assessment and standardized testing and also a linear scaffolding in how this new and unfamiliar genre was introduced. It also suggests that teachers struggle with the genre due to their long-term familiarity with Realism. The data revealed that at times teachers attempted to 'fit' Life of Pi into their existing Realism-dominated understanding of literature. Several suggestions for overcoming these challenges were also identified. A limitation in the study was the number of participants, which was restricted by the dearth of teachers using the text. A future study could be conducted with participants representing more districts.

Key words: Advanced Level English, Magic Realism, *Life of Pi*, teaching challenges

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, there has been a significant growth of Magic Realist fiction in the international market evidencing that it is one of the most sought-after writing styles (Faris, 2004). Further, such texts are now widely used as course material in various academic programmes, including the current General Certificate of Education (G.C.E.) Advanced Level English syllabus in Sri Lanka. The said syllabus which was introduced in 2017 includes a fictional novel belonging to the genre of Magic Realism, a genre which is a combination of Realism and Fantasy that operates on the 'natural' growth of magical elements out of a depicted reality (Faris, 2002); *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel (2014). This is also the only Post Realist novel among four other novels, namely *Tess of d'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy, a Realistic fictional novel, *July's People* by Nadine Gordimer and *The Remains of the Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro which are fictional novels with a historical background and *Nectar in a Sieve* by Kamala Markandaya, which is a fictional autobiography. Among them, both *July's People* and *The Remains of the Day* are not traditional Realist novels but push the margins of Realism. That said, *Life of Pi* is a clear deviation from Realism and is also the only truly Post Realist/Magic Realist text in the syllabus, and it is an unfamiliar genre from a teacher's perspective because the English syllabus until 2017 always contained fiction inclined towards Realism.

Though the introduction of Magic Realism to the syllabus was an apt move in keeping with global trends, the process has been inadequately scaffolded, particularly because Realism is the more popular literary genre. Moreover, preliminary inquiries evidenced a scarcity of teachers who have opted to teach *Life of Pi*, evidencing it to be the least preferred among the prescribed novels. Despite these barriers, certain teachers have opted to teach *Life of Pi*, and their perspectives on teaching the text is undoubtedly rich data for a timely study in the field of secondary school literature pedagogy.

Literature in the Sri Lankan curriculum has received little attention from a specifically pedagogical perspective, in contrast to language, and this issue is related to the larger problem of literature pedagogy being underdeveloped worldwide. The Advanced Level literature syllabus and assessment, as opposed to the language syllabus, has been problematic because there is little explicit guidance on what specific skills or competencies must be acquired by students and how these are to be evaluated and assessed by teachers and examiners.

In such a context, it seemed worthwhile exploring how challenging the introduction of Magic Realism – a genre that most teachers are unfamiliar with – to the syllabus has been to the relevant teachers. Accordingly, this study investigated the challenges faced by a group of teachers that belonged to the minority that teach *Life of Pi* to G.C.E. Advanced Level students who offer English as a core subject. In the process, it also investigated the possible strategies that could be employed to overcome these challenges. This inquiry, will, in time to come, be useful for future teachers as it will discuss in depth how to make teaching this literary genre more meaningful, productive and interesting to their students. Furthermore, teachers who have deliberately avoided choosing the text for classroom study may become motivated to teach by gaining some useful information from this inquiry.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted by extracting in depth data from four teachers and they were named Tilak (Teacher 1), Tania (Teacher 2), Thilan (Teacher 3) and Tracy (Teacher 4) in order to maintain their anonymity. They are employed as Advanced Level English teachers in local schools. They also conduct private tuition classes in which they teach Life of Pi. They were a purposive sample since they were selected on the basis of their teaching Life of Pi to Advanced Level students. They were also a convenient sample since they were approached based on accessibility with them being employed in schools in the Colombo District. As for research tools, a questionnaire that covered demographic and basic background details was circulated among the participants and individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with all. The analysis of the data collected was done using a thematic analysis based on the six-phase approach framework proposed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2012) making this study rely exclusively on qualitative research methods.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges faced while teaching *Life of Pi*

Three out of four respondents affirmed that *Life of Pi* was not a favourite among their students largely due to the lack of secondary reading material on the novel and also due to the general belief that it was too 'difficult'. The 'safe' choices were seen to be the time-tested Victorian novels for which it was relatively easier to find material. As such, *Life of Pi* may not have been selected by certain teachers not because it is a Magic Realist novel but because they feared the 'unknown'.

