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The Magic Flute: Creative Potential of Liquid Learning in English

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A word about the title will perhaps be the most appropriate beginning for the present ‘paper’, for, the theme that the organisers have marked out for the purpose is most pertinent to the circumstances the world is passing through at present. It touches the very heart of the matter and makes for a kind of preparation for the type of education we are going to impart. What is important is not the system of education—old or new—but the method of teaching the changing circumstances are forcing us to evolve to suit the changed know-how. The seminars or the webinars, being ordinarily organised around, deal with the dead wood of the past. But here is one aiming at transporting us to a new learning zone—creating a kind of awareness—asking for a kind of will and vision to live with Covid-19. The theme and the subthemes are all intertwined like the concentric ripples that spread when a piece of stone is dropped into a pool of standing water. How, after all, “to draw out the best in man—body, mind and soul”? Shorn of the imagery, symbolic rigmarole and allegorical implications it carries in its womb, it comes down to the simple theme of handling the system of teaching English during the period we are passing through. The theme and the sub-themes suggested by the organisers seem to be quite straight and simple. But their simplicity is simply deceptive. Most appropriate is the symbolic significance of the “Magic Flute.” But the “Magic Shadow-show” seems “deceptively” simple. And yet, as Jacobs and Rosenbaum point out in the very opening chapter of *English Transformational Grammar* (1968): “The most puzzling scientific mysteries are often uncovered when scientists investigate natural phenomena that are taken for granted” (3). The seemingly obvious problem in hand begins to admit of a lot of complexity as and when it is viewed in the light of questions such as these: What exactly does the term “Magic Flute” here mean? What does the term “Liquid-learning” stand for? And, what is “Creative Potential”, especially the “Creative Potential in English”? Everything about the subject, highly fascinating as it is, asks for a lot of concentration.

Though at the surface level the questions are all very simple and straightforward, they cry at bottom for some elaboration, and ask for clarification of the sense in which they have

been used in the present context. For, whatever sense or meaning the scholars, critics, researchers, writers of “glossaries” and lexicographers, may bring to bear upon each of these terms in general, they still require some elaboration of the specific shade or shades of meaning each of them carries in the present context. Consider, for instance, the term “Magic Flute”. Whatever its dictionary definition or meaning elsewhere, in the present context it simply stands for a fairy tale of darkness and light, finding ... way in the world ... a feast for the ears and for the eyes.

Similarly, the term “Liquid Learning”, as used in the present context, carries kaleidoscopic implications in its curves and folds. It is not always easy to put it straight across. It is, in fact, a kind of “transformational and interactive educational experience” which shapes learners' vision going beyond and embraces a vast variety of methodologies and platforms “blending together physical, digital and natural environments”, so that the learners may avail of it anywhere in the world under all circumstances.

Even the term “Creative Potential”, especially the “Creative Potential in English” is not so simple an affair as it appears to be. It means “Ability to raise expression of individual creative abilities and creative performance through creativity training.”(<https://www...>)

Translating a little classic—a *Rubai* (a typical type of quatrain)—by Omar Khayyam (1048–1131), a world famous Persian poet of the twelfth century A.D., says Edward FitzGerald in *Rubayyat...*:

For in and out, above, about, below

'Tis nothing but a *Magic Shadow-show*

Play'd in a Box whose Candle is the Sun

Round which the Phantom Figures come and go (46).

What is important in the present context is the expression *italicized* in the *Rubai*—*Magic Shadow-show*—which FitzGerald has appropriately used in the sense of a story projected through shadows generated by figures or hand gestures. That is perhaps the finest projection of what Covid-19 has forced us to in the field of education. All our traditional institutions, with all their buildings, libraries, canteens and laboratories, with all their centuries-old paraphernalia have lost their conventional significance. All our classrooms and

lecture-theatres with seating arrangements for hundreds of students, with raised platforms for teachers with chairs and tables and lecture stands, black-boards with or without a couple of electronic devices for PowerPoint Presentation and so on are all lying unused and deserted. Covid-19, a horrible invisible enemy, has forced us to a world where everything has been locked down. The students and the teachers have all been forced to hide themselves in the nooks and corners of their houses—in pigeons holes, as it were—to keep them hidden even from their near and dear ones. None is ordinarily allowed to come out to the streets, roads or market-places unless there be something very special and unavoidable. Under the circumstances, who cares for the normal working of schools, colleges and universities? Things have suddenly been pushed to a kind of doldrums. The situation is, obviously, a very critical one especially in the field of education which has had normal working routine over the centuries. Since the very dawn of civilization, man's life on earth has continually been under a Himalayan heap of challenges—asking for drastic re-orientations and re-adjustments. This has particularly been the case in the field of education, a kind of preparation in Bapu's well-known words, "to eke out the best in man—body, mind and soul", in order, of course, to lay hands on what is excellent and worthwhile and gives sense and meaning to life.

One of the most revolutionary challenges was the proverbial onslaught of Lord Macaulay who came out with the system of 3- R's, aiming at popularizing reading, writing and simple arithmetic—to prepare, in his own words, a cheap army of clerks or *babus*, Indian by blood and race—"children of the soil"—who could occupy white collared jobs, doing mechanical exercises without poking their nose in the affairs of the White Masters (cf. Panipati 34-35). The system—almost equally traditional as it was—served its purpose for over a century till *Bapu*, "Father of the Nation", tried in his own way to replace the system of 3-R's with a new system of 3-H's, aiming at enlightening the head, sweetening the heart and training the hands to prepare upcoming Independent youth as the shapers of their own destiny as free citizens of India i.e. *Bharat* (cf. Panipati 34-35). But because of the accidents of history and paucity of funds, the system has, somehow, been laming on for another century.

