



## Understanding The Fear of the Text in a Post-Colonial Classroom

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resistance, anglicisation, decolonization

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**ABSTRACT** *The students of English literature are often found to be lacking in interest when it comes to the reading of literary texts in their academic syllabus. They would rather approach the texts through interpretations, summaries, prepared answers for suggested questions etc instead of directly reading the texts themselves. Though this has definitely to do with their inadequacy in handling the language, it is also a result of their cultural alienation from the anglicized context, the product of which these literary texts are. This indifference to the texts is on the other hand taken to be a sign of certain 'lack' in those students by the academic fraternity in a typical colonial mentality. This paper attempts to analyse this resistance from a postcolonial perspective.*

The ideological intent of English literary studies has gradually been demystified. Though this exposé has remained confined within the arena of scholarly research, pedagogy within the class room has still persisted with its Anglocentric assumptions. In the Undergraduate level in India, English Literature Courses begin with a survey of History of English Literature and Language, followed by the authorial texts from different periods. Indo-Anglian writing has been incorporated in many Universities over the recent years, though they are approached and interpreted from the universalist and humanist tradition, often conveniently ignoring the ambiguities and the political contexts and undertones. At the University level, Anglo-American literature along with Western Literary Theory still rules the roost. Even half a century since independence, Post-colonial Literature, Afro-American Literature, Feminist Literature, Subaltern Literature, Popular Literature etc can gain entry into the hallowed curriculum only as optional papers. No wonder then that, many a student of English literature feel baffled by the content of his/her Literature course and ask him/herself, What am I studying all this for? Though not all, one assumes. Some on the contrary enter the Department with a linguistic felicity and precociousness enough to make others cringe in awe. Neither of them of course, can disown that the badge of English Department endows them with certain privileged identity vis-à-vis other Humanities or Social Sciences students. Yet, more often than not, they are also likely to face scoff from other Department students for allegedly being uppish. The legacy of English studies in India as well as in other post-colonial countries is thus fraught with an ambivalence; a paradox of desire and resistance; desire for the benefits it confers on the subjects, and resistance for the alienation it engenders. This was in fact bound to happen in a country where the "earliest efforts to introduce English education had been the work of missionaries and private societies" for whom English was a happy means of diffusing the gospel and building commerce (Roy 1994: 88). Though suspicious of Anglicisation, Indian natives since early nineteenth century were increasingly becoming aware of the growing importance of learning English. The Permanent Settlement of 1793 had diminished the power of Muslim nobility, old zamindars and bankers and sought establishment of a class of capitalist landowners and nouveau rich at the cost of an impoverished peasantry. As early as in 1834 an editorial in the Samachar Darpan, noted that "an acquaintance with Bengalee will rather prevent their [Indians'] acquiring wealth.... Those well acquainted with English may obtain situations as writers with long salaries and prospects of higher appointments" (Basak 1974: 259). English was emerging as a language of power and privilege, mere knowledge of which would enable one with an unprecedented social mobility. More and

more men flocked to cities and district towns to learn English and seek careers in association with the British. They mostly belonged to upper caste Hindus who found works as dobasis, clerks, munshis, brokers, junior administrators, computers, teachers etc.

In contrast to that, English literary studies as pointed out by G. Vishwanathan was introduced in British India as 'a strategy of containment' (Vishwanathan 1987: 437) against native rebellion and conflicts of interests between colonial agencies and the native elites. It was with this intention that "Hindu (later Presidency) College in Calcutta, an English School in Benares in 1818, and the Elphinstone Institution in Bombay a decade later to educate the sons of upper-caste Hindus in English" (Roy 1994: 96) were set up. By creating a 'class of persons, Indian in blood, and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect' (Macaulay 1831: 430), who could then rule the vast mass of population on behalf of the colonizers, the rulers sought to restructure Indian society on colonial lines. Consequently, there emerged two classes with contrasting attitudes towards English education. The former included mostly upper-caste Hindus from non-Metropolitan middleclass background, taking to English studies from economic motivation, mostly in missionary and private schools set up by Britishers in India. The latter group, comprising of native capitalists and metropolitan elites sent their children to the new colleges teaching English Literature, language, Western thought and philosophy and English History. Their motivation was not economic, rather assimilation of Western culture and a gradual entry into the ruling fraternity. Infact, the extremely wealthy landlords and aristocrats preferred Oxfords and Cambridges to Indian Colleges, where the acculturation would be perfect. The former class even though keen on English studies, were not necessarily anglicized. They were usually traditionalists and conservatives, often resisting English thought and culture, even though ready to reap the advantages of English education. For this group English education was a means to an end, not the signifier of a lifestyle. On the other hand, there was the non-modern native Indian majority who continued to get their education from the tolls, pathshalas and madrasahs in the vernacular medium or Sanskrit or Persian. This class consisted of peasants, workers and other marginal and Backward sections who could somehow manage to earn enough to send their children for traditional education. After Independence, there had been an effort on the part of both private and Govt. sectors to widen the ambit of Higher Education beyond urban areas. More and more Colleges were set up in the smaller towns to provide Higher education for the middle and lower middle classes. Overlooking their schooling which was in the vernacular medium, they were desperate to take up English

Literature Courses for their Graduation and Post-graduation courses. Sixty years since Independence, and the fascination for the Royal subject has only gained in strength. The effort at decolonization has succumbed to the neo-colonial socio-cultural and economic forces of a globalized world.

