
UNIT 4 ENGLISH TEACHING IN INDIA

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit we shall do a close reading of **Mukherjee's** essay "Certain Long – Simmering Questions" and thereby explore how English teaching is negotiated in our classrooms. What are the specific problems associated with this enterprise? Are they unique to our context? How enabling is theory in our pedagogic practice? These are some of the issues that are dealt with in *Provocations*. **Mukherjee's** essay shall be discussed at length to get an overview of the concerns of this book.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit let us critically examine the paradigms that envelop English teaching in our country through a discussion of the essay by **Meenakshi Mukherjee** prescribed in this course. This essay is included in the book *Provocations*, (ed. Mohan Ramananan, et al, Sangam Books, 1993, pp25-35). The essays in this volume have evolved from the papers read at a seminar organised by the British Council Library (BCL) and the University of Hyderabad in 1991. The essay in question examines major issues regarding English studies in India.

4.2 LEGACY OF THE PAST VS. POSSIBILITIES FOR THE FUTURE

A careful study of the earlier blocks would have helped you perceive the burden of history that envelops English studies in India. English in India, a colony of the British till 1947, cannot be taught without correlating the literary text and the political context. Our colonial past cannot be brushed aside while teaching the erstwhile coloniser's language and literature. The legacy of the past, as **Mukherjee** points out, inevitably creeps in, in our postcolonial classrooms. While examining this legacy, we have to locate the study of English as something that has, from the beginning, intertwined with the consolidation of the empire. The institutionalising of English, as discussed in the earlier blocks, continues to shape the course of English studies even today. Thus, English studies in India inevitably is also a reappraisal of:

- What is taught in the classroom
- How a text is taught in the classroom

- Who is taught; and
- Why this is being taught.

An answer to the above categories of what, how, who and why would enable us to appreciate the state and function of English studies in India. Before we comment upon the function of English studies in India, let us be very clear about the objectives of literary studies as well. We have to recognise that literary studies do not operate in a social vacuum. Teaching of literature is not a mere unravelling of aesthetic markers. Literary studies do not exist in "some pure realm of aesthetics and ideas", observes **Mukherjee**. Literature is as much a product of a society that it emerges from as any of society's other material productions. The production as well as reception of literature cannot be divorced from its social moorings. Given these premises, English Literary Studies cannot be examined without the social/ political context in which it is negotiated.

How should we teach English literature in India? This question, argues **Mukherjee**, is inextricably linked with our perception regarding the nature of literature itself. If we look at literature as embodying transcendental truths, as a repository of universal, eternal, immutable truths and values, then we could teach literature purely from the point of view of its aesthetic merits. Our enterprise in such a case would limit itself to the aesthetic pleasure produced by a literary text and focus on its technical perfections or imperfections. New critical readings of a literary text were such exercises that totally disregarded the pressures of history, culture and material forces on a literary text.

On the other hand, if we view literature as a representative product of its age and culture, then we shall recognise its moorings in history and a specific cultural context. We would then locate literature within the context of social, political, linguistic and institutional structures that determine both its production as well as its reception in a particular age. Hence, an unquestioning internalising of British values and its literary contours by Indian teachers is ruled out under the framework we have adopted. While teaching English literature we would have to deliberate about our location outside the culture that such a literary text embodies. Such a strategy would enable us to place the text within its framework of historical formations. Further, it would also enable us to analyse and reflect upon our position as readers of that text. Such a self-reflexive perception would examine our relationship to the culture that has produced the text. The perception would also throw light on the processes that have canonised the text and have initiated its consumption in contexts outside its original site of production.

In other words, why does a British national epic like **Milton's *Paradise Lost*** become a canonised text in our universities? Why and how do we study it? The ideological agenda governing the entry of this epic in our universities underlines the link between British rule and English literary studies in India. The discourse of obedience that *Paradise Lost* enjoins upon Man towards his creator was transferred to the colonial context to implicate the colonised subject in a similar hierarchical position of subordination towards the imperial race. Thus, while *Paradise Lost* was a radical text in many ways, it was also deployed by the powers that be for oppressive, imperialist designs in our soil. An English teacher/ student in India cannot ignore this placement of a text for the simple reason that English in India cannot be taught with any amount of political neutrality as is possible in the teaching of physics or statistics. In short, English studies in India involves an interrogation of class, gender, identity, language, power and nationality as embedded in a literary text. How we teach English literature is determined by:

- How we perceive literature as well as by
- How we receive our colonial past.

