

The Paradox of English Literature in India

Poonam Datta

Thomas Babington Macaulay's Minute of 1835 spoke of spending 'a lakh of rupees' for the introduction of English literature and teaching of English language to Indians. This historic minute was shaped by a colonial conviction which mainly served the purpose of providing clerks to British administrators. The colonial anxiety to perpetuate the Raj through the English language and literature led to a textual construction of *Bengali Babus*, ridiculing their English accent and their Western education. No serious study of imperial literature can afford to overlook the works of Rudyard Kipling. He avoided overt political exigencies but his text is deeply entrenched with an ironical ideological message about a particular community. In a short story "The Head of the District" Kipling created a Bengali administrator who was brought up on the western education but was unable to govern an unruly region. The story indubitably subverts aspirations of educated Indians for administrating their country.

The emphasis in colonial writings was on the teaching of English language to Indians with active collaborations of administrators, scholars, missionaries, which contributed to the process of the consolidation of the British Empire. Macaulay's famous quote "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature" succeeded in perpetuating the myth of 'white man's burden' and 'the civilizing mission' of British rule in India.

The colonial mission extended, Gauri Vishwanathan observes "to the spheres of literature, cultural and moral negation of the indigenous history, conventions and traditions"(32). Though literary critics attribute the introduction of the English literary text to numerous factors but Vishwanathan says "the English literary text, functioning as a surrogate Englishman in his highest and most perfect state, becomes a mask for economic exploitation, so successfully camouflaging the material activities of the colonizer." She explains that the traditional Indian literature was considered to be too sensual for Indian students when the curriculum was devised for them.

It is perhaps worth noting that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was the English language that offered an opportunity for Indians to translate the indigenous literature into English. English as a language of literary expression had already enticed the Western educated Indians. Sarkar

observes, that “the western educated ‘elite’ or ‘intelligentsia’ searched for its models in the European “middle class”, which as it learnt through western education, had brought about the great transformation from medieval to modern times...”(67-68). It was mainly from this vantage point, Indians turned to their classical literature and religious texts, but they also wrote in English and read English classics. Babu Kashiprasad Ghosh, Sochee Chander Dutt, Toru Dutt, Bankim Chandra, Aurobindo and Tagore among others wrote both in English and in Bengali.

Nineteenth-Century reform movements, inspired by Western education and thought, invoked Indian cultural traditions and moved towards a synthesis of indigenous cultural narratives and marked a confrontation with Western culture and colonization. The vernacular intellectual movement influenced by Western aesthetics and philosophy formed an alternative narrative of difference, contest and protest. In such circumstances, the publication and dramatization of *Neel Darpan* in 1860 provides a strident antidote to colonial narratives and forms the core of the anti-colonial stance. The play written by Dinabandhu Mitra in 1858-1859 focuses on the exploitative policies of indigo planters.

A literary portrayal of nationalism in diverse forms, languages and approaches, shaped by different ideologies, represented cultural unity in literary works. In Bengal Bankimchandra’s *Anandmath* with ‘Bande Matram’ struck the emotive cord. Newspapers and journals like *Bangbasi*, *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* in Bengal and in Maharashtra Tilak’s *Kesari* and *Yuganter* gained immense popularity by invoking patriotic and populist ideals. The colonial state came down heavily on the so-called inflammatory texts and literature, which were proscribed. Many printing presses were shut down in the process. During such tumultuous times, contradictory trends emerged. Munshi Prem Chand, a renowned Urdu and Hindi writer, appreciated “Hugo’s *Le Miserable* and novels of Tolstoy and Dickens” as “works of literature having immense literary significance....not lost their charm even today.” But Mulk Raj Anand, RK.Narayan, Sarojini Naidu and Raja Rao began to focus on contemporary Indian situations, social reality and Indian scenes in fiction, drama and poetry. Herein lay the origins of Indian writing in English.

The spirit of nationalism was inescapable in Indian writing in English. Kipling, Forster, Edward Thompson, Orwell, Maud Diver, Flora Anne Steel, Travers, and many others engaged with India and Indian themes. In 1920, Forster critiqued Iqbal’s ‘Asrar-i-Khudi’ (*Secret of The Self*, translated by

A.R. Nicolson. The review was first published in December 1920 in the literary magazine *Athanaeum*). His concept of the 'Superman' was inspired by German thinkers. He said: "For Philosophy of the West... Iqbal sure has an eye." Gandhi too had acknowledged the influence of Tolstoy and Ruskin on his thought.