In recent years many writers and critics have stressed the imperative of decolonizing the English Departments in post-colonial nations. Ngugi is the foremost of them, who in his famous "On the Abolition of the English Department" argues for substitution of the Department of English with a Department of African Literature and Language on the premise that "education is a means of knowledge about ourselves" and "it is better to study representative works which mirror their (natives') society rather than to study a few isolated 'classics', either of their own or of a foreign culture" (Ngugi 1968: 441). It is ironical that in spite of Macaulay and his Utilitarian and Evangelical cohorts prescribing doses of English Literature and history for regeneration of Indians in 19th century itself, Britain herself realized the necessity of studying a national literature and language only in the second decade of twentieth century. The British Curriculum which hitherto constituted exclusively of Classical Literature and Language studies (ancient Greek and Latin literature) was officially nationalized after the publication of the Newbolt Report on the Teaching of English in England in 1921 which persuasively argued for delatinization of the English curriculum. The report noted that 'It is self-evident that, until a child has acquired a certain command of the native language, no other educational development is even possible...a lack of language is a lack of the means of communication and of thought itself' (10). Yet, most of the post-colonial academia haven't realized this even today. The neo-colonial forces have resisted all attempts at decolonization of the education sector. Today's globalised market has irreparably lured us away from our native literature, culture and thought.

Interestingly, the Newbolt Report had also ordained a specific role for the teachers of English literature and language in the universities of Britain. As English Literature and Language was introduced in the British curriculum to foster a spirit of nationalism supplanting the diminishing influence of religion on British life and society, the role prescribed for Professors of English by the Report had found a parallel with the priests serving in religious institutions. It says 'The Professor of Literature in a University should be and sometimes is, as we gladly recognize a missionary in a more real and active sense than any of his colleagues. He has obligations not merely to the students who come to him to read for a degree, but still more towards the teeming population outside the University walls...But first, and, above all, it means a right attitude (my italics) of mind, a conviction that literature and life are in fact separable, that literature is not just a subject for academic study, but one of the chief temples of the human spirit, in which all should worship' (259). So Literature is no more an academic subject only, it is a temple of the human spirit, where the literary text is worshipped as fetish. Naturally, professors of English literature, votaries of this high liberal humanism are the negotiators between the text and the readers. If this complicity of the teachers of English in perpetuating the hegemony of the Western liberal humanistic tradition and its values in the British context is an acknowledged fact, then it should hold equally true in case of both colonial and post-colonial Indian contexts. English teachers and Professors in India, then turn out to be informers, interpreters and mediators of British literary and cultural

values even in the post-colonial era. Ngugi's essay assumes significance in this context, as it urges English teachers to come down from their Anglicised insulations and initiate decolonization of the Departments from within.

An English Honours or M.A English class room in India today comprises broadly of two categories of students, the Anglicised English medium educated from privileged metropolitan backgrounds and non-modern vernacular medium educated from backward non-metropolitan backgrounds. The former had studied English subject as their first language since school with a high literary content, where they were persuaded to imbibe literature as a cultural product. The latter, studying English as second language, were trained for compositional and comprehensional aptitudes. This latter group to begin with has never been exposed to, neither trained for literary appreciation, which they are though forced upon in an English Honours class. Not interested in mimicry and emulation, an English text as a higher cultural product to them is redundant. It is neither significant from the examination point of view, which of course is their only concern. Their objective is only a degree in English as in India degrees get jobs. While the elitist student approaches the course through the texts, the student from a village does the same circumventing the texts. He limits his study of a text to stock questions supplied by ancillary sources. Thus, unable to appreciate and interpret an alien literature on individual resources, they rely on translations, summaries, critical analyses and readymade notes supported by either private tutors or locally published guides.

This resistance to literary text and its afterlives in the classroom, on the other hand, is perceived by the teachers of English literature an indicator of the rural student's disqualification for English studies. It is seen as an inherent lack within the student or lack of the 'right' aptitude and background, the 'right' orientation for English studies, or even sometimes simply as dullness and laziness on the part of the students. Thus, instead of enquiring into the disinterestedness which is symptomatic of a larger attitude, it is reduced to a physiological and cultural inadequacy. The native student's resistance to Anglicization could well be seen and appreciated as an attempt at decolonization, a counterpoise to the teacher's blind fetishism. Instead the student is systematically demoralized, discriminated against and drilled with an inferiority complex vis-à-vis his elite co-students.

Pedagogical communication would be better off without being intimidating and awe-inspiring. Instead of coercing the students to conform to the received tradition of analyzing 'English' texts and writing assignments, they could be patiently allowed to bring their sensibility and experience to their interpretations. They could rather be initiated to negotiate a text through its elisions and cracks, inconsistencies and ambiguities. For our intention should not be on how much we identify ourselves with the 'English' text, rather what constitutes our distinctness from it. A student's resistance to the study of a text could be construed as a resistance to the Anglocentric interpretations and assumptions of the text. By harnessing that resistance and liberating a text from its cultural moorings, we could liberate the Department from the colonial legacy and prepare for the challenges beyond Post-colonialism.

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