4.3 FUNCTION OF THE ENGLISH TEACHER IN INDIA

The function of the English teacher in the Indian context is, directly linked to the phenomenon of English literature teaching in India. If we reflect upon it we will realise that it is impossible for the English teacher to teach English literature without historicising either the text (subject) or the teacher/ taught (object)? In other words can she/he teach English literature in the tradition of an essentialist, universalist position whereby English literature can impart eternal values to all its readers without taking into account cultural specificity of the reader. If we concur with the discussion outlined so far, our answer would definitely be an emphatic no. The English teacher unlike her/his counterpart in other disciplines or even in other literature studies is located within our academy in a unique position. This teacher has the burden of assimilating English studies into the larger academic calendar of syllabus, examination and evaluation for a market-friendly degree, the practice shares with teaching in other disciplines. In addition, the English teacher alone is, perceived as someone determined by our colonial past, and one who has the potential consciousness of a postcolonial society that would wrestle with our history and contemporary culture. With the intent of carrying such a responsibility the English teacher would be able to bring to English literature studies a self-reflexive sensibility that could critique, problematise as well as explore the possibility of English literature studies in our context. The negotiation between our colonial legacy and the possibilities for TELI in a postcolonial context is a task that has been entrusted to the English literature teacher in India. This dual task empowers her/him to critically examine questions regarding class, race, strategic significance and enabling opportunities that lay hidden in English studies.

Such a task is not only mammoth but is also inadequately defined. It is not a very well demarcated space. Interestingly, it offers far greater autonomy to the teacher on the one hand and an exacting responsibility towards the student community on the other. A teacher of English literature is not imparting specific skills or linguistic competence, but a more important capability of ordering one's experience, of perceiving one's cultural identity and examining one's location in the immediate social context. It would be helpful to remember that Mukherjee emphasises the fact that while English is conceded as one of the official languages of India, it does not occupy the same position as the other fifteen-odd recognised languages. It occupies a more privileged position. Why? We have noted in the earlier units how English occupies a distinct class in our society. It is not a foreign language like Spanish or French. Nor is it an Indian language like Tamil or Urdu. English, in fact, is the language of empowerment. Hence, this language and its literature cannot escape the complex texture of class, race, nation and politics of power that lay embedded in its dissemination. The English teacher is, thus, ever aware that he/ she is not teaching a "value-neutral tongue" as Mukherjee aptly puts it.

Recognition of the common assumption of the student and the teaching community regarding English as a language of class privilege and economic power invests the English teacher with enormous clout in our society. The traffic between curriculum/ canon formation and value formation assumes a formidable significance. The values held out for emulation are deeply marked by perceptions of the privileged social class. How representative are they of the teeming millions who struggle for their daily survival in our country?

The answer is obvious. The tacit complicity, the undeniable link between pedagogy and power needs to be explored in the context of the poor, working, economically and socially deprived classes. How empowering or disempowering is English to them? Does the English teacher stand alienated from the masses? Can she/he impart a new impetus to English studies in India by bringing the aspirations, anxieties and modes of struggle of the under-privileged classes of our country to bear upon the literary discourse under scrutiny in the classroom? If this could be done, the elitist

badge of English literature studies could be combated in a significant manner. Further, by establishing a dialogue between literature discourse and the struggle of the masses for social and economic parity, English literature studies could recover its fast eroding centrality in the academy where professional courses have begun to assert their hegemony. The teacher then could also encourage students to establish a two way movement /trafficking between literatures in the Indian languages, the literature in English written in India and literatures in English from other parts of the world. The time has come to make a critical appraisal of the role and function of the English teacher in India. She/he has to raise questions, hitherto brushed under the carpet as discomfiting, regarding “literature and power, language and identity, class and gender, education and employment.” This would result not only in a critical examination of the legacy of English but also set up possibilities for a change in its agenda. Teaching of English is ideologically implicated – it always has been. Only now a keener awareness has to be brought into focus to retrieve English studies from being sucked up by the newer dominant, privileged sections of society. Let us now examine another aspect of the same complexity- curriculum design.

4.4 CURRICULUM FRAMING: THE DEBATE CONTINUES

The course of English studies in India remained more or less fixed and rigid from its days of institutionalisation in the mid-nineteenth century to the first two decades of post-Independence era. English studies was imparted as an ennobling, value-filled, humanising exercise. Authors like **Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Tennyson** and **Shelley** formed the staple diet. Secondly, their works were taught as embodying universal, morally elevating values that cannot fail to ennoble Indian hearts, never mind the latter's tryst with colonial history. There was an unwritten but rigidly enforced compartmentalisation of “our” literature and “their” literature. No traffic was envisaged or encouraged between the two. Indian students switched themselves off from their knowledge of their folklore, their music, traditional arts, theatre traditions and their literatures when they entered the English classroom. The twain shall never meet, they were told. And Indian students continued to study authors who were considered canonical by the British academy. In other words, it was a canon imposed from the outside, unresponsive to our culture, our needs and expectations. Such a canon was regarded as sanctified and impregnable to challenge or questioning. **Mukherjee** argues that we have to be acutely conscious of the issue of ‘canonicity’. In other words, we have to be alert as to who defines a canon of literature texts – when, why and for whom. If we evade this issue, we are doomed to confine literature and life as mutually exclusive categories.

