Narrative as Art: Teaching Contemporary Indian Fiction through Creative Pedagogies

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ABSTRACT

Narratives are not only stories; they are artistic forms of human expression that shape imagination, memory, and identity. When literature is approached as an art form, it moves beyond the written word and enters the realm of painting, music, performance, and sculpture.

This article explores five such novels—Deepa Anappara's Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line (2020), Arundhati Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness (2017), Shubhangi Swarup's Latitudes of Longing (2018), Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey (2014), and Anuradha Roy's Sleeping on Jupiter (2015). Each novel demonstrates a unique fusion of narrative and art: sketches and cartoons, mosaics and murals, landscape paintings, oral performances, and fractured mosaics of trauma. By viewing narrative as art, teachers can encourage students to connect emotionally and imaginatively with literature.The paper further argues that art-based pedagogies such as drawing, collage-making, dramatization, eco-poetry, and creative writing can help students engage with texts more meaningfully.

As we are living in this modern era, it is crucial to learn and understand the significance of teaching the contemporary Indian fiction through such more creative pedagogies which hones the potential of the learner holistically.

Keyword: - *Pedagogy, paradigmatic, narrative. tranquility*

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature has always been understood as a mirror of society, but it is equally important to recognize it as a canvas of artistic imagination. A novel is not simply a story about people, events, and places; it is also a carefully designed artwork, constructed through rhythm, voice, imagery, and structure. Just as a painter uses brushstrokes to capture a landscape or a musician uses notes to convey emotion, a writer uses narrative to create a world that is both real and imagined.

The artistic approach to narrative has strong foundations in theory and pedagogy. Jerome Bruner (1991) argued that human beings think in stories, and that narrative is the primary way through which we make sense of the world. Louise Rosenblatt (1978) emphasized that reading is a "transaction" between the text and the reader, an act that is closer to experiencing art than decoding information. John Dewey (1934), in his classic work Art as Experience, insisted that art should not be seen as separate from life but as a vital way of experiencing and interpreting it. These thinkers remind us that narrative is not only a form of knowledge but also a form of art.

This perspective is particularly valuable in the context of contemporary Indian English fiction. The novels written in the last two decades present complex realities of modern India—urban poverty, gender struggles, caste violence, political conflict, ecological crises, and personal trauma. Yet these realities are not presented in a straightforward journalistic style; they are mediated through artistic forms of storytelling. Each writer brings a distinctive aesthetic sensibility: Deepa Anappara uses a child's voice that resembles sketches and cartoons, Arundhati Roy constructs a mural-like narrative with fragments and collages, Shubhangi Swarup paints landscapes with words, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar transforms folklore into performance, and Anuradha Roy uses fragmented structures like mosaics to represent trauma.

2. NARRATIVE AS ART AND PEDAGOGY

Literature is not merely a vessel for ideas but an artistic form that shapes how ideas are felt, imagined, and remembered. By treating narrative as art, we shift attention from what a story is about to how it is told, how it creates beauty, and how it resonates with readers' emotions. This perspective is especially significant in education, because teaching literature is not only about transmitting knowledge but also about cultivating sensitivity, creativity, and empathy.

3. NARRATIVE AS ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

Jerome Bruner (1991) distinguished between two modes of thought: the paradigmatic (scientific, logical) and the narrative (storied, imaginative). While paradigmatic thinking seeks truth through logic and verification, narrative thinking seeks meaning through story. A novel, therefore, is not simply a report on reality but an artistic construction that allows us to feel reality differently. Its power lies in rhythm, imagery, voice, and structure—the very qualities we associate with the arts.

John Dewey (1934) argued that art is not confined to galleries and concert halls but is part of everyday experience. A novel, in this sense, is art because it transforms ordinary life into heightened experience. Dewey's view allows us to see literary narratives as aesthetic events that demand active participation from the reader. Reading is not passive consumption; it is an engagement similar to listening to music or looking at a painting.

Louise Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory of reading also affirms this idea. She proposed that meaning does not reside solely in the text or in the reader but emerges through the encounter between them. This encounter is aesthetic when readers attend to language, rhythm, and imagery, not just to information. For teachers, this implies that literature classes should create space for students to "experience" texts as artworks rather than only decode them for examinations.

