
STORIES THAT TEACH: MOVIES, MYTHOLOGY, AND MEDIA AS PATHWAYS TO LEARNING, LOVE, AND LIBERATION

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Abstract

This paper reimagines education as a transformative journey shaped by learning, love, and liberation, drawing upon insights from literature, cinema, mythology, and contemporary media. Moving beyond traditional classroom paradigms, the study argues that stories—whether textual, visual, or oral—function as powerful pedagogical tools that expand learners’ epistemic horizons and deepen their understanding of self and society. Literary thinkers like Tagore, Freire, and bell hooks illuminate how love and dialogue nurture critical consciousness, while films such as *Dead Poets Society*, *Taare Zameen Par*, and *The Pursuit of Happyness* demonstrate how cinematic narratives can cultivate empathy, reshape identity, and inspire intellectual awakening. Similarly, mythological frameworks—from the Mahabharata’s ethical dilemmas to Greek myths of transformation—offer symbolic maps for learners to navigate moral ambiguity, resilience, and the quest for knowledge.

In an age defined by digital saturation, media becomes both a site of meaning-making and a space for liberation, enabling students to inhabit multiple worlds of knowing. Through multimodal engagement—reading texts, viewing films, interpreting myths, and navigating media ecologies—learners encounter education as an unfolding process of becoming. This abstract argues that such an integrative pedagogy fosters holistic growth, encouraging students to merge reason with imagination, intellect with emotion, and individuality with collective responsibility. Ultimately, this study positions education as a creative, relational, and emancipatory practice, where love acts as a radical force, stories become mirrors and windows, and learning evolves into a pathway toward liberation, belonging, and human flourishing.

Keywords: Transformative Education, Multimodal Pedagogy, Mythology and Media, Critical Consciousness, Holistic Learning

Introduction

Stories have always been central to human learning and cultural transmission. Long before formal education systems developed, societies used myths, folktales, and legends to teach values, explain the world, and guide human behaviour. Scholars of literature and culture emphasize that storytelling is not merely entertainment but a powerful pedagogical tool. As Bruno Bettelheim observes, “Through stories children learn to understand themselves and the world around them” (Bettelheim, 1976). Thus, narratives function as moral, emotional, and intellectual guides that shape human consciousness. Mythology in particular plays an important role in preserving cultural wisdom and ethical frameworks. Myths offer symbolic explanations of life, nature, and human struggle, allowing communities to transmit beliefs across generations. Joseph Campbell famously remarks that “Myths are public dreams, dreams are private myths” (Campbell, 1949). Through mythological narratives, societies communicate ideals such as courage, sacrifice, justice, and devotion. Characters from myth—whether from Greek epics, Indian epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, or indigenous traditions—become archetypes that reflect universal human experiences.

In modern times, cinema and visual media have emerged as powerful storytelling platforms that continue this tradition of teaching through narrative. Films combine visual imagery, sound, and emotion to communicate ideas in compelling ways. Film theorist Robert Stam notes that cinema is “a powerful medium through which cultural values, ideologies, and social realities are represented and contested” (Stam, 2000). Movies therefore serve as contemporary myths that shape popular imagination and influence public discourse. Media in the digital age further expands the reach of storytelling by connecting global audiences. Television, documentaries, social media, and streaming platforms allow diverse voices and experiences to be shared widely. Henry Jenkins argues that modern media culture enables participatory storytelling where audiences actively engage with narratives rather than simply consume them (Jenkins, 2006). This participatory nature of media encourages dialogue, critical thinking, and new forms of learning.

Stories also play a vital role in nurturing empathy and emotional intelligence. Martha Nussbaum highlights that literature and narrative imagination help individuals “cultivate the ability to see the world from another person’s point of view” (Nussbaum, 1997). Through stories of struggle, love, and resilience, audiences develop deeper understanding of human relationships and social realities. Therefore, *Stories That Teach: Movies, Mythology, and*

Media as Pathways to Learning, Love, and Liberation explores how narratives function as transformative tools in society. By blending traditional myths with modern cinematic and media narratives, stories become pathways to knowledge, compassion, and critical awareness. They encourage individuals to question injustice, imagine alternative possibilities, and move toward personal and collective liberation.