No serious account of the study of Indian English literature can afford to ignore the politics of literature, religion and nationalism in the narrative situated within the imperial tradition of the early twentieth century. In the age of uncertainty, unrest and violence Edmund Candler, a journalist and a novelist, principal of Mohindra College, Patiala wrote a novel *Sri Ram-Revolutionist- A Transcript from Life, 1907-23*.¹ He interrogates the cultural ideals and knowledge embedded in the English text institutionalized by the British in India for Indian students. In the novel, Skene, the Principal of the college, has been teaching English literature to students for over five years. Skene questions the relevance of English literature to Indian students, "the spirit of Adonais was tortured and expired in his presence every day and he was a paid accessory" (11). Skene's frustration in the teaching of English literature is not merely political but cultural as the 'natives', according to him, were unable to appreciate and understand the language and its imagery. He writes about his Indian students:

The modern books they read must have been incomprehensible even if they could have had enough English to appreciate the subtleties of meaning. They read wantonness into the badinage of Lamb. Thackeray sinned by condoning too much. Shelly and Keats were frank sensualists. Even Stevenson in his canoe shocked them, forever waving his handkerchief at unknown maidens on the bank. Nor could fiction, romantic or realistic, have any point for them, as it offered a criticism of an existence as remote from their own as cobwebs in the moon. The mischief of it was, as critics of education were always pointing out, that the books bore no conceivable relation with the student's life. (44)

The question of racial exclusiveness falls asunder when Skene comes to know that a 'Hindu' has annotated the English classic and the students rely on the notes prepared by the 'native' to understand English literature. "For what culture or ideas would the like of Sri Ram gather from his own

people?” (21). This was not all. Sri Ram, the main protagonist was represented as having spent just a few minutes on “Ode to Nightingale”. Candler’s novel demonstrates the colonial anxieties and tensions that informed the colonial project of English literature in India. The ‘native’ was placed in an ambiguous position in this frame. It is in such contexts that Indians were connected with the imperial project of English language and literature.

Independent India nurtured a strong tradition of English literature and language. Various universities and colleges became the leading centers where scholars and students have kept the tradition alive. Research in English literature inevitably connects with European philosophical aesthetics and thought. However, some new trends have reshaped the idea of English literature. Students grapple with various emerging and perplexing theoretical frameworks traversing over the centuries. These frameworks mainly draw on the European tradition, originating with Greek literature together with the Renaissance, as well as reading of the English text in British history and social and political life. In addition, European philosophers and Anglo-European critics too have made interventions in universities’ curriculum. Simultaneously, a few American authors were also introduced in the 1960s.

Another trend is the incorporation of African, Spanish, Afro-American, Latin American literature together with voices from the margins and epics into the curriculum after decolonization. In universities, translated works of regional and vernacular writers continue to enrich and expand the scope of higher research. Thus, in contemporary times, for the students of humanities and social sciences, the inclusion of cultural and literary texts in the curriculum and imagination is of critical importance. The regional fiction, drama and poetry have become hallmarks of new literary studies, which tend to reject the cultural hegemony of English language.

From the 1990s, the term ‘Indian Writing in English’ acquired immense significance. Currently, many research scholars have taken up research work on contemporary Indian writers writing in English. Most of these authors emerged in the 1990s and many regional writers are being resurrected but critical readings on their works are not easily available.

The colonial agenda framed a policy which introduced English literature in a systematic and logical manner, yet there were flaws in the

project. The post-colonial impulse to introduce vernacular texts has some limitations too. These texts often restrict themselves to a mechanical appropriation of Western aesthetics and philosophical frameworks at the expense of critical thinking, analysis and rigor. The challenges are many. In many north Indian universities, the number of students pursuing higher research in English literature is dwindling.

Literature has no boundaries and to restrict it to definite categories would be limiting and detrimental to the growth of students of literature and social sciences. An open-ended dialogue between different types of literature and literary theories is required to shape the critical thinking of younger minds. In the end, a conversation across disciplines—literature, philosophy, psychology, criticism, culture and psychology—will make the difference.

(The first draft of the article was published in *The Tribune* on 29 October, 2017)

Endnotes

- 1 Candler Edmund, *Sri Ram- Revolutionist–A Transcript from Life, 1907-23*, Constable,1912. All the citations to the text are from this edition and the page numbers have been given in the parenthesis immediately following the quotation.

Works Cited and Consulted

Macaulay, Babington, Thomas. *Minute on Education*,1835.

Kipling, Rudyard. *Life's Handicap: Being Stories of My Own People* 'The Head of the District', Penguin, 1987.

Minute on Education,1835.

Vishwanathan, Gauri, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Studies and British Rule in India*, Oxford University Press,1998.

Sarkar, Sumit. *Modern India 1885-1947*, Macmillan,1983.

Candler Edmund, *Sri Ram- Revolutionist–A Transcript from Life, 1907-23*, Constable,1912.