Tania insisted that there were many among her private students who had initially commenced studying *Life of Pi* in school but had later abandoned it either because they found it unrelatable or because the teacher had discontinued teaching it. Thus, she assumed that this was due to the lack of communication between the teacher and students which had led to a sense of boredom within the classroom. Tracy too affirmed Tania's view stating that a student's acceptance of a text depended on how comfortable the teacher was with it. She further added that since most teachers lacked the imagination to relate to *Life of Pi*, they preferred more straightforward texts. This seemed a plausible reason for the dearth of teachers who had attempted the novel.

It seemed that most teachers preferred the comfort zone of Realist novels because previous syllabi were compiled of texts that were mostly aligned with Realism. However, texts with qualities that departed from classic Victorian novelist fiction are 'appropriated' and 'normalized' after a while in the syllabus. In other words, with time, they began to be read like normal Realist texts. The dystopian and post-modern qualities of *July's People* and the metafictional qualities of *The Remains of the Day* were downplayed, and they came to be read like ordinary Realist novels. In the case of *Life of Pi*, if this 'normalization' occurs in the future, it will be particularly problematic because this is a novel that clearly departs from the Realist mode.

Thilan expressed that his students had had difficulties in accepting the *Life of Pi* – Richard Parker relationship which depicts many Magic Realist characteristics. He felt that they were confused with the demarcation between Surrealism and Fantasy. In fact, there are subtle differences between Magic Realism, Surrealism and Fantasy, though these three genres do have many common characteristics. Thilan may have felt less challenged had he elaborated on these dis/similarities to his students. Then again, it must be noted that the relevant authorities have not used properly scaffolded methods in introducing new items into the syllabus, and no assessment of the capabilities of teachers had been made before the new material was introduced. In particular, the introduction of a novel like *Life of Pi* that belongs to a genre which is different from that of the usual Realist texts, needs to be carefully scaffolded, and that, evidently, has not happened. Tania believed that not having much teaching experience aggravated this situation. Hence, she pointed

this out as one of the drawbacks that has caused certain teachers to fail in reigniting the initial enthusiasm of students for the novel. Evidencing their lack of interest, Tania's students had not attempted a single question on *Life of Pi* at any of the term end exams.

These responses clearly highlighted a significant flaw in teacher training, assessment and standardized testing. The abrupt introduction of the new genre to the syllabus was not accompanied with clear guidance on how the text must be taught and what knowledge must be assimilated and how it must be tested. Teachers, exam setters and examiners must be collectively educated and informed of their roles, and they must agree on what is expected from the students; simultaneously, students must be informed of what is expected of them.

Another major challenge mentioned was the multiple interpretations of the novel. For instance, in the novel, Pi provides two different endings to the Japanese officials whom he meets in Mexico: 1) Pi surviving on a lifeboat at sea for 227 days with a tiger and several other animals 2) Pi's replacement of these animals with human beings to make the story more believable. Apparently, both endings have been taken as different interpretations by various teachers and Thilan, as a private tutor, had been criticized by the schoolteacher of his students for his reading of the novel. As a result, he had asked his students to adhere to their schoolteacher's version when writing answers in school and to incorporate his ideas at the Advanced Level Examination. This seems quite a confusing situation for students. Further, students themselves – according to Thilan – had encountered several other interpretations online that had further complicated their understanding of the story. Accordingly, there had been a discrepancy between the readings of the novel furnished by their schoolteacher and by their private tutor. Clearly, this was a disadvantage for students, again created due to the lack of uniformity in teaching a novel belonging to a literary genre which was new to the syllabus. This also points to the larger problem of how literary competencies are assessed. Assessment now appears to be based on the notion of a fairly rigid 'correct' reading, whereas, assessment needs to be based on the competency of a student to interpret a text within a reasonable range of interpretations, all demonstrating creative and intellectual skills in interpretation.