Storytelling as a Pedagogical Tool

Storytelling in cinema often functions as a powerful pedagogical tool by presenting ideas about learning, creativity, and personal growth through compelling narratives and relatable characters. Films such as *Dead Poets Society*, *Taare Zameen Par*, and *The Pursuit of Happyness* demonstrate how storytelling can challenge traditional educational norms and inspire learners to discover their own potential. In *Dead Poets Society* (1989), the character of John Keating encourages students to think independently and value the power of literature and imagination. His famous advice, “Carpe diem. Seize the day, boys. Make your lives extraordinary” (*Dead Poets Society*), reflects the transformative role of education when it moves beyond rote learning toward self-discovery and creativity. The film uses narrative and poetry to emphasize that true education should awaken curiosity and critical thinking rather than impose rigid conformity. Similarly, the Indian film *Taare Zameen Par* (2007) highlights the importance of empathy and individualized learning in the educational process. Through the story of Ishaan, a child with dyslexia, the film critiques conventional schooling systems that fail to recognize diverse learning abilities. The teacher Ram Shankar Nikumbh reminds parents and educators that every child possesses unique talents, affirming that “Every child is special” (*Taare Zameen Par*). This narrative demonstrates how compassionate teaching and creative methods—such as art and storytelling—can unlock a child’s confidence and intellectual growth. In another inspirational narrative, *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006) portrays the struggles of Chris Gardner, whose perseverance and determination serve as a powerful lesson about resilience and hope. In a memorable scene, Gardner advises his son, “Don’t ever let somebody tell you you can’t do something. Not even me” (*The Pursuit of Happyness*). This statement encapsulates the film’s message that education and personal development are closely linked to belief in one’s abilities and the courage to pursue dreams despite adversity. Through emotionally engaging storytelling, these films illustrate that cinema can function as an educational medium that teaches values such as creativity, empathy, resilience, and self-belief. By connecting audiences with the struggles and aspirations of characters, storytelling in film becomes a dynamic pathway for learning, encouraging viewers to reflect on their own lives and to reimagine education as a process of liberation and self-realization.

Mythology as Cultural Memory

Mythology as cultural memory functions by preserving collective values, struggles, and aspirations through stories that societies continue to reinterpret across generations. In the contemporary world, cinema often performs a role similar to mythology by retelling archetypal narratives of the hero’s journey, struggle, transformation, and moral awakening. Films such as *Dead Poets Society*, *Taare Zameen Par*, and *The Pursuit of Happyness* reflect this mythic dimension by presenting stories that resonate with universal human experiences and cultural ideals. In *Dead Poets Society* (1989), the character of John Keating acts as a mentor figure comparable to the wise guide found in many mythological traditions. Through poetry and critical thinking, he inspires his students to question conformity and pursue meaningful lives. His invocation of the phrase “Carpe diem. Seize the day, boys. Make your lives extraordinary” (*Dead Poets Society*) reflects the timeless mythic message of embracing life with courage and purpose. Such narratives echo what Joseph Campbell describes as the archetypal structure of myth, where individuals must awaken to their own potential and undertake a journey of self-realization (Campbell 30). Similarly, the Indian film *Taare Zameen Par* (2007) reflects cultural memory by portraying the struggle of a misunderstood child whose creative spirit is suppressed by rigid social expectations. The teacher Nikumbh becomes a nurturing guide who recognizes Ishaan’s artistic abilities and encourages him to express himself freely. His affirmation that “Every child is special” (*Taare Zameen Par*) echoes the mythic motif of recognizing the hidden gifts within individuals who are often marginalized or misunderstood. The film thus connects contemporary educational concerns with deeper cultural ideals about compassion, individuality, and the nurturing role of the teacher. Likewise, *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006) presents a modern narrative of perseverance that resembles the mythological hero’s journey. Chris Gardner’s struggles with poverty, homelessness, and social obstacles represent the trials that heroes often face before achieving transformation and success. In a poignant moment, Gardner tells his son, “Don’t ever let somebody tell you you can’t do something... You got a dream, you gotta protect it” (*The Pursuit of Happyness*). This statement reflects a universal mythic lesson about determination and faith in one’s destiny. Through such narratives, cinema preserves cultural memory by presenting contemporary versions of timeless myths about struggle, mentorship, and self-discovery. As Campbell argues, myths continue to guide societies by providing symbolic frameworks that help individuals understand their place in the world (Campbell 4). Therefore, films like *Dead Poets Society*, *Taare Zameen Par*, and *The Pursuit of Happyness* function as modern

