

DISCIPLINING ENGLISH LITERARY STUDIES IN INDIA: A CRITIQUE

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The present paper traces the history of English literary studies in India through an interrogation of the disciplinary formation of the subject in the country of its origin, the British intervention in the area of education in India in terms of implementing English literature as a subject for study and the contours of how their course of action impacted the developmental trajectory of the subject in India. The paper examines how, even as academics engage in ideological thrust and parry with colonization and its fallouts, the epistemological space of English literary studies in the country continues to reflect its colonized character. Even as we debate the future of English literary studies in India today, an appraisal of the syllabi of Indian universities, as well as the recommendations of the UGC Curriculum Development Council (2001) regarding how undergraduate and postgraduate level syllabi in English Literature are to be framed, reflect the fact that, by and large, these courses use the word English more as a synonym for British instead of using it to represent the present-day global character of the language. The prescribed texts are usually canonical as is the list of recommended secondary scholarship that, by and large, consolidates the hegemony of these texts. The paper, through a detailed examination of the points raised here, puts forth a critique of the predicament.

I

Whenever, in the English Literature classroom, we talk of Shakespeare as the greatest dramatist that the world has ever produced, we are engaging with the dramatist on two possible levels: an “operation of belief” or an “operation of examination”¹. If we consider the proposition closely, it can be clearly discerned that we as students and teachers of English Literature are entrenched in the former position rather than the latter. The corpus of literature

that talks of Shakespeare in superlative terms has been unambiguously accepted as true to the extent that right from school boards that prescribe abridged versions of his plays to postgraduate courses in universities that have entire paper/s on Shakespeare, the “operation of belief” is continually replicated to the extent that it has become axiomatic. Without detracting from Shakespeare’s position as a dramatist, and conceding space for the historical accident that led to studying English Literature in India becoming an eventuality, a few issues still need to be resolved in this context. An idea with a historical, political and cultural baggage is mechanically implanted, through the education system in general and the university system in particular, perpetrating an epistemological assault on unsuspecting minds. This is not to argue for a nationalist or nativist assertion in terms of reductive binary oppositions of the self/other. However, it does call for an interrogation of prevailing pedagogical practices and argues for an affirmative and critical understanding of one’s own legacy and also that of others.

Since the last few decades of the previous century, there has been a lot of work scrutinizing the growth and development of English studies in England as well as in India. Critics like Chris Baldick, Peter Widdowson, Terry Eagleton, Gerard Graff and D. J. Palmer² have provided important perspectives about English studies in the country of its origin. As these works demonstrate, the institutional origin of English Studies as a discipline is largely uncertain and indeterminate; its historical genesis cannot be traced with a great degree of certitude. Graff does talk of the development of English studies in England, but his primary focus is on the development of the subject in America. Palmer gives a detailed account of the development of the discipline up to the twentieth century. Baldick underscores the imperative of interrogating the assumptions of timelessness and naturalness that are associated with what we study in the subject in order to understand the social and cultural intricacies that shaped it. Eagleton and Widdowson interpret the historical evidence as being ideologically motivated. From its early modern beginnings where it was imbricated in social life, to the eighteenth century position where it was viewed as an isolatable entity worth being analyzed in its own right, English literature finally came to occupy central position with the failure of religion in the nineteenth century:

“England is sick, and ... English literature must save it. The Churches (as I understand) having failed, and social remedies being slow, English

literature has now a triple function: still, I suppose, to delight and instruct us, but also, and above all, to save our souls and heal the State” (George Gordon quoted in Eagleton, 2008: 20).

Higher education in England at that time was controlled by the Church of England, and the colleges under the two extant universities at that time, Oxford and Cambridge, were run like monastic institutions. It was accessible only to Anglican Christian males who were taught the classics, divinity and mathematics by churchmen, the whole situation reminiscent of the “organization of higher education ... since the middle ages” (Barry, 2010: 12). Religious, class and gender barriers were done away with in 1826, and English was offered as a subject of study for the first time around 1828. This was in part because literature was a private and introspective activity, and its experiential and emotional characteristics could operate across every group distinction as a stabilizing factor. English literature as we know it was first institutionalized in the Mechanics’ Institutes and working men’s colleges of England around 1831; it was introduced in Oxford for the first time in 1894 and in Cambridge in 1911.

