



About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



---

ISSN 2278-9529  
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal  
[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## The Real Education

Hari Ravikumar

“Get out of the class!”

Mayur Sidhwani looked at the teacher with crestfallen eyes, as if he was seeking pardon. This was not the first time he had been caught. Desperate, he mumbled a few words of justification, but to no visible advantage. The teacher seized the Social Studies textbook from his hand.

“Shut up! Incurable copycats like you should be thrown out of the school. You are ruining your character and setting a bad example for the others. Mayur, get out of the class before I call the principal.”

Mayur’s emotional state shifted from helplessness to disgrace to frustration to anger. His face carried an irresponsible frown as he took the question paper and pencil box from the desk. Hauling his schoolbag on to his right shoulder from the bag shelf, he marched out of the door with noticeable insouciance.

He dragged his feet to the far end of the sports field and sat down under his favorite gulmohar tree. He opened his bag to put in the question paper and pencil box that he had been clasping in his hand all along. But before shoving the question paper inside, he looked at it once more. As he skimmed through the pages, he realized that he knew the answers to most questions in Geography. It was History that he always had trouble with. He had resorted to copying in utter despair. The teacher, sadly, apprehended the cheat just before he could reach the Geography section in the question paper.

Hot tears rolled down his cheeks and fell on his snow-white school uniform, making it pale, much like himself. His future looked bleak. On one side, he had a bunch of teachers who hated him and on the other, his ambitious parents wanted him to “*pad likh-kar bada aadmi bano*” (get educated and become an honorable man). They were eager that their son should not miss out on the education that they had been deprived of.

He spent some time crying under the tree. Then he took his bag and slowly walked home along the customary, uninteresting Seventh Avenue, kicking stones along the way.

“You’re back so early *beta*! How was the exam?”

Mayur looked at his mother’s caring face with a sense of guilt. He dare not tell her the truth though; that would be the end of him, and of her.

“Question paper easy *tha*! I finished early.”

With an expression of relief and happiness, his mother said, “*Bahut khoob! Chal*, have a wash and I’ll keep your lunch ready in the meantime.”

He ate his lunch in fearsome silence, avoiding any eye contact with his mother. The rest of the day, he spent turning the pages of his Mathematics book. He would look at a particular page for a while, and after he was convinced that he had looked at it for a sufficient period of time, he would turn to the next page.

During dinner, when his father asked him about the exam, Mayur sold the same story about the question paper being easy. He succeeded in putting on a cheerful countenance for the rest of the evening.

When he lay down on his bed that night, he began ruminating about the day’s events. He had cheated in an exam, angered his teacher, lost face in front of his friends, lied to his parents... he didn’t get a drop of sleep.

The next morning he was tired and unwell. He told his mother that he would write the exam in spite of being in poor health. His mother was worried but was mightily pleased about his determination.

Mayur gaped at the Mathematics question paper. He was ill, unprepared, and disturbed. After a while, he felt dizzy. He requested the teacher to grant him the permission to go and wash his face.

“I have a headache, madam. I couldn’t sleep very well last night.”

“A student is not allowed to leave the room in the middle of an exam. And specially cheats like you... God knows what you will do once I let you go out! Sit down and continue writing.” So saying, the teacher went away for some official work and another teacher came for invigilation.

The pain in Mayur’s forehead worsened.

He contemplated on requesting the teacher who had just entered, but was afraid of the consequences. He resumed gazing at the puzzling question paper and tried to solve some of the simpler problems.

“Excuse me ma’am!” cried a high pitched voice from the rear end of the class. It was the voice of Shanti Mukherjee, the class topper and cultural secretary of the student’s union. Because of her various academic and extra-curricular achievements, she became the archetypal teachers’ pet.

“What’s the matter, Shanti?” asked the teacher, in a tone laden with concern.

“I’m not feeling well ma’am. My stomach is writhing in pain. I’m afraid I will not be able to complete the paper.” The smoothness in her voice was like a block of butter sliding on a heated pan. Mayur was disgusted at her exaggerated expression of pain and the attention the teacher was giving her.

“Don’t worry, my child. Go to the staff room and ask Shantala ma’am for some pills. She always carries important medicines with her. Take some rest for a while and come back. I’ll give you extra time to complete the paper,” said the teacher.

“Thank you ma’am!” As she walked towards the door, she looked at Mayur and he gave her a cold look indicating that he was most annoyed with the situation. The teacher, a witness to the exchange of glances, was piqued.

“Mayur Sidhwani, it would be better for you to mind your own business.”

