



## Decolonizing English Studies – The Kerala Experience

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### Abstract

This article is an attempt to trace the paradigm shifts that are slowly emerging in the field of English language and literature education in our country. Anchoring on the theoretical notions of post colonialism, the article explores into the syllabi and textbooks of undergraduate Common Courses of non-technical programmes of five universities in Kerala, India to understand how far these universities have marched forward in decolonizing their English studies. The immediate context of analysis is the curriculum restructuring spearheaded by the Kerala State Higher Education Council. The article argues that there have been considerable and appreciable efforts on the part of the syllabus framers to problematize the politics of English education in the postcolonial times and to offer alternatives that make forceful efforts to destabilize the canonical framework of colonial education and the pervasive pressures of neo-imperial hegemony.

**Key Words:** Decolonization, English Studies, Kerala, Syllabus.

### Introduction

*“Do not confine your children to your own learning, for they were born in another time.”*

Chinese Proverb

The course curriculum and the syllabus followed by a university are indicative of how the university updates and positions itself in the present world where knowledge itself has emerged as the greatest power. The world is growing at a phenomenal rate and every moment changes are taking place also in the production, acquisition and dissemination of knowledge. If the universities fail to cope with the dynamics of these changes, they will be losing their *raison d'être* in the present and the future times. Unfortunately, it is observed that Indian universities, as evidenced by various rating agencies, often fail to keep pace with the





current pace of knowledge expansion, especially in the context of the world emerging as a global village and production and dissemination of knowledge cutting across all conventional barriers. However, of late, there are certain rays of hope at least in our approach to the politics of knowledge production and dissemination with respect to English language and literature syllabi of various universities in the country. This paper is an attempt to trace such a change that is perceptible in the syllabi of Undergraduate-level English Common Courses (courses/papers that all students have to take for completing their UG programme, irrespective of their core/major/optional subject) in the non-technical universities in the southern state of Kerala in India. Inferences in this paper are drawn from the common elements visible in the syllabi of the said courses in five universities, viz. Kerala University, Thiruvananthapuram; Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam; University of Calicut, Malappuram; Kannur University, Kannur; and Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady. The immediate context of this study is the curriculum restructuring/revamping of the UG courses in the state in 2008 spearheaded by The Kerala State Higher Education Council (KSHEC). Theoretically basing its policies on the four pillars of learning put forth by the UNESCO, the KSHEC identified the skills to be developed in the UG students and drew broad outline and suggested guidelines as to how the UG studies in the state should proceed to meet the challenges of the time. Following these guideline, the universities offering non-technical/professional UG programmes got into the process of restructuring their curricula and syllabi.

This paper based on the view that education on the whole as well as its constituent aspects like the curriculum and the syllabus are not apolitical entities. The educational set up of a state with all its constitutive aspects truly reflects the power structure in operation and often resort to measures for consolidating the power hierarchy. Suresh Canagarajah makes this point unambiguously clear when he writes:

Knowledge ... is intrinsically social, and constructed through interaction between community members. The question as to which community's knowledge paradigm becomes the operating explanation of things is settled by an exercise of power. The knowledge of the dominant groups is imposed through the institutions at their disposal, including the school. This knowledge





in turn serves to justify the status quo. It is from this perspective that the post-Enlightenment and post-modern orientation understands educational activity as political. (18)

Therefore, every step being taken in educational reform of any sort can be taken only with maximum care regarding the power politics that gets entrenched in educational transactions.

### **English Education in Postcolonial Nations**

When it comes to the question of English education in a postcolonial society/nation like India, the issue gets more entwined. We have got that language as an offshoot of colonialism in the former centuries and of neocolonialism in the present. The curriculum of English studies in India assumes greater dimensions by virtue of the history of our colonial association with English language, on the one hand, and the global acceptance that this language enjoys even in the present postcolonial world, irrespective of the fact that it was a major tool of colonialism, on the other. In the colonial as well as in the postcolonial world, English language remains as an icon of power and prestige.

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)

Canagarajah 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)

The studies on the past, the present, and the future of English education in India has been quite promising in terms of quality, but meager in terms of quantity. Invariably in almost all these studies it has been argued that there is a ruling Anglo-centric assumption in university teaching of English in India. My study that resulted in this paper has actually taken off from that board. However, a scrutiny of the English Common Course syllabi of the universities in Kerala gives the impression that the picture is not entirely dismal. There have been very sincere and concerted efforts on the part of the Board of Studies of these universities in decolonizing at least the syllabus surviving over pressures of the multinational, neoliberal textbook as well as the ELT industries.