C. D. Narasimhaiah, Gauri Vishwanathan, Rajeshwari Sundar Rajan, Susie Tharu and Svati Joshi³ among many others have provided perceptive accounts of the institutionalization of English studies in India and how it was causally linked to the corresponding process in England through colonialism. Narasimhaiah stressed the lack of “Indianness” in our responses to English literature. Tharu emphasized the need for factoring in contextual and experiential specificities. Vishwanathan’s work extends the genealogy from England to the colonies, pointing out that the discipline came into its own during colonial times, its humanistic underpinnings being ideologically deployed for sociopolitical control. Both Rajeshwari Sundar Rajan and Svati Joshi also delve into the institutionalization of English studies in India in order to bring out how the originary antecedents of the discipline have remained largely intact, leading to the discipline being fossilized and outdated, and emphasize the need to re-examine the logic of the study of English Literature in India.

The British East India Company came to India in 1600. Their initial engagement was with trade, but in order to augment their position, they gradually entered the realm of the political and subsequently, the educational. If the Battle of Plassey is a watershed in terms of British political engagement with India, Wood’s Despatch of 1854, Macaulay’s infamous “Minute on Education in

India” and the English Education Act of 1835 are the defining moments of how British involvement gave a new direction to education in India.

The proposal for diffusion of Western education was first proposed when the East India Company’s Charter was to be renewed in 1793. It was turned down on that occasion, one of the members of the Court of Directors declaring that England had lost America because of the “folly, in having allowed the establishment of Schools and Colleges”, and that “it would not do for [them] to repeat the same act of folly in regard to India” (Marshman quoted in Basu, 1867: 5). It would be another twenty years before the Company decided to set aside a sum of “not less than one lac rupees” for educational purposes during the renewal of the Charter Act in 1813, outlining two “distinct propositions” for consideration: “first, the encouragement of the learned natives of India, and the revival and improvement of literature; secondly, the promotion of a knowledge of the sciences amongst the inhabitants of the country” (Basu, 1867: 14). This clause in the Charter Act opened up the debate between the advocates of traditional and modern education. The Orientalists advocated indigenous systems and methods of education, while the Anglicists opposed this on the grounds that it was not equipped to deal with the changed social circumstances, and felt that there was a genuine need for a radical Western orientation in the field of education, and that there was a distinct mandate in favour of this change. The Wood’s Despatch was issued after Charter Act was renewed in 1853. It proposed European knowledge and a higher education system modelled on the London University as correctives to the flawed learning systems and literature of the East. English was to be promoted as the medium of instruction, and English Literature was to be the vanguard of this enterprise.

Macaulay’s “Minute” reiterated the same position and the English Education Act was the culmination of this process. The events of 1835 and their implications are too well-documented to merit repetition. However, the change in policy that resulted from the 1835 English Education Act was not entirely motivated by altruistic and philanthropic motives based on the notion of the superiority of the Western institutions and mode of learning as public documents would lead us to believe, but also by more pragmatic considerations like ease of governmental functioning, distrust of alien religions and people and the need to hegemonize the discursive space of knowledge. Revealing insights can be found in private

dialogues on this matter. In 1836, Macaulay's wrote to his father:

The effect of this education on the Hindus is prodigious. No Hindu who has received an English education ever remains sincerely attached to his religion. Some continue to profess it as a matter of policy, but many profess themselves pure Deists and some embrace Christianity. *It is my firm belief that if our plans of education are followed up there will not be a single idolater among the respectable classes in Bengal thirty years hence.* (quoted in Basu, 1867: 105, emphasis in original)

