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Protraction of Colonial Oppression: Reconsidering the Teaching of English Language and Literature in India.

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Abstract

The instruction of English language and literature in India remains largely ineffective, as it persists as a mechanically replicated academic practice disconnected from the aspirations, needs, and expectations of the vast number of students who pursue these programmes. English Studies continue to be offered at all levels as though it were an ongoing colonial enterprise, with objectives misaligned with the socio-cultural and economic realities of contemporary India. Ironically, many students' complete degrees in English without developing even basic functional literacy. The discipline has consequently evolved into a heavily subsidized yet unproductive academic structure lacking direction, purpose, and contextual relevance. The focus must shift from the conventional act of "teaching" English language and literature to enabling meaningful "learning" and active "reading," ensuring literacy and communicative competence take precedence. Postcolonial Indian learners require English as a pragmatic tool for economic and social advancement rather than solely as a medium for aesthetic contemplation. Accordingly, the paper argues that teachers should transition from authoritative interpreters to facilitators and mentors who cultivate essential language skills. The teaching of English must therefore be restructured and de-institutionalized in order to meet present needs.

Key Words:

Literary colonialism, rote learning, functional literacy, communicative English, curriculum reform, student needs, skill acquisition, de-institutionalization, post-colonial context.

Background to the Study

A central concern of postcolonial theory is the examination of the prolonged influence of colonial domination. The introduction and continued prominence of English Studies in both colonial and post-independence India exemplify this legacy. Its persistence, along with its cultural, linguistic, and academic implications, calls for critical evaluation of intertwined imperialisms—literary, linguistic, educational, and cultural. Surprisingly, policymakers have seldom addressed the deep-rooted imperialistic frameworks embedded in English literary studies. Political discourse typically focuses only on the dominance of English in public domains, noting its evolution from a colonial language to a global medium of modernization. Yet, English literature educators have rarely questioned the fundamental purpose of English Studies in India. As Rushdie (2010:17) aptly states, English cannot be used in the same manner as its colonial origins and must be reshaped to suit local realities. The primary argument here is that the dominance of English Studies undermines indigenous languages and literatures, fostering cultural assimilation rather than intercultural competence.

Research Questions

This study poses the following questions to evaluate the sociopolitical implications of Teaching English Language and Literature (TELL) in India:

- Why do Indian writers with English education choose English as their creative medium?
- Why does English literature continue in academic institutions after independence? Are there policies regulating this?
- What motivates students to pursue English literature as an academic major?
- How does English Studies affect indigenous languages, local cultures, educational structures, and society?
- Has there been a shift in objectives between colonial English education and contemporary postcolonial English Studies?

Agenda of Literary Colonialism

Language occupies a central role in postcolonial inquiry. It is widely acknowledged that colonizers imposed their language and literature to achieve ideological, religious, and socio-political control (Viswanathan, 2009). Dalrymple (2006:71) highlights that the British sought to “uplift” the colonized by introducing English literature as a civilizing force. Charles Grant similarly argued that English would dispel “darkness” and introduce the colonized to new forms of thought (Sharp: 83). The colonists perceived Indians as backward and lacking progress; English literature thus became a tool for shaping obedient, morally aligned subjects suitable for colonial administration. Over time, English became associated with power and prestige, and English Studies emerged as a vehicle for social mobility. Its disciplinary structure emphasized close reading, explication, and examination-driven learning—a tradition that persists today despite broader political and epistemic shifts. Although additional literary traditions have been integrated into curricula, the fundamental approach to English Studies remains unchanged, and serious evaluation of its relevance in postcolonial India is still lacking.

Postcolonial Writers' Ambivalent Attitude toward English

Postcolonial authors hold differing views regarding the use of English as a literary medium. One group rejects English entirely, advocating a return to indigenous languages. Another group seeks to appropriate English for local expression, shaping distinct “Englishes.” Their acceptance of English aligns with the Indian understanding of English not as an external imposition but as a language assimilated into cultural and intellectual life.

Objectives / Policies of English Studies in Postcolonial India

Although writers have justified their continued use of English, academic circles in India have not critically examined why English Studies thrive in post-independence educational systems. In a democracy, individuals may freely read world literatures for intellectual or personal enrichment, but this does not explain why English remains an academic discipline with institutional authority. Questions persist: Does English Studies retain the colonial functions once assigned to it? Does it produce competent language teachers? Many graduates demonstrate minimal communicative proficiency despite their ability to summarize literary texts; they often become teachers who perpetuate weak language instruction. The discipline thus survives as a subsidized but inefficient structure sustained by misinformed students and inadequately trained faculty. Students frequently assume that studying English literature will enhance their communication skills, though this is seldom the case. The curriculum is outdated, lacking vision and responsiveness to societal needs. Furthermore, many English literature students remain alienated from their own cultural and linguistic heritage, reinforcing loss of identity.

Impact of English Studies on Indigenous Languages and Literatures

There exists an unequal academic relationship between English departments and those devoted to indigenous languages. English departments often project prestige, while regional literature departments rely on Western theoretical frameworks mediated through English. This dynamic positions English as both cultural gatekeeper and academic authority, perpetuating linguistic and literary imperialism.

The impact of English Studies on indigenous languages and literatures has been both transformative and contested. On one hand, the institutionalization of English through colonial education systems often marginalized local languages, relegating them to informal or domestic spaces. This led to a decline in the literary production, transmission, and prestige of many indigenous traditions. Canon formation in English further reinforced Eurocentric literary standards, influencing what was considered “literature” and often excluding oral and regional forms.

On the other hand, English Studies has also facilitated new opportunities for indigenous expression. The spread of English as a global language has enabled writers to reach wider audiences, bringing local narratives into international literary discourse. Translation practices, often mediated through English, have played a crucial role in preserving and disseminating regional literatures. Moreover, contemporary

scholarship within English Studies increasingly engages with postcolonial and subaltern perspectives, encouraging the inclusion of marginalized voices and texts.

Thus, the relationship between English Studies and indigenous literatures is complex. While it has historically contributed to linguistic hierarchies and cultural displacement, it has also evolved into a space that can support revitalization, recognition, and cross-cultural dialogue when approached critically and inclusively.

Literary Colonialism / Imperialism

English professors, often perceived as embodiments of cultural sophistication, benefit from symbolic privilege, while teachers of indigenous literatures face marginalization. This colonial mindset manifests in dress, speech, pedagogy, and institutional hierarchies. English literary instruction encourages cultural alienation by distancing learners from their own cultural contexts. Emphasis on Standard English, RP, and Western academic norms sustains linguistic and educational imperialism. Academic dependency is further reinforced through imported academic structures, standardized international tests, and reliance on Western documentation styles (MLA, APA), indicating a lack of indigenous research frameworks.

Conclusions

There is an urgent need for foundational research addressing the core issues of teaching and learning English in India. Curriculum reform must promote bilingualism, bicultural communication, and comparative literary studies that place indigenous literatures alongside world literatures in English. A shift from aesthetic consumption to intellectual inquiry, supported by postcolonial critique, is essential to reframe the discipline for contemporary relevance.

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