We should have the choice of framing our syllabus – restructuring it to suit our changing needs and concerns. Once we agree upon the purpose of literature teaching as a socially useful activity, an ideologically constructed and contextually formulated exercise, then we can embark upon drawing up innovative, alternative, multiple optional course to energise English literature studies and bring them closer to our cultural matrix. Curriculum revision also entails a recognition of important facts such as the availability of texts, marketing and publishing constraints, flow of funds/ grants, fellowships, library infrastructure, etc. This, in truth, further foregrounds how the academy or literature studies in particular do not operate in a pure, aesthetic realm but are governed by material forces both non-literary and non-academic. In the next section of our discussion we shall look at some of the trends and key concepts in the teaching of English Literature in India.

4.5 CONCEPTS, LABELS, TRENDS IN TELI

At this point of our discussion, we have to deliberate upon an interesting aspect concerning English studies. Not only have we been studying a canon envisaged for us

by the western academy, but periodically, we have also accepted the numerous labels and nomenclatures formulated by British/ American universities. Over the years, this culminates in what one can term as a literary trend. At times, new labels are coined for older, traditional areas of study and are unquestioningly accepted by us. One good example of this practice would be the concept of commonwealth literature. To begin with, this concept did not take its origin in our country or for that matter in any of the former colonies of Britain. Commonwealth literature denoted literatures in English originating from the various ex-colonies of Britain. The commonality of these literatures was restricted to the shared experience of imperial dominion by these diverse cultures. Thus, literatures emerging from diverse, cultures like New Zealand, Australia, India, South Asian countries, Africa, etc. were all clubbed together under the nomenclature "Commonwealth literature". We can see that this grouping puts together extremely divergent cultural spaces under one canopy for political convenience. It was an attempt to estimate their literary output purely as vague and shadowy reflections of their contact with the British Empire. It assumed and encouraged a secondary, critical perspective that still looks up to "academic leadership and intellectual recognition" from their erstwhile rulers. The institutionalising of Commonwealth literature thus was envisioned from outside. The intent was clearly political aimed at creating a subordinate category of writing in English. It assumed that literature writing from India, Africa or Australia would be identical and open to easy homogenisation. This is a totally false promise. Africa in itself is a highly rich and complex, cultural space. So is, the case with a country like India with multiple traditions, linguistic, regional, religious and other variations that help form a multi-textured composite discourse. Studying such writing under the common banner of Commonwealth literature was misleading. The common link between heterogenous cultures was a British colonial past and the use of English. This was hardly sufficient to sustain a discipline or any ideologically pertinent premise.

In the late 80s strong resistance gained ground against this label. This category of Commonwealth literature made sufficient inroads in the academy. Much academic research, projects, M Phil Programmes and MA courses were devoted to this trend.

Slowly this began to wane and was displaced by another label that gained steady momentum. What we have come to call the Postcolonial Studies remains till date a popular trend. This is yet another interesting story. The emergence of postcolonial studies or what some posited as postcolonial theory was in fact a rechannelling of the earlier concept of Commonwealth literature in a slightly more radical and better formulated mode. Postcolonial studies emerged following a strong resistance to the term Commonwealth literature. It postulated a self-reflexive, critical awareness of postcoloniality on the part of the writer as well as the reader. Beginning with the nineties, the term Commonwealth has been disbanded and in its place the term postcolonial has gained prominence. There are two aspects to this nomenclature. One connotes postcolonial as a chronological marker i.e. the era following the liberation of a colony. The second includes experience of the colonial period after the colonising powers beat a retreat following resistance from the colony. This includes a specific way of reading, a particular perception of global traffic in moments of history. It also demarcates a longer period for consideration. Like the earlier tag of Commonwealth literature, postcolonial literature also includes only literature written in English not in the other languages of the former colonies. For instance, in India, there has been a strong resistance against the empire and colonial politics not only in English but, much more stridently in Bengali, Tamil, Hindi, Marathi and other languages. The concept of postcolonial literature does not take such writings into consideration.

