

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Teaching Note

Visibility, Precarity and Public Spaces: Reading Matthew Arnold's "West London" in an Indian Classroom

by Saradindu Bhattacharya



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In 2022, I offered MA English students at the University of Hyderabad a course on Victorian Literature and Thought. Building on preliminary remarks on the explosive impact of the Industrial Revolution on the growth and movement of populations in England during the period, I took up Matthew Arnold's "West London" for discussion in class. The poem presents a brief scene, described from the point-of-view of an unobtrusive but observant speaker, featuring a tramp who lurks about Belgrave Square and sends her little daughter begging for alms. My aim was to explore the possibility of reading the figure of the tramp as one that evokes recognition as a *human* agent, even as she confronts the dehumanizing conditions of her survival in a hostile social environment. The students in my class – most of them having had some exposure to the English canon at the undergraduate level – were already familiar with the history and conventions of basic literary genres, and could thus immediately identify that Arnold presents a recurrent 'subject' of Victorian literature (the urban poor) in a form (the Petrarchan sonnet) that typically posits a personal problem or crisis in the first eight lines and then offers a contemplative (re)resolution to it in the next six lines. Arnold's poem, a student remarked, seemed to have thematic resonances with other Victorian texts they had already read (such as Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Cry of the Children"). I pointed out that the tramp in Arnold's poem was akin to solitary figures like prostitutes, peddlers, vagrants, leech gatherers, and discharged soldiers who populate the poetry of William Blake and William Wordsworth. The literary tradition of representing such socially marginalized characters, I suggested, might be seen as a symptom of the growing cultural anxiety over the rapidly changing economic and geographical landscape of England in the 19th century. Another student remarked that while Arnold's poem tackles the topical issue of urban poverty, it does so in a format and tone that was less "polemical" and more "intimate" than that adopted by many of his contemporaries. This sense of intimacy, I suggested, was partly a result of our expectations as readers of the genre of the sonnet itself, and partly also of the fact that Arnold's speaker prompts us to keenly observe the central character of the poem from his perspective.

The poem opens dramatically with a description of a tramp, in ragged clothes and bare feet, in the vicinity of one of London's poshest residential areas, Belgrave Square. The visual incongruity between character and setting, which is the result of 'seeing' a woman belonging to the lower class in a location that connotes class privilege, opened up the scope for analysing how 'space' might be central to understanding the representational strategy of the poem. The fact that the tramp is described as "ill, moody, and tongue-tied," observed a student, seems to project her presence in an otherwise prosperous, fashionable location as discordant, *out of place*, as it were. Another student commented that the tramp's "crouched" posture is potentially ambiguous, suggesting at the obvious level her own awareness of her illicit presence in her surroundings and her *defensive* attempt to be inconspicuous, but also physically resembling a hunting animal and thus bearing the faint trace of *offensive* menace. On the basis of these remarks, I suggested that the tramp's incongruous presence

is visually configured in terms of her body itself as a marker of her 'otherness,' a *sign* that defines (through contrast) but also threatens to contaminate the spatial sanctity of Belgrave Square as the domain of the English upper classes. The speaker's strategy of directing his (and through extension the reader's) visual attention to the figure of the tramp is thus a means of confronting that which would otherwise be rendered unseen, invisible by the class-specific regulation of urban spaces in Victorian England.

Building on this premise, another student observed that the dramatic element of the poem extends into the second quatrain, where we witness the tramp sending her little daughter across the street to beg from a group of passing labourers and the girl coming back after successfully completing her mission. The habitual, wordless interaction between the tramp and her daughter and the swiftness with which the task of begging is accomplished, indicate, in terms of physical 'action,' an ability on the part of these characters to negotiate the space of the city. I suggested that it might be useful to consider how the tramp, located literally on the margins of this setting (on the pavement), is paradoxically also the centre of the scene; in *showing* the reader her ability to navigate through the public space of the street, the speaker identifies her subordinate class status while simultaneously also ascribing to her a degree of agency that implicitly questions the very basis of such subordination: "The rich she had let pass with frozen stare." Insofar as she is the source/ agent of this moral judgement – one that the speaker interprets as a sign of the "spirit [that] towers" above her state – the tramp embodies an essential humanness that the rich fail to recognize but the reader must.

The tramp's moral agency, I further added, may be read through theories of mobility proposed by critics like Michel de Certeau, who highlights the ordinary, everyday "tactics" adopted by social "poachers" to utilize and circumvent institutional norms through which urban spaces are organized. One of the students, with a particular interest in social history, reminded us that while gypsies and vagabonds have been traditionally associated in literature with social disruption, during the Victorian period homelessness and begging were declared outrightly illegal under the Vagrancy Act of 1824. The tramp in Arnold's poem would therefore immediately auger the spectre of criminality to a Victorian audience.