Alexander Duff, writing in *English National Education*, emphasizes the "vast influence of language in moulding national feelings and habits, more especially if fraught with superior stores of knowledge" and then goes on to highlight how the Romans, in course of their conquest of Europe, succeeded in "Romanising" Europe. Then, drawing upon the example of Akbar's establishment of Persian and how it led to "a kind of intuitive veneration" for the Emperor, Duff says:

Lord W. Bentinck's double Act for the encouragement and diffusion of the English language and English Literature in the East, will ... be hailed by a grateful and benefited posterity as the grandest master-stroke of sound policy that has yet characterized the administration of the British Government in India. (quoted in Basu, 1867: 108-109)

It is evident that religious, social and cultural agendas were very much on the minds of the British when they implemented English education and subsequently English Literature. The latter, which started out as a "Church of England monopoly", was thus modified to suit this end (Barry, 2010: 12). The interplay of British involvement in Indian education and their awareness of the sensitive nature of the religious reality here resulted in the "dramatic disavowal of English Literature's association with Christianity" in India (Vishwanathan, 1989: 21). As interference in matters religious was proscribed, "[t]his tension between increasing involvement in Indian education and enforced non-interference in religion was productively resolved through the introduction of English literature" as a surrogate (Vishwanathan, 1987: 432). Had that not been the case, instead of a secular or even religious version of the discipline, the Bible would have sufficed to achieve what the discipline covertly aimed at in surrogacy, as is evident from the colonial manoeuvres in Africa.

There is of course another side to the story, symbolized by the setting up of the Hindu College (now Presidency University) in

1817. One the oldest educational institutes in the region, its date of establishment and its aim of providing Western education were significant in demonstrating that a part of the Indian population was also rooting for change.

II

We thus have the twin legacies of English language and literature to contend with. The colonial legacy of English language per se has been effectively addressed by divesting the language of its imperial baggage and focusing on its functionality. The strategic placement of English as a skill to be acquired for the betterment of the individual and the nation marks a change in its positioning, accessibility and political implications, in part due to governmental decisions and directed largely by global realities and public need. There are quite a few caveats in terms of equity of access to quality and benefits, but by and large there is no baggage in terms of accessibility to the language.

In case of English Literature though, even today, the British literary canon which was introduced in the colonial era has by and large remained frozen except for a few additions and alterations and still forms the core content of most university syllabi in the subject. For most part, English literary education in this country has perpetrated a split identity which is in keeping with this distance that most English literature texts have with immediate realities. This leads to the structuring of interpretation by critics who locate these texts within transcendental values couched within a liberal humanist frame of reference. This pedagogic approach, which glosses over existing realities, is still largely followed in many English departments all over India, thus perpetrating the notion that the text and culture of the English is something superior and is invested with a value (and finality) that is not there in other literatures and cultures (Sengupta, 1994: 279). This static reality also reinforces the assumptions and understanding of students, who believe that in spite of all the changes around them, the unchangeability and monolithic permanence of the syllabus is a mark of authenticity and superiority. This is largely in part due to the rigidity of the many English Literature departments in the country, in which the University Grants Commission⁴ also has a role.

The increasing sense of unease faced by many academics teaching English in the Indian universities – particularly the more traditional ones – where courses are rigidly drawn up and

implemented, has to do with the complex set of problems that go with teaching English in a postcolonial reality. Students gain degrees in English Literature without being aware of how the subject was instituted in colonial times and the circumstances under which it is studied today. It is as if the study of the subject is conducted in a sanitized space divested of historical as well as contemporary socio-political underpinnings. The circumstances and factors that have led to English Literature becoming a subject of study have largely been obscured from Honours and postgraduate students of the discipline. The battles and wars behind it, and the debates and discussions related to it have been conveniently brushed under the carpet, leaving behind an apparently representative set of masterpieces that suggest consent and conclusiveness rather than deliberation and contestation. This kind of approach pre-empts the pedagogical potential of the background behind the formation of the English Literature curriculums and syllabuses that are current today. The design of prescribing texts and authors without focusing on the controversies and background that led to their being there gives an impression of order and agreement, but students are divested of a significant reality, thus diminishing the worth of their study. Is it necessary to give an idea of concurrence? Cannot disagreements serve us equally well? And is it not better to have an understanding of the dissensus rather than not?