myths that transmit cultural values, inspire personal growth, and keep alive the collective memory of resilience, creativity, and hope.

Cinema as Contemporary Myth

Cinema often functions as a form of **contemporary mythology**, presenting narratives that echo the archetypal struggles, transformations, and moral lessons traditionally found in mythological stories. Through powerful visual storytelling, films construct modern myths that guide audiences toward reflection on identity, aspiration, and ethical values. Films such as *Dead Poets Society*, *Taare Zameen Par*, and *The Pursuit of Happyness* illustrate how cinema preserves and reshapes mythic themes in a modern social context. In *Dead Poets Society* (1989), the figure of John Keating resembles the mythic mentor or guide who encourages the hero's awakening. By urging students to think independently and embrace life passionately, Keating challenges rigid institutional structures and inspires self-discovery. His memorable declaration, "Carpe diem. Seize the day, boys. Make your lives extraordinary" (*Dead Poets Society*), reflects a timeless mythic call to action that encourages individuals to live authentically and pursue meaningful lives. Such narratives correspond to what Joseph Campbell describes as the universal "hero's journey," in which the individual must break away from conformity and discover a deeper sense of purpose (Campbell 23). Similarly, the Indian film *Taare Zameen Par* (2007) presents the story of Ishaan, a child struggling with dyslexia, whose creative potential is misunderstood within a rigid educational system. The teacher Ram Shankar Nikumbh acts as a mythic guide who recognizes the hidden abilities of the child and nurtures his self-confidence. His empathetic assertion that "Every child is special" (*Taare Zameen Par*) reflects a mythic belief in the unique destiny and potential within each individual. Through this narrative, the film constructs a modern myth about compassion, creativity, and the transformative power of education. Likewise, *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006) portrays the journey of Chris Gardner, whose perseverance through poverty and adversity mirrors the trials faced by mythological heroes. Gardner's advice to his son, "Don't ever let somebody tell you you can't do something... You got a dream, you gotta protect it" (*The Pursuit of Happyness*), reinforces a universal mythic lesson about resilience and faith in one's aspirations. Through such narratives, cinema becomes a cultural medium that reinterprets mythological patterns within contemporary social realities. As Robert Stam observes, films often function as "cultural texts that articulate the dreams, conflicts, and ideologies of society" (Stam 12). Therefore, movies like *Dead Poets Society*, *Taare Zameen Par*, and *The Pursuit of Happyness* can be understood as contemporary myths that inspire audiences by presenting stories of transformation, mentorship, and the pursuit of human potential. These cinematic narratives preserve mythic values while adapting them to modern contexts, demonstrating how storytelling in film continues to shape cultural imagination and moral understanding.

