

THE POSTCOLONIAL TURN IN ENGLISH STUDIES IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to explore the position of English language in the postcolonial and globalised era, the conflicting trope of reception and resistance offered to this language during the colonial as well as the postcolonial periods, and the attempts at delegitimising and nativising the language by the Indian academia of late. It exemplifies how English becomes a 'lingua franca' as well as a 'lingus frankensteinia' in the contemporary scenario; and proceeds to an explanation of the Indian attitude to English and English Studies in the past, especially in the post-independence period. The article also highlights the attempts made by the Indian universities to delegitimise the Anglo English through various strategies of abrogation and appropriation.

Key Words: *Postcolonial, English Studies, Delegitimising, Nativising*

Introduction

Though English is not the language spoken by maximum number of people in the world, the privilege, authority, and legitimacy that this language enjoys even in the post-war, post-imperial period demand serious enquiry into its political dynamics throughout the world. English language has been received by various societies and nations in various ways. English has made inroads into different communities through different strategies, enjoying reception as well as resistance simultaneously. The domination of English language and the attempts to subvert it have been usual phenomena in the spread of this language across the globe. This tension assumes greater magnitude when nations get liberated from the British imperial control. How such nations have responded to the position of English in the postcolonial period is a trope of significant academic enquiry. This article attempts to explore into that area by taking the twists and turns in English education, especially higher education, in post-independence India as referral points. It highlights the efforts of postcolonial appropriation of English language and English studies by the Indian academia. As we know, the formidable position that English has been enjoying is not the result any natural event; rather, it has been the offshoot of many political, economic, military, cultural, and linguistic manoeuvres that were planned and implemented at various locations, in varying degrees, at different time, in multiple forms.

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The rise of poststructuralist and postcolonial discourses triggered an interrogation of the legitimacy of a monolithic Anglo English (British/American) that holds hegemonic powers throughout the world and opened up vistas for a celebration of linguistic pluralism, extending even into serious debates on the variety of English suitable for different societies. This line of thought assumes greater significance when we understand that English is now spoken more by the non-native speakers than by the native speakers. Before we enter into the discussion on delegitimising the status of English in postcolonial societies, let us have a quick look at the position of English in the present world which is highly globalised.

English across Continents

English language has been playing a confusingly contradictory role in the contemporary world scenario. On the one hand, it is held high and with some degree of adoration as the *lingua franca* which will enable us to be citizens of the global village and empower us to earn our bread and butter by performing effectively in the international job market; on the other, it is seen as a *lingua frankensteinia*, to use Robert Phillipson's term, that stifles all other languages, including European languages, into a slow death and retains its hegemony even after decades of the physical process of decolonisation. To begin the discussion on the role and position of English in this scenario, I quote a series of statistical data, and observations based on those data, provided in Chitra Lele's *English Language: The*

Gateway to Global Growth

English has now become the "major component of the world linguistic DNA" (3). Today English is listed as the official or co-official language of over 90 countries and is spoken extensively in other countries where it has no official status (9). Nearly 80% of the business population uses English on a weekly basis and more than 50% uses it on a daily basis (39).

Due to widespread dissemination of information, [English] language is no longer an exclusive property of native speakers in the field of education (83). English gives full liberty to people, particularly non-native speakers, to explore its many facets based on their own cultural and linguistic experiences. This allows non-native speakers to add their own flavours to this language. This quality of English is what makes it a multicultural language (103).

The facts and observations that Lele presents are worth consideration. It is true that English is now used as a Language of Wider Communication and it is playing communicational, technological, and financial roles in the present era apart from other socio-politico-cultural roles. As most of the available statistics agree upon, English is spoken as a

native language by about 375 million people and a greater number use it as the second language also. As Braj Kachru exposes, English language is making fast inroads into the Expanding Circle countries (China, Indonesia, Singapore etc.) simultaneously with consolidating its position in the Inner Circle (UK, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand) as well as Outer Circle (India, Nigeria etc.) countries. English has really become ‘Globish.’

Since language is a highly potent political tool, the dynamics of the spread of English to this extent has to be approached discursively. English language is now being presented all over the world as a global communicative tool. Behind the façade of this apparently innocent and apolitical promotion of English, we can decipher a “shift from linguistic imperialism [of the colonial period] to communicative imperialism [of the postcolonial period]”, as rightly pointed out by Phillipson (*Linguistic Imperialism Continued* 5). It can be seen that the brand of English being marketed is communicative English which is a product of postcolonial hybridity arising out of neocolonial economic and technological transactions. This evidence is corroborated by the fact that the growth of English over the years has led to the extinction of many languages, even in Europe. Most of the postcolonial societies continue to give more importance to English at the expense of local languages.