For a more dynamic and rewarding study of English Literature in India, the student should thus be conscious of the history of English Studies in India as well as the antecedents of the conceptualization of this discipline – its initiation, growth and development in England. Concomitantly, all these issues have to be assessed in terms of the changed global and academic realities. The empire has crumbled, and contemporary geopolitical circumstances have relegated England to lesser importance. English Literature is no more the exclusive preserve of England; its literary primacy is successfully contested by former colonies having become rich sites from where a multiplicity of literature written in English is being produced, England accounting for just a miniscule part of the entire output. Literature itself has undergone a radical paradigm shift, and it has been re-sited as a “historically informed and politically conscious” engagement moving on from the liberal humanist position of English literature as “‘universal’ and ‘normative’” (Joshi, 1991: 1). It is therefore imperative that we go back to the origins of this discipline in India vis-à-vis Britain, and understand the implications of studying/teaching English Literature in India today. In order to

accomplish this, it is necessary to debate the subject in its present disciplinary formation from within the discipline itself. It is therefore necessary to address the curricular vacuum of a comprehensive research and critique of the disciplinary role of English in our historical and cultural formation, and a comprehensive institutional revamp of our teaching of English literature.

One attempt in this direction is seen in *The UGC Model Curriculum for English and other Western Languages* of 2001, which was framed by an eminent assemblage of scholars under the nomenclature Curriculum Development Committee. It comprised such stalwarts as Sukanta Chaudhuri (Jadavpur University, who was the Convener of the CDC), C. T. Indra (University of Madras), Prashant K. Sinha (University of Pune) and Rajiva Verma (University of Delhi). The Committee put forward two models for subscribers of English Literature programmes: “English Language and Literature” which foregrounds and privileges English language and literature, and “Literatures in English” which could be of more general nature and would be at liberty to “adopt broader cultural and comparativist approaches” and in which English language texts would be at par with texts translated from various languages into English. The document further states that the latter could, in due course, be oriented towards more general programmes like “Literature and Culture” or “Literary Studies” (which would do away with the appellation “English”) and these putative programmes would be at liberty to use texts not only translated into English but into Indian languages as well (16 *Model Curriculum*)⁵.

The document argues for evolving programmes that could use English translations of texts of European, Indian or any other provenance, and for more flexible courses as well, highlighting, in an obverse manner, the rigidity of current university syllabi in the subject as well as the need to “[u]ltimately... break quite free of traditional ‘Eng. Lit.’, and move into totally new areas with appropriate new titles eschewing the word ‘English’ (17 *Model Curriculum*, emphasis added), thus acknowledging that most Indian Universities in India, till 2001 (and even now), had not yet “broken free”.

There are a few grey areas in the CDC recommendations though. While there are detailed optional papers in the CDC recommendations that add to the background knowledge of British and continental literature, there is only the single paper on Indian Literature, with no additional paper to flesh out the contesting and contradictory ideological positions with respect to Indian Writing

in English. There are suggestions for exclusive papers at the undergraduate level that deal with the background to English Literature, and similar background components in many papers at the postgraduate level, but this background is not in any way a history of the institutionalization of the curriculum but what is termed as “literary history”. These literary histories merely confirm the paramountcy of the texts prescribed⁶. Nowhere is the sordid history of colonialism in India referred to in the courses. Ironically, the usual practice is to refer to historical events like the War of Roses and the French Revolution to specify historical space and time, thus creating further insulation. This insular universalist space imbued with liberal humanist values precludes any attempt at explaining the course in terms of historical markers from *our* indigenous experience, resulting in serious students of the discipline being more familiar with when the Puritans came to power in England but having no knowledge of when the English Education Act was enforced in India. The acknowledgement of the closed and exclusionist positions of most literary histories is one more step towards opening up the field for contestation. We have to move ahead from the practice of studying half a dozen canonical texts in each paper which are discussed in the classroom and regurgitated in the examinations, the basis of all discussions being standard books on criticism produced by Western scholars (Sundar Rajan, 1992: 7).