Media and Digital Storytelling

Media and digital storytelling have transformed the way narratives circulate, connect cultures, and reinterpret traditional mythic structures in contemporary contexts. In the digital age, films no longer exist only as cinematic texts; they become part of a larger media ecosystem that includes streaming platforms, social media discussions, educational forums, and digital fan communities. Through these interconnected media spaces, stories acquire new meanings and reach wider audiences. Films such as *Dead Poets Society*, *Taare Zameen Par*, and *The Pursuit of Happyness* demonstrate how cinematic narratives interact with media culture to reinforce mythic ideas about learning, struggle, and personal transformation. In *Dead Poets Society* (1989), John Keating's inspirational call—"Carpe diem. Seize the day, boys. Make your lives extraordinary" (*Dead Poets Society*)—has circulated widely across digital platforms as a motivational quote, illustrating how media technologies extend the pedagogical influence of film narratives beyond the screen. Through online discussions, educational blogs, and video clips, the film's message about intellectual freedom and self-expression continues to inspire learners worldwide. Henry Jenkins explains that modern media culture enables "participatory storytelling," where audiences actively reinterpret and share narratives through digital networks (Jenkins 3). Similarly, the Indian film *Taare Zameen Par* (2007) has gained renewed significance through digital media, where clips, songs, and discussions about dyslexia and inclusive education are widely shared. The teacher Nikumbh's affirmation that "Every child is special" (*Taare Zameen Par*) has become a widely circulated message across educational media, reinforcing the film's emphasis on empathy and creative pedagogy. Through digital storytelling platforms, the narrative resonates with parents, educators, and students who reinterpret the film's message within contemporary debates on inclusive learning. Likewise, *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006) illustrates how cinematic storytelling intersects with media narratives about perseverance and success. Chris Gardner's advice to his son—"Don't ever let somebody tell you you can't do something... You got a dream, you gotta protect it" (*The Pursuit of Happyness*)—frequently appears in motivational media content, social media posts, and digital storytelling spaces that celebrate resilience and determination. Such circulation demonstrates how cinema contributes to a collective cultural memory that echoes mythological archetypes of struggle and triumph. As Robert Stam observes, cinema functions as a cultural text that reflects and shapes social values within broader media environments (Stam 12). Consequently, the interconnection

of movies, mythology, and media creates a dynamic storytelling network in which narratives evolve across platforms while preserving their symbolic meanings. Through digital dissemination and participatory engagement, films like *Dead Poets Society*, *Taare Zameen Par*, and *The Pursuit of Happyness* continue to function as modern mythic stories that inspire learning, empathy, and perseverance in contemporary society.

Stories and Emotional Intelligence and Social Change

Stories in cinema often play a crucial role in nurturing emotional intelligence and functioning as instruments of social change, as they allow audiences to engage deeply with human struggles, relationships, and moral dilemmas. Through emotionally resonant narratives, films encourage viewers to develop empathy, self-awareness, and social responsibility. Movies such as *Dead Poets Society*, *Taare Zameen Par*, and *The Pursuit of Happyness* demonstrate how storytelling can inspire emotional growth while simultaneously challenging dominant social structures. In *Dead Poets Society* (1989), the teacher John Keating transforms the rigid academic environment of Welton Academy by encouraging students to value individuality, creativity, and emotional expression. His famous exhortation, “Carpe diem. Seize the day, boys. Make your lives extraordinary” (*Dead Poets Society*), serves not only as a motivational message but also as a call to cultivate self-awareness and emotional courage. By introducing poetry as a medium of personal reflection, Keating helps students understand their feelings and aspirations, highlighting the role of storytelling and literature in developing emotional intelligence. Martha Nussbaum argues that narrative imagination enables individuals to “cultivate the ability to see the world from another person’s point of view” (Nussbaum 10), and the film vividly illustrates this process as students learn to empathize with one another and challenge oppressive authority. Similarly, the Indian film *Taare Zameen Par* (2007) foregrounds emotional intelligence in the educational context by portraying the struggles of Ishaan, a child with dyslexia who faces misunderstanding and neglect within a rigid schooling system. The compassionate teacher Ram Shankar Nikumbh recognizes the child’s emotional and creative needs, reminding parents and educators that “Every child is special” (*Taare Zameen Par*). Through this narrative, the film critiques conventional educational practices and advocates for a more inclusive and empathetic approach to teaching. By raising awareness about learning disabilities and the importance of emotional support, the film has contributed significantly to public discussions about child psychology and educational reform in India. Likewise, *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006) presents a deeply moving narrative of perseverance and paternal love that emphasizes emotional resilience in the face of adversity. Chris Gardner’s advice to his son, “Don’t ever let somebody tell you you can’t do something... You got a dream, you gotta protect it” (*The Pursuit of Happyness*), reflects the film’s central message about self-belief and determination. Gardner’s journey through poverty and hardship demonstrates how emotional strength and hope can inspire individuals to overcome systemic barriers. As Robert Stam notes, cinema often functions as a cultural medium that reflects social realities while simultaneously influencing public attitudes and values (Stam 12). Through their emotionally compelling narratives, these films encourage audiences to rethink societal norms related to education, success, and human potential. Consequently, *Dead Poets Society*, *Taare Zameen Par*, and *The Pursuit of Happyness* illustrate how cinematic storytelling can cultivate emotional intelligence while also acting as a catalyst for social awareness and transformation.