### **The Politics of Colonial Educational Canon and its Postcolonial Interrogations**

Before entering into an analysis of the features and achievements of the syllabi of the courses mentioned, I would like to deliberate briefly on certain theoretical insights that would set the stage for a postcolonial scrutiny. I quote seven forceful comments made by seven different, scholars/academicians/theorists:

1. It is true that language-related planning and policies need to be closely associated with the linguistic character of a particular region or country (Lele 83).
2. Conflicts over textbooks, for example, are often proxies for wider questions of power relations. Through both their content and form, textbooks legitimize particular constructions of reality and particular ways of selecting and organising the vast universe of possible knowledge (Advani 3).
3. Post colonialism, in direct contrast to colonialism's policy of subordination and erasure, looks for equality and the articulation of the 'difference'. It seeks to retrieve self-respect and lost history. The relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is one characterized by power and the production of knowledge. Post colonialism seeks to validate alternative epistemologies, to reverse the one-sided trend (Jain 22).
4. Dominant groups may use education, more specifically the curriculum, to see to it that voices other than their own are represented so inadequately, feebly,



or distortedly, that they develop a negative appeal and gradually lend themselves to be phased out in curriculum deliberation. None of this needs to be a conscious process, it actually may be a quiet, civilized dynamic of dominance (Kumar 13).

5. The 'standard' English is being freed from the cultural baggage that it used to carry and varieties of Indian 'english' have emerged. The linguistic hybridity of English in India is most vividly felt, besides fiction and films, in and around college campuses and more so in the magazines and journals that cater to the 'teen' and 'just out of teen' age groups. This deliberate abrogation of the English language rejects a normative concept of 'correct' or 'standard' English and "offers a counter to the theory that use of the colonialist's language inescapably imprisons the colonized within the established conceptual paradigms (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 5).
6. How stupid, how utterly stupid for a nation of one billion independent people to go studying year after year writers and authors who have no relevance to our lives, our culture, our history, our vision, our anything! Just because when we were servants, our masters—our colonial masters—forced us to do so (Narang 201).
7. The unitary idea of 'literature' that gained currency during the phases of colonialism and nationalism was implicated in high textual traditions. This resulted in the marginalisation of oral traditions and alternative definitions of the literary that were in circulation in the fields of culture during the same period. In the last three decades, issues of marginalisation and identity formation have become central to the study of literature. The canonical texts can no more be considered as representative of a culture or a society. The idea of canon reinforces elitist notions of literature. The idea of a single, dominant aesthetic that legitimises reading and writing of literature has lost its relevance (Ramakrishnan 14).

The notions and assumptions that we look for in a decolonized syllabus are embodied in these observations and I feel that they would provide me with a platform to approach the syllabi under discussion from a postcolonial vantage point.





When we go to the crux of the observations cited, we see that Chitra Lele says about the need to contextualize the language according to national and regional peculiarities which is very much essential in the case of English, as it is a global language. While Shalini Advani and Jain throw light of the politics of knowledge production and validation of epistemologies, Krishna Kumar unravels the hidden agenda of curriculum planning. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin speak of the postcolonial turn that English language has witnessed in postcolonial countries, whereas Harish Narang expresses his fury over our inability to bring the changes that Ashcroft and others mentioned into our syllabi and curriculum. E. V. Ramakrishnan's focus is on the politics of canon formation as well as on the need to explore the multicultural reality of Indian life.

It is with a distinct understanding of these highly potent concepts (politics of language varieties, hegemony of knowledge, possibilities of curriculum planning, decanonisation of English language, multiculturalism, and representation of the silenced and marginalized voices) that I attempt a postcolonial analysis of the syllabi.

### **Decolonizing English Education: The Kerala Model**

Let us now see whether the theoretical notions and possible changes envisaged by all the above scholars/academicians/theorists have really made their way into the UG Common Course English curricula of the universities in Kerala. As per the guidelines provided by the KSHEC to the universities in the state, which the universities have invariably followed to a great extent, there are six Common Courses in English, viz. "Communication Skills in English", "Academic Writing and Presentation", "Critical Reasoning and Writing", "Literature and Contemporary Issues", "Indian Constitution, Secular State and Sustainable Environment", and "History and Philosophy of Science". The Boards of Studies of the respective universities have tailored the title as well as the course content so as to suit their requirements.