4. ART AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL

The use of art in teaching literature is not new, but it has gained renewed importance in the age of standardized curricula. Traditional approaches often reduce novels to moral lessons or thematic summaries, neglecting the creativity of narrative form. Art-based pedagogy resists this reduction by encouraging learners to respond creatively.

Research in arts education (Eisner, 2002; Greene, 1995) highlights several benefits of integrating art into teaching: it fosters imagination, develops critical perception, allows for multiple interpretations, and builds empathy. In language learning, art activities can improve fluency, vocabulary, and expressive confidence. When students sketch scenes from a novel, compose poems inspired by its imagery, or act out key moments, they are not only engaging artistically but also strengthening their language and interpretive skills.

5. NARRATIVE, EMPATHY, AND CRITICAL AWARENESS

Another crucial dimension of narrative as art is its ability to evoke empathy. Martha Nussbaum (1997) argues that literature engages our moral imagination by making us inhabit lives different from our own. This empathetic function is intensified when narratives are approached as art, because aesthetic experience invites emotional participation. Students reading Sleeping on Jupiter, for instance, may not only learn about trauma but also feel its fragmented, painful texture through the narrative's mosaic form.

6. LINKING THEORY TO PRACTICE

In practical terms, applying the narrative-as-art approach to literature teaching involves three steps:

- Recognition: Students first learn to notice artistic elements in narrative—voice, imagery, rhythm, structure. Teachers can guide them through close reading, pointing out how the narrative is constructed.
- Response: Students then respond to these elements through artistic activities—drawing, dramatizing, composing poems, or creating collages. These activities deepen engagement and make literature experiential.
- Reflection: Finally, students reflect on what these artistic engagements reveal about the novel's meaning and its relation to society. This ensures that art is not a diversion but a method of critical inquiry.

This framework combines aesthetic appreciation with critical literacy, ensuring that students enjoy the beauty of literature while also developing deeper understanding.

7. DEEPA ANAPPARA'S DJINN PATROL ON THE PURPLE LINE: NARRATIVE AS VISUAL ART

Deepa Anappara's Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line (2020) tells the story of Jai, a nine-year-old boy living in a basti near the city's purple metro line, where children begin to disappear one by one. On the surface, the novel is a mystery, with Jai imagining himself as a detective inspired by television shows. Yet beneath this playful framework lies a powerful commentary on poverty, invisibility, and urban neglect. What makes the novel striking, however, is not only what it tells but how it tells it—through the voice of a child who observes the world as if sketching it in bright colours, even when that world is full of darkness.

8. NARRATIVE AS SKETCHING AND CARTOONING

Jai's narration often resembles quick sketches or cartoon drawings. He notices small details, exaggerates features, and uses playful comparisons that make even grim realities appear vivid and strangely beautiful. For instance, when he describes the crowded alleys of the basti, his words have the quality of a child's doodle—crooked, colourful, but full of life.

In this way, the novel's narrative technique resembles visual art, particularly cartoons or street sketches. Cartoons often mix humour with critique, using exaggeration to highlight injustice. Similarly, Jai's childlike observations make poverty, crime, and corruption visible in a way that is both disarming and unsettling. Anappara thus transforms the narrative voice into an artistic tool that makes readers see the city through fresh, innocent eyes.

9. PEDAGOGICAL POSSIBILITIES

In the classroom, the artistic quality of Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line can be used to design creative activities. For example:

Sketching Scenes: Students can be asked to draw a scene described by Jai, such as the alleyways, the metro train, or the schoolyard. Comparing their drawings can spark discussion on how narrative paints images differently for each reader.

Cartoon Panels: Students could create a short comic strip retelling one part of the story, exploring how cartoon exaggeration can highlight humour or critique.

Child's Voice Writing: Learners may be asked to write a short narrative of their own surroundings in the voice of a child, using simple comparisons, humour, and sketches of detail. This improves language expression while deepening empathy.

Discussion on Media vs. Literature: Teachers could ask students to compare how a newspaper report would describe the missing children versus how Jai does. This highlights the role of narrative art in shaping perception.