Educational Implications

The narratives presented in films such as *Dead Poets Society*, *Taare Zameen Par*, and *The Pursuit of Happyness* offer significant educational implications, demonstrating how storytelling can reshape pedagogical practices and inspire more inclusive, empathetic, and learner-centered approaches to education. Cinema, as a powerful narrative medium, enables educators and learners to reflect critically on the purpose and methods of teaching. In *Dead Poets Society* (1989), the character of John Keating challenges the rigid and authoritarian system of Welton Academy by encouraging students to engage with literature as a means of personal discovery and intellectual freedom. His famous exhortation, “Carpe diem. Seize the day, boys. Make your lives extraordinary” (*Dead Poets Society*), highlights the importance of encouraging students to think independently and pursue their passions. By asking his students to view the world from different perspectives—such as standing on desks to change their vantage point—Keating illustrates the pedagogical value of creativity, critical thinking, and experiential learning. Educational theorists emphasize that learning becomes meaningful when students actively interpret knowledge rather than passively receive it, a concept closely aligned with the narrative of the film. Similarly, the Indian film *Taare Zameen Par* (2007) provides profound insights into inclusive education by addressing the challenges faced by children with learning differences. Through the story of Ishaan, a child with dyslexia who is misunderstood by his teachers and parents, the film critiques conventional educational systems that prioritize uniform academic performance over individual potential. The compassionate teacher Ram Shankar Nikumbh recognizes Ishaan’s artistic abilities and reassures him with the message that “Every child is special” (*Taare Zameen Par*). This statement underscores the educational principle that effective teaching requires empathy, patience, and recognition of diverse learning styles. By highlighting the importance of creative expression and emotional support, the film

advocates for educational reforms that accommodate individual differences and nurture students' unique talents. Likewise, *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006) offers educational lessons about perseverance, resilience, and the transformative power of determination. Chris Gardner's struggles with poverty and homelessness demonstrate that education and personal growth often occur outside formal classroom settings. His advice to his son—"Don't ever let somebody tell you you can't do something... You got a dream, you gotta protect it" (*The Pursuit of Happyness*)—reflects the importance of self-belief and motivation in the learning process. The film highlights the role of mentorship, hard work, and lifelong learning in achieving personal success despite social and economic obstacles. As Robert Stam observes, cinema often serves as a cultural medium that reflects societal values while influencing audiences' perceptions of education and human potential (Stam 12). Consequently, these films collectively illustrate how storytelling can inform educational discourse by emphasizing creativity, empathy, resilience, and critical thinking as essential components of meaningful learning. Through their powerful narratives, *Dead Poets Society*, *Taare Zameen Par*, and *The Pursuit of Happyness* encourage educators and students alike to reimagine education not merely as the transmission of information but as a transformative process that empowers individuals to realize their fullest potential.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of films such as *Dead Poets Society*, *Taare Zameen Par*, and *The Pursuit of Happyness* demonstrates that storytelling in cinema functions as far more than a form of entertainment; it operates as a powerful cultural and pedagogical force that shapes human understanding, emotional growth, and social awareness. Through compelling narratives and memorable characters, these films illustrate how stories can serve as pathways to learning, love, and liberation. By presenting struggles related to education, personal identity, creativity, and perseverance, they resonate deeply with audiences and invite reflection on the values that guide individual and collective life. Storytelling in cinema thus becomes a dynamic medium through which societies examine their ideals, confront their limitations, and imagine possibilities for transformation.