The UGC CDC has no doubt brought in some fresh perspectives, from gradually diversifying into continental literature to including translations into English to finally developing a course which includes translations into other Indian languages as well. But universities, which are supposed to revise their syllabus every three years, are pre-empted from making any changes because the British Literature heavy NET examination has been following the same syllabus since its institution more than two decades ago, replicating a pattern that was enforced more than a century ago. As a result, perspectives based on today’s culture, which is a culture without consensus, do bring in new areas of study, but are ultimately proscribed by the range that is relevant to students, and that according to the UGC, still remains British Literature. The other coordinates bring in fresh dimensions, but when we look at the monolith, we find fresh perspectives but cannot include new things because of the closed manner in which it is constructed.

It is therefore necessary to interrogate what we engage with when we are teaching/learning English Literature in terms of who

are teaching, who are learning, and what is being imparted and for what purpose, framed within the broader context of institutional settings and intellectual concerns. The challenge, then, is to review the borders of the discipline and map a new terrain factoring in issues that have been insufficiently addressed. Within these redrawn boundaries, there is, further, a need to approach texts apart from and in conjunction with its con-texts, leading to more reflective practices of learning and teaching the discipline.

NOTES

1. The phrases were used by Prof. Aniket Jaaware, University of Pune, in his keynote address at the International Conference on *Research Trends in English Studies*, Department of English, University College of Arts and Centre for Education and Research, Tumkur University, Tumkur, delivered on 26 July 2013.
2. The major works dealing with English studies are Chris Baldick's *The Social Mission of English Studies 1848-1932* (London: OUP, 1983), *Re-Reading English* edited by Peter Widdowson (London: Methuen, 1982), Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (London: Blackwell, 1983), Gerard Graff's *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1987), Francis Mulhern's *The Moment of Scrutiny* (London: New Left Books, 1979), D. J. Palmer's *The Rise of English Studies* (London: OUP, 1965) and E. M. W. Tillyard's *The Muse Unchained: An Intimate Account of the Revolution in English Studied at Cambridge* (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1958).
3. The works dealing with English studies in India include C. D. Narasimhaiah's *Moving Frontiers of English Studies in India* (New Delhi: S. Chand, 1977) and *English Studies in India: Widening Horizons* (New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2002), Gauri Vishwanathan's *Masks of Conquest* (New York: Columbia Univ Press, 1989), *The Lie of the Land: English Literary Studies in India* edited by Rajeshwari Sundar Rajan (Delhi: OUP, 1992), *Subject to Change: Teaching Literatures in the Nineties*, edited by Susie Tharu (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1998) and *Rethinking English: Essays in Literature, Language and History* edited by Svati Joshi (New Delhi: Trianka, 1991).
4. Even if the individual departments of English Literature were to enforce some changes on the lines suggested above, they would place their own students at a distinct disadvantage, since the questions asked in the National Eligibility Test for lectureship in the country are also based primarily on British Literature, with European, American and Indian English Literature and contemporary theory forming a minor part of the questions. Questions about the disciplinary background of English studies in India are seldom asked while questions relating to the backgrounds of prescribed canonical texts are ubiquitous.
5. The UGC CDC has drawn up a fairly representative and exhaustive list of literature from various Indian languages, which creates a ready corpus of

texts that could be used in the transition from “English Language and Literature” through “Literatures in English” to programmes like “Literature and Culture” or “Literary Studies”, and which would highlight the decolonizing process.

6. Interestingly, most texts dealing with the history of English Literature were written in the last two centuries, overlapping with the period of colonial expansionism.

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