It is interesting to see that eventhough we speak about ‘global English,’ ‘international English’, ‘world English’, ‘nativised English’, ‘English as a lingua franca’ and so on, Anglo English always remains as the ‘accepted standard’ of international communication. When competence/proficiency in English is evaluated against this Anglo English of the native speakers, the non-native speaker often cuts a sorry figure. The resultant ‘incompetence’ leads to subordination of the non-natives. Thus, English language and its ‘managers’ are leaving no stone unturned in retaining the hegemonic position of the language. It is against this backdrop that efforts to decanonise and decolonize English through processes like nativisation becomes all the more significant for postcolonial nations like India.

English in India

India has always had a love-hate relationship with English — during the colonial period it was considered as a tool of hegemonic control, on the one hand, and as a major window to the world and access tool to administrative jobs, on the other. Now it is being treated as a neocolonial hegemonic tool that threatens our linguistics diversity, on the one hand, and as an access tool to MNC jobs and even social mobility, on the other. (It has even influenced the social hierarchies, like the caste system in India, as evidenced by the fact that employment and social upgradation for low castes were brought in by English language.) This confusing and contradictory position will be quite evident from the policies of the

governments, especially the state governments, in their attempts to strengthen the regional language-medium education as a means to resist the neoliberal agendas, even when they are sanctioning more English-medium sections in regional language-medium schools, in the name of equipping the students to reap the benefits of globalised economy, the latter perhaps undercutting the former aim!

A detailed analysis of the socio-political factors that resulted in the presence of English in India is not attempted here due to constraints of word limit. So, I leap over the usual discussions on Macaulay's Minute (1835) that was instrumental in the introduction of English in India; the 1823 petition by Raja Ram Mohan Roy to Governor General Lord Amherst in which English education was viewed as "a means of unlocking the secrets of the western sciences that had contributed to the advancements of European society" (Advani 26); the debates over the nature and the tenure of the continued presence of English in independent India; the implementation of the Three Language Formula as a compromise; and similar milestones on the timeline of English in our country. I would rather like to approach, from a poststructural/postcolonial point of view, the issue of the variety of English suitable for the classrooms of India, and similar postcolonial countries.

English Studies in India

It is a valid position that the issues of the dominance of English language along with the methodologies of learning/teaching English in a country like India has to be carried out with much critical consciousness. As Jasbir Jain writes:

No colonization is ever terminated by a stroke of the pen. There is no finality in its termination, primarily because it has infiltrated the lives and the mind of people in multiple ways. The past with its history and experience, persists and continues to be a constant reminder. (20)

Krishna Kumar toes a similar line: "Structures of pedagogical transaction, once established, do not give in to change easily. Colonial pedagogy outlasted colonial rule.... (37-38).

Suresh Canagarajah also has a strong point to make regarding how the English Language Teaching (ELT) industry infiltrates into classrooms of the postcolonial/periphery English speaking nations:

The special potency of the cultural agencies in influencing periphery ELT enterprise lies in their ability to side-step the other macro-level periphery organizations (such as the state agencies and educational bureaucracy) and reach directly into the language classrooms. For example, by supplying

textbooks, the agencies can shape the curriculum and by conducting teacher training courses they can influence instructors' values and orientations. This means that whatever policy the periphery institutions and administrators may develop, classroom practice may be considerably shaped by a center agenda. (84)

It is here that the postcolonial pedagogy has a vital role to play, as the onus of decolonizing our education lies with none other than ourselves. It is encouraging to find that there have been some serious and sincere attempts along this track in the case of some state boards of school education and universities in the country of late.

Even a cursory review of the curricula and syllabi of any English course in any of the colonial universities in India would make clear the kind of stuff that went into their making—European, mainly British, literary output by established/canonical European authors (mainly celebrating liberal humanist values); works such as travel accounts or personal narratives by Europeans to intensify the inferiority complex of the Indian learners; and a handful of Indian texts, but most of which were thoroughly 'Orientalised'. European texts discussing European experiences, or very rarely the Europeans' experiences with India (with due recognition of the power hierarchy) were thus thrust upon the Indians.

