

Language, Power and Educational Resistance in Keats Was a Tuber

Santosh Solanki

Ph D scholar

JNVU JODHPUR

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Abstract:

Indian English drama has significantly contributed to the representation of contemporary social realities, institutional structures, and psychological conflicts. Among the important contemporary dramatists, Poile Sengupta occupies a remarkable position because of her critical engagement with issues related to gender, identity, violence, and education. Her play *Keats Was a Tuber* presents a sharp critique of the modern educational system and exposes the rigid institutional structures that suppress creativity, individuality, and critical thinking. The play examines how language, discipline, and examination-oriented learning function as instruments of power and ideological control. Through irony, satire, and realistic classroom situations, Sengupta highlights the emotional and psychological consequences of rote learning and institutional pressure.

The title itself symbolises the absurdity of mechanical learning where students memorise information without understanding its meaning or relevance. The play demonstrates that education, instead of becoming a liberating process, often transforms into a mechanism of conformity and discipline. Drawing upon the theoretical perspectives of Paulo Freire, Michel Foucault, and feminist critics, this paper analyses the interconnected themes of language, power, institutional control, and educational resistance in the play. It further explores how Sengupta advocates an alternative educational model based on dialogue, creativity, intellectual freedom, and emotional understanding. The paper argues that *Keats Was a Tuber* remains highly relevant in contemporary society where educational institutions continue to prioritise examination performance and conformity over meaningful learning and critical awareness.

Keywords:Poile Sengupta, Indian English Drama, education, institutional power, language,resistance, feminism, rote learning, classroom politics, educational oppression.

Introduction

Indian English drama has evolved considerably in the post-independence period. Contemporary dramatists moved beyond mythological and historical themes and began focusing on social realities, psychological conflicts, gender discrimination, and institutional oppression. Modern playwrights attempted to expose the hidden structures of power operating within society and questioned the systems that shape human identity and behaviour. In this changing literary environment, Poile Sengupta emerged as a significant dramatic voice whose works critically examine patriarchy, violence, social conditioning, education, and women's experiences.

Poile Sengupta's plays are characterised by their social awareness and feminist sensibility. She focuses upon individuals trapped within oppressive social and institutional structures and exposes the emotional and psychological effects of domination and silence. Her dramatic writings consistently question authority and foreground resistance against systems of control. Among her important works, *Keats Was a Tuber* occupies a special place because it directly addresses the crisis of modern education and critiques the rigid examination-oriented educational system.

The title *Keats Was a Tuber* is deeply symbolic and ironic. The absurd statement immediately draws attention because it reflects the distortion of knowledge caused by rote learning. Students memorise information mechanically without understanding its meaning or significance. Literature, poetry, and language lose their emotional and intellectual value because the educational system reduces them to examinable facts and memorised answers. Sengupta uses this irony to criticise a culture where creativity and independent thinking are sacrificed for examination performance and institutional discipline.

The play presents the classroom as a site of power and ideological control. Education in the play is not portrayed as a liberating or creative process; instead, it becomes a mechanism of conformity and obedience. Students are trained to memorise and reproduce information without questioning authority. Teachers themselves become trapped within institutional expectations and are compelled to prioritise syllabus completion and examination results over genuine learning.

The educational structure represented in the play strongly resembles what Paulo Freire describes as the "banking model" of education. According to Freire, traditional education treats students as passive recipients into whom teachers deposit information. Such a system discourages dialogue and critical thinking because students are expected merely to store and reproduce knowledge. Freire observes: "Education thus becomes an act of

depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor.”\n\nThis idea becomes highly relevant in understanding Keats Was a Tuber. Sengupta repeatedly demonstrates that students are denied opportunities for creativity and independent interpretation. The system rewards memorisation and conformity rather than understanding and intellectual participation.

One of the most significant dialogues in the play sharply criticises rote learning:\n\n> “Real teaching. Not this cramming and vomiting out that you and your colleagues expect them to do. Memorise! By heart! Mug up!”\n\nThis statement captures the emotional frustration against an educational culture based upon mechanical repetition. The words “cramming” and “vomiting out” symbolise the artificial and lifeless nature of institutional learning. Knowledge becomes disconnected from emotional engagement and intellectual curiosity. Students are transformed into machines expected to reproduce information mechanically.

The play also reflects the theories of Michel Foucault regarding disciplinary institutions and power structures. According to Foucault, institutions such as schools, prisons, and hospitals function through surveillance, regulation, and normalisation. These institutions discipline individuals by controlling their behaviour, language, and actions. In Keats Was a Tuber, the classroom functions as a disciplinary space where students are constantly evaluated according to institutional standards. Examination marks become measures of intelligence and worth, while teachers are pressured to maintain discipline and produce academic results.

Sengupta reveals that educational institutions are deeply connected with ideological control. Schools do not merely impart knowledge; they shape behaviour and reinforce social hierarchies. Students are conditioned to obey authority, compete for success, and conform to institutional expectations. Creativity and questioning are discouraged because they threaten the stability of the system. The classroom therefore becomes a miniature version of society where power relations are continuously reproduced.

Language occupies a central place in the play because it functions as an instrument of authority and institutional domination. The educational system privileges prescribed forms of expression and suppresses alternative interpretations. Students are expected to produce “correct answers” rather than develop independent perspectives. Language loses its creative and communicative function and becomes merely a tool for passing examinations.

