



## HUMANISM, FEMINISM AND WOMANISM

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### ABSTRACT



English language teaching must not merely be a mechanical process by which learners of English are taught skills in the language. If conceived in such a mundane manner, it would not just be tedious but more importantly utterly ineffective. This paper advocates the view that incorporating humanistic values and skills such as reasoning, self empowerment, problem solving and co-operation into the framework of English language teaching, would make it more appealing and meaningful. Probably the best and most effective way of doing this is by adopting literature as the prime medium for inculcating English language skills in the learners. Taking this idea as the basic premise, the paper seeks to drive home the point that adding aspects of feminism and womanism into the scheme would render the process more profound and empowering.

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In an educational context, humanism has a philosophical influence on education for the last five centuries. The term *humanistic* describes learning approaches that assert the central role of the 'whole person' in the learning process. Humanistic approaches emerged in the mid-twentieth century partly as a reaction to the 'de-humanizing'

psychology of behaviourism, but also as a counterbalance to exclusively intellectual (or cognitive) accounts of learning, such as mentalism.

Carl Rogers' *On Becoming a Person* (1961) and *Freedom to Learn* (1969); Abraham Maslow's *Towards a Psychology of Being* (1968) and Gertrude Moscovitz's *Caring and Sharing in the Foreign*



*Language Class* (1978) are some of the books that paved the way towards a more humanistic education. Humanistic education includes the personal growth, including realizing one's full potential, as one of the primary goals of education. The development of human values is another significant factor. The learner should be engaged affectively which includes both emotionally and intellectually. Behaviours that cause anxiety or stress should be avoided in the classroom and learners should be actively involved in the learning process. Learners can and should take responsibility for their own learning. Effective teaching and learning engages the whole person - the mind, the body and the heart. The learner is the vital person in the act of learning. Creativity, involvement and satisfaction are the obligatory fundamentals for lifelong learning.

Humanism is an all-inclusive life stance that upholds human reason, ethics, and justice, and rejects supernaturalism, pseudoscience, and superstition. Many Humanists derive their morals from a philosophy of Ethical naturalism, and some acknowledge a science of morality. Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality.

Humanistic teachings, thus has certain prerogatives. There should be an emotional response to humanistic teaching. The next query to be analysed is, 'Why teach literature in an ELT class?' Isn't it enough if the essentials of grammar are taught to build up the student's confidence to learn a language? LSRW are the main components of teaching English and that should suffice. After all if the main goal is to learn to use the language effectively in any discipline, why should an ELT teacher use literature in the classroom to develop the main learning skills? Students do get the main facts of life and the various events that happen in the world through newspapers and the wonderful machinery called google now. They can imbibe their values through these sources.

Classroom learning is not just learning the mechanisms of a language. Students should study literature because it helps them learn about themselves and the world. Stories expose them to differing view points and experiences in new ways. Literature deals with the things that are close to our hearts. By reading literature, students expand their vocabularies, subtly enough that they don't always realize they are doing it.

In this modern age when students prefer playing video games than to reading literature or story books, reading short stories is highly interactive in the classroom and opens their minds to a very high level of thinking. Words form pictures and in turn pull them deeper into a text. It gives them an insight, no matter how small, into history, mathematics, physics, psychology, sociology, culture, gender, race, religion, sexuality, and philosophy, just to name a few. Understanding the underlying meaning of deep social issues or the meaning behind a racial or gender issue simply by reading about it in a newspaper is not absolutely possible.

One can't feel the impact of an issue just by reading a few facts in a newspaper or listening to it in the TV news channel. When analyzing texts, scholars of literature look for new ways to understand the author's meaning and intent. This then translates into being able to understand existing and potential problems and solutions. The ability to see things from new, fresh, and different perspectives is invaluable in the workplace and even among friends and family, though many do not always realize it. The students have to specifically understand this valid principle in this modern age.

As philosophies, feminism and womanism which is also an outgrowth of feminism are closely allied with and supportive of humanism. That is, feminism and womanism are applications of the precepts of humanism specifically to women as a class of people. Because feminism is basically a humanistic philosophy and world view, it must be understood in terms of humanistic ideals. From feminism's primary concerns about equal rights, authority, and sexual roles of men and women flow a significant number of social, political, moral, ethical, religious, and economic issues of importance to individuals, families, churches, and the nation. For



example, a humanist points out that domestic violence is wrong. A feminist will note that, according to the Family Violence Prevention Fund, 85% of victims of intimate partner violence are women and 15% of victims are men.

Womanism, distinct from feminism's often white-centered history, is an alternative casting of the same basic beliefs about equality and freedom, and few Womanists would deny the link to feminism. While each of these groups is magnetized by political equality, some additional aspect of their personhood needs to be emphasized because it affects their struggle for equality. Womanism and stories based on this concept help one to teach empathy. It is through immersing ourselves in others' stories not just hearing them summarized, but truly immersing ourselves in the imagery, emotions, language of these stories that we can have empathy. And empathy is what keeps us human. Womanism is a concept that wants the whole community to live in harmony and not just the women alone.