He felt a great urge to tell the teacher how he had been treated unfairly. It was common knowledge among students that Shanti used to secretly tell the answers to her friends during the exams. But logic couldn’t surmount the gender bias of the teachers. It would only lead to more taunt and trouble.

He managed to spend the remaining time coping with pain and fury. He walked out, a changed person. Marks meant everything. As long as a student did well in studies, he would be respected. Else, he had no identity, no care.

His attitude towards school life changed. He began working hard, and doing better in class. In cases where the subjects were hard, he simply devised better ways to copy. By the end of the year, he stood third in the class. This was his last year of schooling and it gladdened his heart that he outwitted the teachers just before leaving the school by getting high marks in the 10<sup>th</sup> standard public examination. He never came back to his school even to bid a final goodbye to his teachers.

Five years later, Mayur completed his bachelor’s degree in commerce. His father wanted him to become a chartered accountant, but Mayur was more interested in doing something of his own. He wanted to start a business, just like his father. One evening, Mayur was discussing his future plans with his father when the phone rang.

“Beta, there’s a call for you!” yelled his mother from the bedroom, with an element of surprise. It was most unusual that someone should call up the friendless Mayur. He quickly walked to the bedroom, and with raised eyebrows, he took the phone in his hands.

“Hey Mayur! This is Ramesh *yaar*... Ramesh Bolanath... I studied with you in school, remember?”

“Oh! Hi Rambo. How are you? It’s been a long time since I heard from you,” said Mayur with a feigned interest.

“I’m doing great, *yaar*... and how about... oh gosh, it’s 7:30 already... didn’t realize only... hey Mayur, sorry *yaar*, I’ve got to run... MBA tuitions *hai*. Just called to tell you that we’re having a class reunion. This Saturday. We’ll assemble near the school gate at noon. After we meet the teachers, we’ll go for lunch. We’ll have a long discussion then. OK? Bye!”

Even before Mayur could reply, the line got disconnected. In fact, he wanted to create some excuse and tell Rambo that he would be unable to make it. He always hoped that he would never have anything to do with that rotten institution once again. He wanted to forget all places, events and people, even remotely associated with Mata Saraswathi Gyan Mandir. It was history that he had trouble with.

“*Kiska* phone *tha*?” asked his mother.

“Ramesh, *ma*. School *ka* classmate.”

“So why did he call? Is he getting married?”

“No *ma*. They’re having a reunion at school on Saturday. I won’t go. Waste of time.”

His parents were rather surprised to hear that he did not want to go to his school again. They had not the faintest idea about his misdeeds. Also, he had never openly expressed his revulsion for the school. Mayur’s parents advised him to always respect the school and the teachers, whose invisible hands helped him secure high marks in his examinations. Fearing a disclosure of his checkered past, he agreed to go.

Mayur was at the appointed place on time. Lots of familiar faces. As the number became sufficiently large, they all rambled towards the staff room, engrossed in myriad private conversations. The teachers were very pleased to meet all the children and especially Mayur, because he had never come to the school after his 10<sup>th</sup> standard exams. They spoke kindly to him. They enquired of his academic and personal advances. Mayur presented a well-faked smile. But he was seething inside. The hypocrisy of his teachers made him sick. He told himself, “Look at them! When I was in school and needed real support, they scoffed at me. Now they pretend as if they are overjoyed to see me.”

After meeting most of the teachers, the whole group moved slowly towards the sports field. Suddenly, Mayur asked Rambo about Meenakshi ma’am. Rambo told him that she had gone abroad to meet her daughter. When they were in high school, Meenakshi ma’am became the principal of the school. Every time Mayur got caught copying in his exams, he would beg of her not to disclose it to his parents. She would shout at him, ridicule him, cajole him, advice him, but she never let his parents know about it. Mayur was always thankful to her for this.

After lunch, the group dispersed, promising to keep in touch and meeting more often. They had decided on meeting up during the Founders’ Day which was a month away. Mayur felt that he should join them on Founders’ Day, simply because he would have a chance to meet Meenakshi ma’am. He had met all the teachers, and did not want to be unfair to the one person who had helped him the most.

After school, Mayur never thought about his teachers or the school, but now he began pondering about the past. The more he thought of it, the more he felt pain and repugnance. He wanted revenge. Something that would teach the teachers a lesson. “The teachers robbed me of my childhood, so I will rob them of something equally important.” Looking back at the

miseries he had to go through in his school life, he felt that it was absolutely justified. The Founders' Day seemed a perfect time to accomplish his motive.

He carefully recollected the chain of events that occurred traditionally on Founders' Day. He mentally established certain time periods during which there would be nobody around in the school building; most of them would be either busy with arrangements or with performances. It would be during one of these time slots, that he would execute his plan.