These activities make literature interactive and experiential, showing students that novels can be as visual and creative as artworks on a page.

10. ART, EMPATHY, AND SOCIAL AWARENESS

By reading Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line as visual art, students also learn empathy. Jai's sketches are not just drawings of objects but portrayals of his friends, family, and neighbourhood. Through his eyes, readers see characters as full of dreams and flaws, rather than as anonymous "slum dwellers." This artistic vision humanizes marginalized lives, inviting students to reflect on issues of inequality, justice, and childhood vulnerability.

In this sense, the novel becomes both an artwork and a moral experience. Martha Nussbaum (1997) reminds us that literature can educate the "narrative imagination," enabling readers to imagine the lives of others. Anappara's novel, through its sketch-like narrative, achieves exactly this, making it a powerful tool for education.

11. ARUNDHATI ROY'S THE MINISTRY OF UTMOST HAPPINESS: NARRATIVE AS COLLAGE AND MURAL

Arundhati Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness (2017) is one of the most ambitious works of contemporary Indian fiction. It spans decades of Indian history, covering issues such as gender identity, communal violence, caste discrimination, insurgency, and political protest. Rather than following a linear plot, Roy arranges the novel as a mosaic of fragments—letters, diary entries, shifting perspectives, and multiple storylines. The effect is that of a vast mural or collage, where different pieces come together to form a complex picture of India.

12. NARRATIVE AS COLLAGE

The narrative structure of the novel resembles collage art. Collage, as a visual form, assembles different materials—photographs, newspaper clippings, scraps of fabric, paint—into a single frame. Each piece retains its individuality but contributes to a larger meaning. Similarly, Roy's novel incorporates different voices and forms of writing. We hear the story of Anjum, a hijra who builds a community in a graveyard; the accounts of Tilo, an architect entangled in Kashmir's conflict; and fragments of political history, from the Emergency to Gujarat riots.

The power of collage lies in juxtaposition. By placing fragments side by side, artists create new meanings through their interaction. In The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, Roy juxtaposes personal stories with political events, poetry with reports, humor with tragedy.

13. PEDAGOGICAL POSSIBILITIES

Teaching The Ministry of Utmost Happiness as collage and mural opens rich classroom possibilities:

Collage Activity: Students can create a physical or digital collage representing the novel's themes—using newspaper headlines, photographs, drawings, and quotes. This mirrors Roy's technique and helps learners see how meaning emerges from juxtaposition.

Mural Project: The class can design a collective mural depicting the different characters and conflicts. Each student contributes a piece, just as each voice contributes to the novel.

Fragmented Storytelling: Students can write short fragments (letters, diary entries, reports) about a shared theme, then arrange them together. This demonstrates how multiple voices create a richer narrative.

Discussion on History and Story: Teachers can ask students to compare how the novel narrates events like the Gujarat riots with how textbooks or news reports do. This highlights the power of narrative art to challenge official histories.

Such activities not only enhance comprehension but also cultivate collaborative creativity, critical literacy, and empathy.

14. SHUBHANGI SWARUP'S LATITUDES OF LONGING: NARRATIVE AS LANDSCAPE PAINTING AND MUSICAL COMPOSITION

Shubhangi Swarup's Latitudes of Longing (2018) is an extraordinary novel that defies traditional storytelling. Structured in four interconnected sections—"Islands," "Faultline," "Valley," and "Snow Desert"—it moves across diverse geographies of South Asia: the Andaman Islands, Nepal, Myanmar, and the Himalayas. Each section introduces new characters, but all are linked by themes of love, longing, and ecological connection. What unites the novel is not a continuous plot but an artistic vision that treats landscape itself as the central character.

15. NARRATIVE AS LANDSCAPE PAINTING

One of the most striking features of Latitudes of Longing is its painterly quality. Swarup describes mountains, forests, and oceans with the precision and depth of a landscape painter. Her language resembles brushstrokes: sometimes delicate, sometimes bold, always attentive to detail. For example, the descriptions of the Andaman seas shimmer with colour, while the Himalayan glaciers are rendered with austere beauty.