The absurdity of the title itself symbolises the distortion of language within institutional education. “Keats Was a Tuber” reflects how memorised information becomes meaningless when disconnected from understanding. Literature is no longer appreciated for its emotional and intellectual depth; instead, it is reduced to fragmented facts meant for examination purposes. Sengupta therefore critiques the commodification of language and knowledge within modern educational systems.

The play also explores the emotional consequences of institutional education. Students experience fear, anxiety, and alienation because of constant pressure to perform academically. Education becomes associated with competition and stress rather than intellectual excitement. Teachers too experience frustration because they are forced to function within rigid institutional boundaries. Many teachers recognise the limitations of rote learning, yet they remain trapped within academic expectations and administrative control.

Another important aspect of the play is its emphasis upon resistance. Although the educational system appears oppressive, Sengupta does not portray individuals merely as passive victims. The play foregrounds emotional rebellion, questioning, and dissatisfaction against mechanical learning. Characters challenge the obsession with memorisation and advocate meaningful education based upon creativity, understanding, and dialogue.

This resistance can again be understood through Paulo Freire’s concept of “critical consciousness.” Freire believed that education should empower individuals to recognise and challenge oppressive structures. Sengupta similarly suggests that true education must encourage intellectual freedom and social awareness rather than passive obedience.

The feminist dimensions of the play further deepen its significance. Sengupta’s critique of institutional authority intersects with feminist concerns regarding voice, individuality, silence, and resistance. Feminist theorists such as Elaine Showalter and bell hooks have argued that institutions often reproduce patriarchal structures by enforcing conformity and suppressing alternative voices. In *Keats Was a Tuber*, students are denied opportunities for self-expression because institutional authority values obedience and discipline over individuality and creativity.

The suppression of voice becomes an important feminist concern in the play. Students are expected to remain silent and passive, while institutional structures dominate classroom communication. Such dynamics reflect broader patriarchal systems where authority controls discourse and limits freedom of expression. Sengupta therefore presents educational resistance as not merely intellectual but also political and emotional.

The play's dramatic technique effectively strengthens its critique of modern education. Sengupta uses irony, satire, realism, and symbolism to expose the absurdity of examination-oriented learning. The title itself functions as a satirical symbol of distorted knowledge and mechanical memorisation. Through realistic classroom interactions and emotionally charged dialogues, Sengupta captures the frustrations of both students and teachers trapped within oppressive educational structures.

The classroom setting in the play symbolically represents larger social systems based upon hierarchy, competition, discipline, and conformity. Schools become spaces where individuals are trained to accept authority and suppress individuality. Sengupta critiques this social conditioning and advocates an alternative educational philosophy based upon creativity, empathy, dialogue, and intellectual participation.

The relevance of Keats Was a Tuber remains extremely significant in contemporary society. Even today, educational systems across the world continue to prioritise examination performance, rankings, and competitive success. Students often experience psychological pressure, anxiety, and emotional alienation because of academic expectations. Creativity and critical thinking are frequently neglected in favour of standardised learning methods. Sengupta's critique therefore continues to resonate strongly in present educational debates.

The play also remains relevant because it questions the larger purpose of education. Sengupta challenges audiences to consider whether education should merely produce economically successful individuals or nurture emotionally and intellectually aware human beings. Her play clearly supports the latter vision and advocates a humane and democratic model of learning.

Thus, Keats Was a Tuber emerges as a powerful critique of institutional education and its hidden structures of domination. Through its exploration of language, power, discipline, and resistance, the play exposes the dehumanising nature of modern educational systems. At the same time, it offers hope for transformation by emphasising creativity, communication, emotional understanding, and intellectual freedom. Sengupta's play therefore remains an important contribution to Indian English drama and contemporary educational discourse.

Conclusion

Poile Sengupta's Keats Was a Tuber is a powerful dramatic critique of modern educational institutions and their hidden mechanisms of control. Through satire, irony, realistic dialogue, and symbolic representation, the play exposes the failures of examination-

oriented education and the emotional violence created by rote learning and institutional discipline. Sengupta demonstrates that education, instead of becoming a liberating process, often functions as a structure of conformity, surveillance, and ideological conditioning.

The play reveals the close relationship between language and power within educational systems. Language loses its creative and intellectual significance because it is reduced to memorisation and mechanical repetition. Students are expected to produce standardised answers rather than develop independent interpretations. Literature becomes fragmented into examinable information, and genuine learning disappears beneath institutional expectations and academic pressure.

Drawing upon the ideas of Paulo Freire and Michel Foucault, the play presents schools as disciplinary spaces where authority is maintained through surveillance, regulation, examinations, and evaluation. Students are conditioned to obey rules, compete for success, and conform to institutional standards. Teachers themselves become victims of the same system because they are pressured to prioritise results over creativity and understanding.

At the same time, Sengupta foregrounds the importance of educational resistance. Through questioning, emotional frustration, and criticism of rote learning, the play advocates meaningful education based upon dialogue, creativity, empathy, and intellectual freedom. The desire for genuine teaching becomes a form of rebellion against institutional oppression.

The feminist dimensions of the play further deepen its significance. Sengupta highlights how educational systems suppress individuality, silence alternative voices, and reinforce structures of domination. Her critique therefore extends beyond the classroom and becomes a larger commentary upon social and institutional power.

The relevance of *Keats Was a Tuber* remains highly significant in contemporary society where educational institutions continue to prioritise performance, competition, and examination success over emotional and intellectual development. Sengupta's play encourages audiences to rethink the purpose of education and advocates a humane, democratic, and liberating model of learning. Thus, the play stands as an important contribution to Indian English drama and continues to inspire critical reflection upon education, power, and freedom.

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