To this I added that the anonymity of the tramp, a figure whose contiguous presence would trigger collective anxiety amongst the residents of Belgrave Square, is combined here with sympathetic characterization, wherein the speaker prompts a recognition of her *human* instinct for survival, especially as a mother. In fact, the presence of the quasi-family unit of the mother-child duo is precisely what unsettles the 'respectable' social order of Belgrave Square. The little girl, one of the students observed, demonstrates a certain precocious expertise in the act of begging (requiring no more than a touch from her mother as instruction) that suggests her acquired ability to successfully navigate through the public space of the street; this ability, necessary for survival within this social order, is also ironically a reminder to the reader that a child (the lowest common denominator for humanity, as it were) should ideally not

have to beg on the streets and thus serves as an ethical condemnation of the inhumanity of such an order. Thus, in the sestet of the poem, the speaker shifts from direct observation to contemplative social commentary and posits a clear binary opposition between “the unknown little” and “the unknowing great.” Having established a degree of sympathetic visual familiarity with the tramp through her dramatic portrayal in the octave, the speaker can now offer a critique of the class segregation between the rich and the poor through an alternate binary division within the same spatial domain – the passing labourers as “friends” versus the resident upper class “aliens.” The contrast between relations of cordiality (between the beggar and the labourers) and of animosity (between the rich and the poor) prompts an identification of humanness with the former, the unlawful occupants of the ordered space of Belgrave Square, whose rightful residents are shown as lacking in humanity. I proposed that this moral binary constitutes an imaginative, ethical reconfiguration of the titular space of Belgrave Square, its meaning(s) having been revised through the humanization of the unnamed tramp.

At this point, one of the students wondered if the tramp’s strategic negotiation with(in) the public space of the city street might yield insights into how certain sections of the population, such as migrant workers in our own immediate context (the Indian metropolis), are often seen in everyday contexts and yet never recognized as individuated human characters. This set off a discussion on how the presence of daily wage labourers, peddlers, and beggars (including children) in public spaces (railway stations, construction sites, traffic signals, street corners, and pavements) is a fairly common phenomenon in India, so much so that this goes unremarked, practically unnoticed, by members of the middle and upper classes who happen to occupy the same spaces but also enjoy the privilege of retreating into exclusive spaces such as restaurants, shopping malls, office buildings, and of course private houses and residential complexes. I argued that if the figure of the tramp in Arnold’s poem symbolizes *vulnerability* (not only to the elements of nature but also to social ostracism and legal punishment) and her visibility functions as an ethical call to the Victorian audience to address the problem of urban poverty, then the pervasive presence of similarly marginalized characters in the urban Indian landscape may symptomize a normalization of class disparity. Their presence in our everyday public spaces, a student observed, is socially regulated and rendered ‘harmless,’ even necessary – for instance, sanitation workers and food delivery agents are often required to wear certain uniforms, making them visually identifiable, while surveillance systems monitor the entry and exit of courier agents and domestic servants within the premises of residential complexes. These forms of institutional regulation, the student suggested, render them visible only as particular ‘types’ rather than individuals to those who benefit from their labour.

Another student ventured that there might be certain extraordinary circumstances under which the visibility of these ‘types’ of citizens becomes unsettling, even threatening. As an instance, she cited the news reports on the mass migration of manual and semi-skilled labourers following the sudden imposition of a nation-wide lockdown in India in March, 2020 in response to the outbreak of Covid-19. The media coverage of this migration (reportedly the biggest since the exodus of populations during the 1947 partition of the country), I proposed, might be seen as foregrounding (in a literal, visual sense) citizens whose occupation of public spaces is otherwise inconspicuous. Thus, visuals of thousands of migrant workers walking through empty national highways, railway tracks, and interstate check posts, created an unsettling spectacle, one that reminded the audience, safely ensconced in their homes fearing exposure to the deadly virus, of their own privilege, while at the same time also conjuring up the fear of contamination through the unregulated, illicit movement of the (now) hyper-visible ‘other’ through the spatial territory of the nation. One of the students interjected that the lockdown was imposed precisely with the intent to keep the body of the average Indian citizen immune to a highly contagious disease and thus the movement of workers *en masse* was potentially a source of infection; another student countered that not all bodies that share the space of the nation are equally vulnerable when we consider the fact that class disparity renders the existence of the average migrant worker in urban India particularly precarious when s/he confronts hunger and starvation due to lack of employment. The class recognized that the visual representation of migrant Indian workers, seen in the act of re-locating themselves away from the Indian city through the exercise of their bodies (traversing thousands of miles on foot), performs a role similar to the figure of the tramp in Arnold’s poem, in that both underscore the physical and social vulnerability of the urban poor, albeit in very different historical and cultural contexts; both serve as an unsettling reminder of their “precarious lives” (to borrow a phrase from Judith Butler), even as the audience, the relatively privileged Indian student studying English at a university, acknowledges, with Arnold’s speaker, the moral imperative to see the ‘other’ as “sharers in a common human fate.”

Saradindu Bhattacharya teaches at the Department of English, University of Hyderabad, India. He teaches postgraduate courses on New Literatures in English, Victorian Literature, Anglo-American Poetry, and Indian literatures and media. His research interests and publications are in the domains of popular culture, narratives of trauma, young adult literature, and the pedagogy of English in India.



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