Landscape painting is not merely decorative; it conveys mood and meaning. In traditional art, landscapes often represent emotions—tranquillity, awe, melancholy. Similarly, Swarup's landscapes mirror the inner states of her characters. When characters experience love or grief, the surrounding environment reflects and intensifies those emotions. The novel thus becomes a canvas where human life and natural world are inseparable.

16. NARRATIVE AS MUSICAL COMPOSITION

The novel also resembles a musical composition, particularly a symphony in four movements. Each section has its own rhythm and tone—sometimes lyrical, sometimes tense, sometimes meditative. Together, they form a larger harmony that transcends individual characters.

Music often works through repetition and variation. In Latitudes of Longing, themes of longing, separation, and connection recur across different sections, but each time with variation. Just as a raga in Indian classical music explores a mood through improvisation, Swarup's narrative explores the mood of longing across diverse landscapes.

17. PEDAGOGICAL POSSIBILITIES

Teaching Latitudes of Longing as art offers unique creative strategies:

Landscape Painting Activity: Students can paint or sketch a scene described in the novel, such as the Andaman shoreline or Himalayan snowfields. They then compare their artworks with Swarup's verbal "painting," noticing how words can create visual images.

Soundscapes and Music: Teachers may ask students to create soundscapes—using instruments, voices, or digital apps—that represent the mood of each section. This highlights the musical rhythm of narrative.

Eco-Poetry: Students could write short poems inspired by the landscapes in the novel, blending personal emotion with environmental imagery.

Discussion on Human and Nature: A class debate may explore whether nature in the novel is merely background or a living character. This fosters ecological sensitivity.

Such activities combine artistic creativity with critical thinking, encouraging students to engage with the novel as both artwork and ecological text.

18. HANSDA SOWVENDRA SHEKHAR'S THE MYSTERIOUS AILMENT OF RUPI BASKEY: NARRATIVE AS ORAL PERFORMANCE AND FOLK ART

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey (2014) is set in the Santhal community of Jharkhand and tells the story of Rupi, a woman who suffers from a mysterious illness believed to be caused by witchcraft. The novel is remarkable for its grounding in the oral traditions and folk practices of the Santhal people. Its narrative style draws heavily on performance, folklore, and the rhythms of storytelling passed down through generations. As such, it can be read not only as a novel but also as an artwork shaped by oral performance and folk aesthetics.

19. NARRATIVE AS ORAL PERFORMANCE

The novel carries the tone and rhythm of oral storytelling. Sentences flow like speech rather than polished prose, with repetitions, digressions, and emphatic phrases that mimic the storyteller's voice. The narrator often addresses the reader directly, as if speaking to a gathered audience around a fire. This oral quality is not accidental—it reflects the Santhal tradition of storytelling, which values voice, memory, and communal listening.

In oral performance, meaning is conveyed not just through words but also through rhythm, tone, and gesture. Similarly, Shekhar's narrative is rhythmic, sometimes repetitive, sometimes dramatic, as though performed aloud. This creates intimacy between narrator and reader, bridging the gap between written literature and spoken word.

The mysterious ailment itself is narrated in the manner of folktales, where illness and misfortune are explained through supernatural causes. The community's belief in witches and spirits becomes part of the performance, blurring the boundary between realism and folklore.

20. PEDAGOGICAL POSSIBILITIES

Teaching this novel through the lens of art opens opportunities for performance-based and creative activities:

Storytelling Performance: Students can retell parts of the novel in oral form, using gestures, tone, and rhythm to capture the narrative style. This highlights the performative dimension of the text.

Role-Play and Dialogue: The novel's dramatic moments, such as confrontations over Rupi's ailment, can be enacted in the classroom. This makes students experience the text as theatre.

Comparative Discussion: Teachers can guide students to compare the oral narrative qualities of the novel with the polished, linear storytelling of mainstream fiction. This helps them appreciate the diversity of narrative art forms.

Performance-based tasks improve speaking and listening skills, while folk art activities expand vocabulary related to culture, ritual, and symbolism.