July 5<sup>th</sup>. Founders' Day. An air of festivity and gaiety filled the school. Mayur walked towards the school building with cautious steps. The auditorium resounded with noise. Mayur stole a glance into the auditorium to see whether the situation was powerful enough to retain the attention of everyone inside for a minimum of half an hour. Convinced, Mayur began climbing the stairs leading to the staff room. As he neared the empty staff room, he felt a fierce stillness in the air. But before long, he brushed it away and entered the staff room.

Colored papers, napkins, ribbons, cellophane tapes, scissors, plastic bags and a host of other things were strewn around the place. But Mayur was only focused on what he wanted. He wore his gloves and carefully picked up all the marks registers and put it in his bag (he had decided that he would later set it on fire). Then, he checked the handbags of the teachers and polished off all the money. Greatly vexed by his past, he broke all the bamboo canes lying on the tables and threw them into the dust bin. Feeling a sense of completion, he triumphantly walked out of the staff room and went down the stairs unhurriedly, hoping to avoid any suspicion.

He began walking directly towards the gate rather than going back to the auditorium. Suddenly, he remembered that he wanted to meet Meenakshi ma'am. But, it would be a huge risk to go back. He continued walking towards the main gate across the sports field, still tangled in thoughts. In the midst of the chaos in his head, he heard a voice.

"Aren't you going to attend the program, young man?"

It was that same ringing voice with the tonal clarity and sincerity intact. It had to be Meenakshi ma'am. He turned around, looked at her serene face – unchanged over years – and slowly walked towards her.

"Good morning madam! Really nice meeting you," he said. A well-rehearsed smile adorned his face. "Mayur Sidhwani, batch of—"

"I remember you Mayur. You must be very angry with us!" she said, very bluntly, with an expression of regret. She had been distressed by the fact that students like Mayur had always misunderstood the teachers.

Mayur did not like the way she read his mind. He tried to hide his true feelings. He pretended as if he were really surprised to be asked such a question.

"Why madam? Why should I be angry with you? After all, you people have helped me so much."

"Your eyes are telling me a very different story."

Meenakshi Prabhakaran had always been a keen observer of children. Nothing could be concealed from her notice. Her sagacity, genial nature, quest for discipline and motherly qualities had endeared her to everyone in the school ever since she joined in the position of principal.

Mayur, feeling a bit pricked, resorted to a new strategy. "I used to be angry with the teachers once but not anymore, ma'am. I'm grateful for what you all have done for me."

"Yours words are sweet, but your eyes paint a bitter picture."

Mayur fell silent. Dry throat. Exhausted vocabulary. Stock of counterfeit emotions empty.

"Mayur, I have been teaching children for nearly fifty years now and I can tell you one thing for sure: the eyes never tell a lie."

Mayur now looked at the ground. His fingers began fidgeting. His whole being experienced immense discomfort.

She placed her hand on his shoulder and said calmly, yet firmly: “Look at me.”

With great hesitation, Mayur slowly raised his head.

The bespectacled lady resumed, “It is sad that you have misunderstood us. Also, I have to admit, we as teachers failed to express our true intentions – both to the students and their parents. Every year, many children join the school and many boys and girls leave the school. During enrolment, the parents are eager that their child gets high-quality education. They want their child to excel in studies, sports, arts, crafts, quizzes, debates, and become an all-rounder. Blindly pursuing a hundred and one things is not the aim of education. But I don’t like to discourage them because every parent comes with a glimmer of hope in their eyes. The hope that their child will be the best.”

Mayur’s eyes moistened. He understood the shortcoming in his parents’ standpoint. At the same time, he recognized their concern for him. He now began to wonder what the real objective of education was.

“Now, you might be thinking: What then is the aim of education? Education is not an equivalent word for literacy. It’s not just the development of certain intellectual and physical skills in a person. It’s not a measuring device to test your memory or other innate abilities. It’s not a privilege available only to intelligent and wealthy people. The purpose of schooling is not to form a system to relatively grade students and proclaim that some child is the best and some child is the worst. There is more to education than marks, medals and merit certificates. Human values. Inner fortitude. Development of character. This is what education really teaches you.”

Meenakshi Prabhakaran paused for a while, giving some time to the young man to sink in the words she was speaking. Mayur actually wished to vacate the place as soon as possible since he had all the stolen goods in his knapsack. On the other hand, he was drawn to this conversation.