But now Corona or Covid-19 has brought everything to a standstill, resulting in a kind of heavy lockdown in all educational institutions including universities and other temples of learnings, forcing us to think of new ways and means to work out a new system. The paraphernalia we have all been using over the centuries has become utterly useless. Covid-19,

the invisible enemy, is horrible enough to waylay anybody anywhere in human crowds. How can the students enter the lecture-theatres or classrooms? They are locked up at homes like all others in the country. To continue with any type of teaching/learning, we require everything new—online classes, online demonstrations, online lessons, online practices, online tests, online assessments, online examinations, online evaluations, in fact, online everything. Everything is required to be reshaped and remoulded. The earlier challenges—centring round 3-R's or 3-H's—required at best re-orientations and re-adjustments of the existing system. They revolutionised things, no doubt, but the existing infrastructure remained more or less in use, keeping the new system going on the rail lines laid centuries ago. But Corona or Covid-19 has resulted in a kind of trepidation, a revolution of revolutions asking for a wholesale replacement of the earlier paraphernalia. And because there seems to be no end to the present situation in the near future, everything is required to be completely overhauled, including teaching aids. Now what about the teaching aids in liquid learning classes? The aids being aids are after all aids. Whether audio or visual, or both rolled into one, they are all a fabulous dream used only by the “affluent” teachers as well as students. What aids, for instance, do we truly have in our traditional classrooms? Even the best institutions do not provide anything beyond the blackboard. Most of our institutions do not have even PowerPoint Presentation arrangements in the lecture-theatres. With the possible exception of extension lecture-hall, we cannot even dream of anything beyond that. Even the best temples of learning do not subscribe to Journals—so very costly as they are and are thought to be useful only for the selected few, interested in them for ulterior purposes. Most of the teachers, even those at the PG colleges, do not open even the textbooks in the classrooms. Thinking of audio-visual aids is like entering the fabulous world of dreams. And dreams being dreams, as we know, do not have any bones in them even as realities being realities have no flesh about them.

What we actually require in a virtual classroom is the presence of a teacher—a good teacher—a teacher with a will and a vision, ever ready to walk a mile free, ready to take care of everyone of “the sheep under his control with a lantern in hand” (like Christ in the *Bible*). Like a magic man with a magic flute in his hand always producing notes that are really fascinating. But every piper, as we can confidently croon, is not the Pied Piper of Hamelin (as in Robert Browning’s world famous little classic). Every teacher, fully conversant as he/she is not with the new technology that can be helpful in the presentation of the “Magic Shadow-show”, cannot be the Pied Piper of Hamelin—a magic piper the tune of whose flute

could fascinate the whole crowd of budding scholars. The stuff on the college rolls, rural as well as urban, being of a kaleidoscopic variety—consisting of drifters, whistlers of the moment, pleasure seekers, music makers, mere time killers, drummers, gilded, nincompoops, paupers and whilers away of their parents' heavy purses cannot all be equally mystified by the magic tunes in the physical absence of the teacher. Most of the learners are like horses brought to the pond without any will to drink. Which Piper can exercise his magic on one and all? In the traditional classrooms, the learners are considerably controlled by many a trick of the teacher's resourcefulness—over-riding them one way or the other—body language, personal examples, a harsh eye of the teacher, strength of the “red-ripe” and a little fear of rules and regulations involving punishment too, and, of course, a bad name to the family. Most of the scholars on rolls—just mediocres and time killers as they are—weigh heavy upon the acute minority of the real scholars who cannot even afford the technological instruments required for the purpose. But what about the virtual classrooms? Especially during the lockdown period? Normal routine, disrupted as it is due to Covid-19 and is feared to remain so without any hope of return to what we have been used to over the centuries, has become a thing of the past.

Consider, for instance, the recent memo-orders of the DGHE, Haryana Government, which reads: “It has been brought to the notice that all students are not able to access online e-learning platforms due to various reasons. To meet this short-coming, the Department of Higher Education, Haryana and the Department of Technical Education, Haryana shall be airing radio shows to promote distance-learning/ learning-from-home through radio...” And, as the memo continues: “The students of Haryana are the main target audience of the broadcast, so that they are able to learn by the radio platform, as well...”(See Memo-order dated 29/06/2020)

What does the forgoing memo-order show, after all? Nothing, if not the brute fact that what we have been doing so far by way of liquid or fluid teaching/learning through online classes in virtual classrooms has failed to click. Whatever the reason, or reasons, it has failed to serve the purpose it was designed for. And, who can be 100% sure of the success of the radio sessions the department is going to start? That, too, may turn out to be a blind jump in the dark! Many more such discrepancies may come up during the trial. What Corona or Covid-19 has forced us into is really a tight corner. It will need a thousand attempts to make the

Magic Shadow-show a real success. Hence the hit and trail nature of the online classes in process!

One word more. Online classes designed for liquid and fluid learning, however, cannot be held all through the day, as the routine classes we have been used to. The time period will have to be minimized taking into consideration the specialized and expert advise of all concerned especially the health specialists who can favour us with their tips about the mental health of all involved. Most important should be the opinion of “health engineers”, especially the mental health experts. In a kind of overenthusiastic fervour for online classes, the authorities must take care of that aspect too. For, the reward should not be an enlightened army of handicapped scholars who can do things but are not in a position to do because of physical hazards. This is also the general opinion of a community of social surveyors too (*Times of India*, 24 June, 2020, p. 9). The realisation of the potential of liquid learning must not be at the cost of national health. When all is said and done, the price should not be higher than the nation can afford to pay. The fact, however, remains that this liquid learning in online classes is at best a temporary stay against confusion, a poor substitute, in fact, for the system the country has been used to over the centuries. The marvelous dust has been cruelly rubbed off from the golden wings of a butterfly!

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