With regard to the Teachers' Guide (Department of English, 2017) issued by the National Institute of Education (NIE) related to the new Advanced Level English syllabus, three respondents had very few positive comments about its contribution to their teaching. For instance, Tilak complained that its content is quite generic and provides insufficient guidance. Tracy too was of a similar view. She added that unlike the assessment objectives set down in the London Advanced Level syllabus, which are actually followed when marking the exam papers, the competency levels stated in the Teachers' Guide issued by the NIE are often disregarded in the marking scheme.

Strategies that could be employed to overcome these challenges

Tania had followed several methods to combat the boredom her students had felt initially when they read through the narrative on their own. For instance, before commencing teaching, she had provided them an overview of the text comprising the setting, literary genre and related themes. She had also asked them to watch the movie, if possible, and research on the novel and its background. Even Tilak and Thilan were in favour of encouraging the students to watch the movie before reading the book, since the movie, despite its limitations, provided visuals for certain segments of the book that were hard for a reader to imagine. However, Tracy, while agreeing that this was one rare movie which was quite faithful to the novel, was adamant that her students watch it after reading the book.

Another common method utilized to overcome challenges was referring to other texts with similar characteristics. For example, Tilak had extracted examples from Russian folk tales and his own students had made references to *Harry Potter* and also to Hindu mythology. Tania had referred to the Sinhala stage drama *Sinhabahu* by Prof. Ediriweera Sarachchandra and also to Chinese myths, fables and Biblical stories.

She had also made a WhatsApp group comprising herself and her students. Sometimes, she asked them to play different characters from the novel on the group and then react to a certain incident within the parameters of that particular role. This had helped them to critically analyze the characters as well as certain incidents in the story. Within the WhatsApp group, she had also paved the way for discussions by occasionally posting questions for which the students had to text back their views. Thilan had made his students draw flow charts depicting the movement of the plot which had aided them in remembering the story sequence. Along with the flow charts, he had also made them create mind maps – another term for concept maps – based on the themes, motives, symbols, important incidents and special utterances.

With regard to the vagueness of guidance provided in the Teachers'Guide, Tania believed that there is scope for improvement of the resource book if the relevant authorities study the guidelines stipulated for the London Advanced Level English syllabus and make the changes accordingly. Another possible means of receiving guidance, as mentioned by the respondents, are the seminars and workshops that are conducted for teachers as well as students. They were of the view that the academics who introduced the texts should conduct these seminars and workshops and furnish the guidelines that must be followed when teaching them. Elaborating on the same issue, Tania stated that the NIE should shoulder the responsibility of organizing such workshops, perhaps involving the exam setters as well.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The current G.C.E. Advanced Level English syllabus which was introduced in 2017 includes a Magic Realist novel, *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel, which was the first of its kind in the syllabus. This study attempted to explore challenges faced by teachers while teaching the text and the strategies that could be followed to overcome them. Accordingly, four teachers who teach *Life of Pi* shared their views on the same, and the collected qualitative data that underwent a thematic analysis revealed the following.

The shortage of teachers who opted to teach *Life of Pi* proved that it was the least favoured among the rest of the prescribed novels. Probing into the cause behind the reluctance to teach the novel revealed that there is a dearth of widely and collectively accepted study notes and secondary literature on the relevant subject.

Specific and clearer guidelines need to be developed by the relevant authorities such as the NIE and be made available to students and teachers. At the same time, such guidelines should focus more on literary competencies rather than on rigid notions of 'correct' interpretations. It is also important that the goal of assessment shifts from 'correct' interpretations to literary competencies where a range of acceptable interpretations can be accommodated because the lack of an agreed-upon range of interpretations has led to confusion among teachers and students alike. The issue lies in the reluctance of certain teachers and the limited attention given by some of them to discussing Magic Realism while teaching *Life of Pi*. It seemed a noticeable drawback to underplay the most significant generic quality of the text. This is another fact that needs to be clarified for the benefit of both parties, and the National Institute of Education (NIE) is best positioned to remedy this issue.

The study also revealed a few interesting and unique techniques utilized by the teachers to mitigate the challenges of teaching *Life of Pi*; some of these are the use of concept/mind maps, thematic approaches and also discussions and role playing on WhatsApp groups.

However, since this study was initiated, the number of schools that offer *Life of Pi* as an Advanced Level English text has increased, thereby broadening the teacher/student population who are involved in the teaching/learning process. Therefore, a similar study could be conducted with participants representing many more districts.

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