Mayur cleared the lump in his throat. “If marks and medals are not the only thing, then why did teachers favor the kids who got high scores in their exams? Why was there blatant discrimination between boys and girls? Why did the teachers loudly announce the marks we used to score and then make fun of students like me? Some parents had given money for advertisements in the school magazine, and subsequently, the teachers showed extra kindness to their children. Why? The PT teacher would train students who were already good in sports and leave out the rest. The teachers used to focus on petty things like bad handwriting, poor memory, and inability to converse in good English. I am sorry to say, my experience in this school contradicts all your idealistic talk, madam.”

The young man, who had initially put a lot of effort to gather his courage, now was in his elements. The tone had shifted from that of hesitation to fury to anguish, and by the end, he was in tears.

Meenakshi Prabhakaran’s eyes dilated but she controlled her emotions. She collected her thoughts to provide a suitable reply to the young man’s questions. Mayur did not let her speak yet. He spoke through his tears.

“This big farce called school has not achieved anything useful yet. On the contrary, it destroyed my childhood. My parents wanted me to become that ‘best’ child, but I was not sufficiently intelligent. At school, I saw an ugly discrimination and wanted to prove a point. So I copied. The institution meant to teach human values became the very source to destroy it. The innocent child in me was killed and a shrewd cheat was born. I was caught red-handed a few times and everyone in the school hated me for that. I lost my reputation, my friends, my childhood.”

Mayur Sidhwani was weeping like a beaten up child. He continued in his broken voice, "And as if that were not enough, the horrid memories of my past have made me a thief and a maniac."

He ripped open his bag and showed her the stolen money and the marks' registers. He painfully narrated the just concluded act of secretly entering the staff room and carrying out his malicious plan. Then, he threw the bag on the ground, walked slowly towards a nearby stone bench, heavily sat on it and hid his face in his palms.

The elderly lady came and sat down next to him. She patted his back and consoled him. "Don't cry Mayur! You have not done anything wrong. We have. Sadly, the teachers themselves have the faintest idea of true education. I have spent many years trying to teach them but they fail to grasp the basics. The only thing I can do is apologize to you."

Mayur raised his head, surprised. "Why should you apologize, madam? It is I who should. I have committed a crime. You can call the police and hand me over to them."

"Poor, crazy child! What has gotten into your head that tells you that I'm going to call the police?"

Mayur looked at her, still in shock.

"I will try and answer your questions Mayur. Perhaps you might be in a better position to forgive yourself and then, forgive us."

She beckoned him to get up and they leisurely walked towards the far end of the sports field, near the trees. "Look at those trees. Do they discriminate between you and me? They don't. But, human beings are different. We do not possess that kind of purity."

She stopped in her tracks and turned towards Mayur. "Discrimination is human nature. Every human being seeks identity, a special place for herself. So she discriminates and compares. Also, people have a tendency to help and support those like themselves. Now, most of the teachers who taught you were women. Women, who struggled against many odds to get educated. Women, who fought tirelessly against gender-bias. Women, who had to take care of their homes and families. They naturally empathized with the girls. The teachers wanted to support the girls more and give them the empowerment that they had missed in their childhood. Because of the general dislike towards men and male chauvinism, they kept boys in their place."

Mayur listened to her words, absorbed.

"Another human tendency is to follow the path of least resistance. It is easier to teach a smart child or to coach an already athletic child. The measurement systems for these things were unfortunately marks and medals because there was no other way amidst a class of 70-80 children. It's also true that teachers themselves forget that external factors are only suggestive. True learning happens within. It doesn't happen by the will of the teacher but rather by the determination of the student. We, as teachers, are here just to remove obstacles and give you direction. We try to empower you, give you the tools for understanding so that you can fashion your life with your own hands. The external factors are only triggers that instigate you into studying your own self. Once you have strengthened yourself as an individual, how hard is it to learn your mathematics and cricket and geography and painting?"

"Yes, madam. You are very right. I remember a quote of Vivekananda that I read recently. He says, 'Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man.' What a beautiful thought, isn't it?"

"Yes, I love that quote. Because that's what education is. That's what it does. It makes you a complete person. Remember our school motto?"

*"Mens sana in corpore sano!"*

"Yes, 'a healthy mind in a healthy body.' Education makes you an active participant in the evolution of ideas and not a passive observer of results."

Mayur's face seemed to be glowing.

“Meenakshi madam, I had read many years ago, ‘Education is that which liberates’. Today, I have seen it happen in front of my eyes. I forgive myself and everyone else for all that has happened to me – as a mark of respect for what I have learnt today.”

“Mayur, look at the trees, look at the trees.”

Teacher and disciple were enveloped by a gentle breeze coming from the East.