Even a casual survey of the syllabi and textbooks of these courses would reveal the postcolonial temper pervasive almost throughout the curricula. Instead of catering to the monolithic reality of the Eurocentric world, as envisaged in the canonical European literary texts which were always the dominant presence in our university English syllabi, the restructured syllabi of these universities celebrate multiculturalism and polyphony. They take







a position that English literature need not be essentially written by the first language speakers; rather the experiences and writing strategies of the non-native speakers are equally legitimate and relevant. They raise powerful voices against all kinds of exclusions and accommodate with due respect the experiences and creative outputs of the muffled and marginalized sections of our multicultural society, such as dalits, women, rural farmers, victims of violence and so on. The subalterns really speak; speak loquaciously, through the pieces of these textbooks.

Until post colonialism 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. Only recently, there has been at least the “partial dismantling of the rigid boundary between literature and what has traditionally been regarded as ‘non-literature’” (Mukherjee 19). The syllabi under reference take this dismantling further forward by placing non-literary and newspaper articles at par with the literary text, establishing the truth that both literary and non-literary texts address the same social reality from different vantage points, thereby problematizing the very issue of ‘point of view’. The sections on critical thinking also provide a sound and creative platform for a meaningful deliberation on the multiple points of view.

The postcolonial discourse, as we know, makes us conscious of the dangers of globalization which, at least in some respect, is another form of continuing hegemony. The pieces on globalization in these syllabi make the students aware of these dangers and offer alternative views of development. They equally strike at the roots of overexploitation of nature and natural resources in the globalized world and propose the alternative of sustainable development as an icon of progress. Against the monocultural assault on local culture by the globalized, neoliberal economy, the articles included in the syllabus present the varied experiences and myths of the local culture which are capable of standing against all assaults.

Yet another marked feature of the curricula under reference is the recognition of the increasing importance of cultural studies. We are living in an academic atmosphere where cultural texts are considered as a sub-genre of the literary discourse (or literary discourse being treated as a sub-genre of cultural studies). Whatever be the case, the mutuality and complementariness of the literary and cultural discourses are admitted by all now. The curricula of most of the universities here have well imbibed this changed scenario; and





consequently there are a few texts and suggested activities that take the learners out of the classroom, into the world where different social activities become not merely lived experiences of a particular community but also academic texts for the cultural theorists in the making.

With respect to the language learning element (in courses anchored in communication skills) significant attempts have been made to do away with conventional approaches. The approach adopted here de-stabilizes the age-old reverential attitude towards British English (RP) and sees English as an international language. More emphasis is given to the acquisition of the required skills in the language to enhance the learners' soft skills and employability skills. Rigidities of language that pull the learners back have been sidelined and a more learner-centred approach with practical orientation has been adopted. The universities have conceived English chiefly as "a 'service' subject and a library language", to use the terminology of Qaiser Alam (8). These are of course, significant departures from the 'norms' and the academia can be proud that we have done something significantly to retrieve ourselves from the colonial educational paradigm, though after roughly seven decades of independence.

The curricula, the syllabi, and the textbooks under discussion really problematize, within the available space, almost all issues that are integral to postcolonial societies. They celebrate plurality and multiculturalism, make vocal the silenced voices of the peripheries, chutnify English language and make it a global lingua franca by removing the colonial traces, and accommodate genres that have been kept out of literary studies. The bold initiatives taken by these universities remind us that there is enough scope for us to try to evolve a paradigm of our own rather than blindly following the heels of the 'masters'.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, it can be seen that through the restructured curricula these universities have been able to bring to the fore the revised role of English in Indian classrooms and to evolve pedagogical practices to support and legitimize this new role. English is re-designed to be taught without western prejudices and the learners are sensitized about how these prejudices work in literary and language texts. The syllabi prepared by these universities very well balance both native and non-native contents. Also, there are considerable inclusions of regional language writers through translation. Even when literature from native English







writers are included, our students are advised to approach them with the feeling that they are not written by divinely-gifted and unquestionable lords of language but human beings whose views can be contested. There are, thus, attempts to make English a true 'global' language with no primacy attached to any particular variety.

As postcolonial thinkers argue, a postcolonial set up should be self-reflexive and critical of the systems imposed upon it by the erstwhile masters. In the syllabi of the universities in Kerala some sincere efforts are seen in this line. The much-awaited change has at least begun, though centuries after Lord Macaulay left for the better world.

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