We have to recognise the disturbing fact that English in a postcolonial society is not just a neutral medium of unification. Nor is it, except perhaps in Australia and to some extent in Canada, a language of the soil. Far from being a language of the experience or tradition, is, in fact, a language of political and social empowerment. In such a context, the exclusion of non-English literary discourse from the purview of

postcolonial studies is a serious limitation. Further, with the liberation of most of the colonies and the comparative dilution of Britain in the global power equation, postcolonial societies have shifted their focus from the empire to the grid of neo-colonial forces that have invaded their economies. Hence, their writings can no longer be simplistically estimated only in the tradition of "the empire writes back" but rather in a wider context where the conflation of capitalist, consumerist interests and neo-colonial corporate designs on developing, newly liberated societies have drawn the attention of writers, artists and readers. In a multilingual society, a homogenising composite label like the Commonwealth literature or postcolonial literature does not truly reflect the nature and ideology of its literature. It overlooks the distinctive marks of each culture, its history and its place in the contemporary world. Such labels tend to impose an artificial, reductive, hierarchical relationship between the west and the non-west.

4.6 CRITICAL THEORY AND ENGLISH STUDIES IN INDIA

Mukherjee concludes her essay by analysing how contemporary critical theories can validate alternative strategies of teaching and learning English literature in our country. By dismantling the central authority of "one unitary system of knowledge", critical theories have empowered teachers and students of English literature in India to evolve innovative strategies in the transmission of English studies. One fixed, monolithic interpretation of a text has been rejected now. Thus, it has been made possible to break the shackles of centralised, pedagogue-centred learning. In our classrooms, now an active, two-way negotiation of text is being encouraged. The teacher is no longer the sole disseminator of knowledge. The text is open to interpretation, based more on discussion, dialogue, debate, thus paving the way for a more fruitful negotiation. Critical theories supportive of pluralistic perspectives and multivalent discourses have made it imperative to adopt "collaborative learning" in our classrooms. Let us quote **Mukherjee** at this point:

If instead of presenting a course in literature as 'objective truth' or knowledge with a capital K, the teacher can be explicit about her rationale behind the choice of readings, her own position and confess that her own perspective may be partial, then a truly dialogic process of learning may be generated. If there is conflict of opinion or of interpretation between the teacher or student, or between student and student, it may be a positive factor rather than a problem. (Provocations, 34)

Critical theory guarantees that teachers equip students with ways of reading a text. The monolithic lecture method whereby students are lectured at rather than promote a dialogue between the teacher and the student has, of course, to be abandoned. When students are empowered to read literary texts based on their acquired reading skills backed by an ideological orientation, they would be able to negotiate the various texts that they tackle in their daily life - texts of their society, the electronic and print media, of religion, politics of fashion and that of the market. Ways of reading literature, after all, prepare one to read life with keener intelligence and sensitivity. To prioritize such a task in our teaching of English literature would be a meaningful and rewarding engagement.

4.7 LET US SUM UP

In the context of English studies in India, the legacy of the past has to be probed in conjunction with an exploration of the possibilities of change. English teaching in India has to be an enterprise that co-relates the literary text with the social text that

forms the living experience for the teacher and the learning. As English is the language of empowerment for us, rather than the language of tradition or culture, we have to posit English literature within the framework of race, class, gender, identity, language, employment and power. This also calls for a keen awareness of the question of canonicity - who formulates a canon, for whom, when and why. Instead of adopting labels, concepts and trends that are current in western academy, we have to subject them to a critical examination and set up our own agenda based on an awareness of our needs, aspirations and anxieties. As contemporary critical theories have liberated us from univocal discourse and a centralised authority, it would be highly rewarding to apply those insights in our classrooms. Collaborative learning, inter-active discussions are better strategies in negotiating literary texts in the classroom.

4.8 QUESTIONS

- 1) Critically evaluate the role and function of the English teacher in India.
- 2) Discuss how theory can validate alternative pedagogic strategies in the classroom.

4.9 GLOSSARY

Aesthetic:	pleasure derived from appreciation of art, often in exclusion of social relevance.
Assimilate:	to absorb, to adopt.
Concur:	to agree.
Critique:	to evaluate critically.
Emulation:	(here) to mimic, to model oneself on; mindless imitation unconcerned of one's social, cultural context and requirements.
Envisioned:	to devise, to visualise.
Matrix:	foundation, an enveloping structure.
Nomenclature:	categorisation.
Neo-colonial:	newer formulation of colonial intent in a post-colonial context, often pertaining to economic and cultural sphere. For instance, the MNCs in India are perceived to cater to neo-colonial impulses.