Bell Hooks would be pleased by the students' ability to be "enlightened witnesses" to the cultural constructs and assumptions that surround them. Their ability to use critical lenses to read literary texts should translate into an ability to read the world as well. As Robert Scholes reminds us that, 'The relationship between the text and the world is not simply a fascinating problem for textual theory. It is, above all others, the problem that makes textual theory necessary.' Students can collect stories from a particular social world, for example, family stories about events, traditions, and/or unusual family members or stories shared by members of a neighborhood or town that serve to define what that neighborhood's or town's beliefs and attitudes are. These stories can be discussed in class to understand the culture of the past and how it has changed now.

Some feminists (e.g. Penelope 1990; Spender 1985) argue that English is, in some quite general sense, male. One thing that is meant by this is that English can be said to be male in a manner similar to that in which particular terms can be said to be male — by encoding a male worldview, by helping to subordinate women or to render them invisible, or by taking males as the norm. Spender claims, and provides circumstantial evidence that

'males have encoded sexism into language to consolidate their claims of male supremacy' (Spender 1985: 144). Feminist work on language, and on philosophy of language, is a relatively new endeavour. But there is good reason to suppose that feminist philosophers can bring much that is useful to the study of language, and that philosophy of language has valuable resources to offer feminism.

Many classics and popular stories where girls are portrayed usually replicate stereotypes of masculine and feminine roles. Such gender stereotypes are widespread in mainstream children's books. Children's books habitually portray girls as acted upon rather than active (Fox, 1993). Girls are represented as sweet, naive, conforming, and dependent, while boys are characteristically described as strong, adventurous, independent, and capable. (Ernst, 1995; Jett-Simpson & Masland, 1993). Boys tend to have roles as fighters, adventurers and rescuers, while girls in their passive role tend to be caretakers, mothers, and princesses in need of rescuing, and characters that support the male figure (Temple, 1993). Often, girl characters accomplish their goals because others help them, whereas boys do so because they exhibit ingenuity and/or perseverance. If females are primarily represented as active and assertive, they are often portrayed in a submissive light toward the end of the story. Girl characters who retain their active qualities are clearly the exception (Rudman, 1995). Thus, studies indicate that not only are girls portrayed less often than boys in children's books, but both genders are frequently presented in stereotypical terms as well.

Teachers can choose books where individuals are portrayed with distinctive personalities irrespective of their gender. Achievements should not be evaluated on the basis of gender and occupations can also be represented as gender-free. Females are not always weaker and more delicate than males and individuals are logical or emotional depending upon the situation. The language used in the text should be gender-free. Teachers can also choose books that have counter-sexist attitudes rooted in them, such as feminist texts that can help children recognize gender-stereotypical messages. Combining traditional and non-traditional



books can also spark discussion of how genders are portrayed in different books (Jett-Simpson and Masland, 1993).

Regardless of the type of book chosen, the message of respect for both genders should be subtly contained in the texts. It is important to avoid books that have strident messages on gender equity, as children tend to reject books that preach. In Mem Fox's (1993) words, "laboring the point kills the point of the laboring."

One recommendation is to look dynamically for books portraying girls/women in a positive light with active, dynamic roles. Another suggestion is to look for books and stories that do not represent either gender in a stereotypical manner. Deborah Thacker has written about feminism and children's literature:

"Rather, the advent of a feminist perspective has transformed the way that it is possible to think about children's literature. The proximity of children's literature to the domestic, nurturing, maternal, and, thus, the feminine sphere can be seen as a contributing factor in the marginalization of the subject in academic discourses. However, it is notion of the silencing of the "Other," whether it be women, children, or those who are racially different, that enriches what it is."

Feminism also talks about feminist pedagogy and a feminist classroom. This approach encourages the teacher to increase interactions through dialogue, establish a norm of inquiring curiosity and act as intermediary between the student and topic.

"A classroom based on feminist pedagogy is a community of learners where power is shared and where participatory democratic processes help learners develop independence. It is an active, collaborative classroom where risk-taking is encouraged; where intellectual excitement abounds; and where power is viewed as energy, capacity, and potential, rather than domination" (Christie, 1997, p. 148).

Empowerment is the primary goal of womanism and involves the principles of democracy and shared power. Education is a neutral cognitive process (Chapman, 1997). Education either functions as a mechanism facilitating students' integration and

conformity into the logic of the present system, or it becomes "the practice of freedom" teaching men and women to deal critically and creatively with reality and to learn to participate in transforming their world (Middlecamp & Subramaniam, 1999). The practice of freedom emerges through empowerment.

Womanism also believes in building community. It is concerned with building community and cooperation within the classroom as well as between the classroom and its broader environment. Developing a community of growth and caring is the key in any critical/feminist/ womanist education. Feminism and womanism value community and equality, and in building a trusting environment in which all members are respected and have an equal opportunity to participate

Feminist and Womanist scholars often express interest in the transformational potential of community and connectedness. They envision a world where people link together in a fundamental attitude of protectiveness, and act toward the good of a more equitable society. Working on service-learning projects encourages students to take part in problem-solving dialogues within their own communities; such activities harmonize well with the feminist goals of liberatory research and praxis. It cannot be denied that literature is and must be an integral part of teaching to make it practical and holistic also.

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