21. ANURADHA ROY'S SLEEPING ON JUPITER: NARRATIVE AS FRAGMENTED MOSAIC AND MEMORY ART

Anuradha Roy's Sleeping on Jupiter (2015) is a novel that deals with themes of violence, memory, trauma, and the search for belonging. It follows Nomi, a young woman returning to the town where she had been abused as a child, alongside the journeys of three older women and other characters who intersect with her story. Unlike the linear narratives of conventional fiction, Roy presents her novel as a series of fragments, memories, and shifting perspectives. This structure resembles a mosaic or a collage—an artistic form where meaning arises not from a single continuous line but from the juxtaposition of broken pieces.

22. NARRATIVE AS MEMORY ART

The novel can also be read as a work of memory art. Memory art is a form where creative expression becomes a way to preserve, represent, or transform memory—especially memories of trauma, loss, or displacement. In Sleeping on Jupiter, Nomi's attempt to face her past is mirrored in the novel's structure: the narrative itself becomes an act of remembering, with all its gaps, silences, and repetitions.

Roy uses imagery that reinforces the art of memory. For example, recurring motifs—such as birds, the sea, or religious symbols—act like visual anchors in the narrative, much like motifs in painting or sculpture. They remind readers of earlier fragments and link different parts of the story.

23. PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATIONS

Teaching Sleeping on Jupiter through the perspective of mosaic and memory art opens innovative classroom possibilities:

Memory Collage Exercise: Students can create collages—visual or textual—that represent fragmented memories. Using cut-out images, words, or short reflective paragraphs, they can simulate how stories are built from fragments.

Non-linear Writing Task: Learners can be asked to write short narratives that do not follow chronological order but instead move between past and present. This helps them understand the artistic potential of fragmentation.

Discussion on Silence: Teachers can guide students to notice what is left unsaid in the novel and reflect on why silence is powerful in literature. This develops interpretive skills and empathy.

These activities not only enrich literary appreciation but also promote creativity and critical thinking. They encourage students to see storytelling as a flexible art form that can accommodate brokenness, silence, and multiplicity.

24. CONCLUSION: NARRATIVE AS ART IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN FICTION AND ITS PEDAGOGICAL POTENTIAL

The five novels examined demonstrate the manifold ways in which narrative itself can function as art. Each text uses form, voice, and aesthetic strategy to move beyond storytelling and into the realm of artistic expression. For teachers of literature and language, these works provide fertile ground for rethinking pedagogy: rather than treating novels as fixed containers of meaning, they may be approached as dynamic artistic practices that invite creativity, performance, and critical engagement.

25. NARRATIVE AND PEDAGOGY

Approaching narrative as art reshapes pedagogy in three key ways:

Creativity in Learning: Students move from passive recipients of content to active creators. They sketch, dramatize, collage, or compose, using novels as inspiration. For instance, after reading Latitudes of Longing, learners may create soundscapes of natural landscapes; after The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey, they may perform oral storytelling in local dialects.

Critical Thinking: Analyzing form as art develops deeper interpretive skills. Students learn to ask: Why did the author choose this form? How does fragmentation, repetition, or visual imagery shape meaning? These questions train learners to recognize that form and content are inseparable.

Empathy and Cultural Awareness: Experiencing narrative through art fosters empathy. For example, recognizing silence in Sleeping on Jupiter or ritual imagery in The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey helps students appreciate cultural differences and understand trauma with sensitivity.

26. IMPLICATIONS FOR LITERATURE AND LANGUAGE TEACHING

By treating narrative as art, teachers can make classrooms more engaging, inclusive, and reflective of real-world complexity.

Language Development: Creative exercises—such as retelling, dramatizing, or visualizing—strengthen vocabulary, grammar, and expression. Students learn language not as abstract rules but as living practice.

Cross-Disciplinary Integration: Literature can connect with art, music, history, and sociology, creating interdisciplinary learning. For example, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness can be linked with political history, while Latitudes of Longing can open discussions on ecology.

Student-Centered Learning: Artistic approaches shift focus from teacher-led lectures to student-led exploration. Learners bring their own interpretations, art forms, and experiences, making the classroom dialogic rather than monologic.

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