One of the central insights emerging from these narratives is the role of storytelling as a pedagogical tool that challenges rigid educational structures and promotes learner-centered approaches. *Dead Poets Society* emphasizes the transformative potential of education that encourages critical thinking, creativity, and intellectual freedom. John Keating's exhortation, "Carpe diem. Seize the day, boys. Make your lives extraordinary" (*Dead Poets Society*), symbolizes the call for students to move beyond conformity and pursue meaningful lives through self-discovery and reflection. Similarly, *Taare Zameen Par* foregrounds the importance of empathy and inclusivity within the educational system, highlighting how rigid academic expectations often overlook the unique talents of children. The film's message that "Every child is special" (*Taare Zameen Par*) underscores the necessity of recognizing diverse learning abilities and nurturing creativity through compassionate teaching. In *The Pursuit of Happyness*, the narrative of Chris Gardner reinforces the value of perseverance, determination, and hope in overcoming adversity. His advice to his son—"Don't ever let somebody tell you you can't do something... You got a dream, you gotta protect it" (*The Pursuit of Happyness*)—reflects a universal lesson about resilience and the courage to pursue one's aspirations despite social and economic obstacles.

Beyond their educational messages, these films also function as contemporary myths that preserve cultural memory and articulate universal human experiences. Like traditional myths, they depict journeys of struggle, transformation, and self-realization that resonate across cultures and generations. As Joseph Campbell observes, mythological narratives guide individuals by offering symbolic frameworks that illuminate the meaning of life and the challenges of human existence (Campbell 4). In a similar way, modern cinema reinterprets these mythic patterns within contemporary contexts, presenting stories that inspire audiences to confront injustice, embrace individuality, and seek personal fulfillment. Through their narratives, these films reaffirm timeless values such as courage, compassion, and perseverance while adapting them to the realities of modern society.

Furthermore, the role of media and digital storytelling has amplified the reach and impact of such cinematic narratives. In the contemporary media landscape, films circulate across digital platforms, streaming services, and social networks, enabling audiences to engage with stories in interactive and participatory ways. As Henry Jenkins notes, modern media culture encourages audiences to reinterpret and share narratives across multiple platforms, thereby creating a participatory environment where storytelling becomes a collective experience (Jenkins 3). Quotes, scenes, and themes from films like *Dead Poets Society*, *Taare Zameen Par*, and *The Pursuit of Happyness* are widely circulated in educational forums, motivational content, and digital discussions, demonstrating how cinematic stories continue to influence public discourse on learning, creativity, and resilience. This interconnection of movies, mythology, and media highlights the evolving nature of storytelling in the digital age, where narratives transcend traditional boundaries and inspire global audiences.

Equally significant is the capacity of these films to cultivate emotional intelligence and promote social change. Through their portrayal of complex human experiences, they encourage viewers to empathize with the struggles of others and reflect on the social structures that shape individual lives. Stories that depict misunderstood children, struggling parents, or visionary teachers reveal the emotional dimensions of education and human relationships. As Martha Nussbaum argues, narrative imagination plays a vital role in enabling individuals to understand the perspectives of others and develop empathy for diverse experiences (Nussbaum 10). By engaging audiences emotionally, these films encourage a deeper awareness of social inequalities and inspire efforts to create more compassionate and inclusive communities.

Ultimately, the study of films such as *Dead Poets Society*, *Taare Zameen Par*, and *The Pursuit of Happyness* demonstrates that storytelling remains a powerful medium for shaping cultural consciousness and guiding human development. These narratives remind audiences that education is not merely the acquisition of knowledge but a transformative process that nurtures creativity, empathy, and resilience. Through their portrayal of inspirational teachers, struggling learners, and determined individuals, the films reaffirm the enduring power of stories to challenge injustice, celebrate human potential, and inspire hope. In this sense, storytelling in movies, mythology, and media continues to serve as a profound pathway toward learning, love, and liberation, offering individuals the courage to imagine and create a more humane and equitable world.

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