By the mid-1960s, as Alok Mukherjee argues, the hitherto exclusive Euro-British orientation of the curriculum had begun to change somewhat with the introduction of American literature, reflecting the growing activities of the US in the cultural arena as a component of its global agenda. Nevertheless, literature of the British Isles, characterized by romanticism, aestheticism, mysticism, transcendentalism, and individualism; and a constructed Graeco-Roman classical critical tradition consisting of figures such as Plato, Aristotle, and Longinus continued to set the standard of taste and sensibility. Besides the valorized status of English literature, English language enjoyed a position that was completely out of proportion to the number of Indians who were actually proficient in it (21-22).

Language and education policy analysts and social thinkers like Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, Gauri Viswanathan, Meenakshi Mukherjee strongly articulate that even in the post-liberation scenario, in the Indian universities, the English studies (both language and literature) proceeded along the colonial paradigm in the selection of texts as well as in the way of approaching the texts. The curriculum was in the line of legitimizing the pedagogic practice extant under the colonial education system which invested English literature with universal values and a timeless human significance by disengaging it from the circumstances

out of which the text has emerged as well as from the ethos in which it was being received. (M. Mukherjee 13). Rajan also draws our attention that to the pathetic academic scenario which continued even in the late 1980s: “The academic study of English Literature as a subject in Indian universities is, in its present form, virtually indistinguishable from the curriculum shaped for it in the metropolitan university in the west” (9).

In the field of English language studies, till the 1990s, the thrust was on the conventional material being delivered in the conventional style. RP (Received Pronunciation) was taken as the only standard and Indian students, with their speech organs and climatic conditions not suited for that variety of pronunciation, always struggled in the English classroom of India. Wren and Martin (or Thomson and Martinet, or Raymond Murphy, or F. T. Wood, or Randolph Quirk for English main classes) was the final word in grammar, adding to the woe of those students. However, this argument has no intention either to undervalue their scholarship or to undermine the commendable efforts put in by the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages (CIEFL/EFLU) for exploring into the varieties of English being spoken here and for evolving a variety (GIE) which is almost common to all of us.

The Postcolonial Turn

In the 90s, with the wave of the postcolonial discourse beginning to make its impact in our soil too, there has been a re-orientation in our approach towards both language and literature studies in English. Delegitimising the status of British/American English and realising the potential of English as a global language, our educational system also thought of appropriating this language to our advantage. Consequently, there was a slant towards Functional/Communicative English which really pulled the language out of its cultural roots, to an extent, and relocated it in the localized arena. Though the economic agendas of globalization played some nefarious roles here, the liberation of English from its cultural roots and incorporation of the experiences from the immediate context of day-to-day life of the learners were definitely welcome moves. Thus, we realized that the English language that we need is not the King’s/Queen’s English, but a nativised/hybridised/syncretised language. A kind of ‘calibanisation’ or ‘chutnification’ was the result.

In the case of literary studies also some shifts in the literary canon were visible by the end of the last century, such as the reduction in the primacy of British literary and critical texts, giving due weightage to Indian aesthetics, accommodation of regional literature texts, introduction of texts problematising the issue of the marginalized (such as dalits, women,

minorities, the economically deprived etc.), acceptance accorded to oral literature, celebration of non-British English texts and so on.

Until postcolonialism gathered momentum as a discourse in our academic community, there has been some sort of a stigma attached to non-literary texts being incorporated into literature syllabi, but now we find the non-literary texts and newspaper articles placed at par with the literary text in many university syllabi, establishing the truth that both literary and non-literary texts address the same social reality from different vantage points, thereby problematising the very issue of 'point of view'. Yet another marked feature of the postcolonial curricula is the recognition of the increasing importance of cultural studies and the accommodation of various texts of minor subjectivities and ethnicities. The inclusion of the afore-mentioned has been a strong move to destabilise the primacy of literary discourses over others, thereby challenging some foundational notions of the colonial literary canon.

Conclusion

The discussions made above bear testimony to the fact that, of late, there have been attempts to nativise English language and literature to suit our postcolonial pedagogic design, which is really a welcome move from the academics in subverting the fallacies of the colonialist canon. Such pedagogic moves are strong political statements against both colonialism of the past and neocolonialism/neoliberalism of the present. Education being a key driving force of the society, these pedagogic appropriations and abrogations help the people to find themselves and forcefully articulate their muffled voices.

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