

## Conference Paper

# New Frontiers of English Studies in South Asia

**Mohd Asaduddin**

Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India

**Abstract**

English Studies in South Asia has undergone significant changes. Some of the countries have a history of British colonialism which promoted English literature and language as an important instrument of political domination and acculturation. Even after the British colonialism ended the dominance of English continues in these countries. English has become the language of the privileged class and studying English literature a symbol of prestige. However, in its quest for relevance, English Studies had to incorporate new areas of knowledge under its purview. Literary theory made a big splash in English Studies and changed the way of approaching and assessing literature. English Studies also saw rigorous debates about the relationship between English Literature and ELT and different approaches in their pedagogy. Then, postcolonial literature and theory made its impact felt in the field. Two other domains that have enriched the field of English Studies are Comparative literature and Translation Studies. English writings emanating from former colonies in Asia are going to constitute a strong strand while Asian writings translated into English are also making their impact felt in English Studies in South Asia.

Corresponding Author:

Mohd Asaduddin

Asado468@gmail.com

Received: 13 March 2018

Accepted: 10 April 2018

Published: 19 April 2018

**Publishing services provided by  
Knowledge E**

© Mohd Asaduddin. This article is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons](#)

[Attribution License](#), which permits unrestricted use and redistribution provided that the original author and source are credited.

Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the AICLL Conference Committee.

**Keywords:** South Asia, English Studies, Literary Theory, ELT, Comparative literature, Translation Studies

## 1. Introduction

English Studies in Asia has been undergoing significant changes in the last two to three decades. The pace of this change differs from country to country, depending on the situations, the colonial encounter, if they had any, and other variables existing in them. The countries that were under the British imperial rule like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka had received it as a colonial legacy. The countries that were not under the British colonial rule such as Indonesia or other countries in the Eastern Archipelago had a quite different trajectory of English Studies than the earlier group of countries. However, one common feature that is observed in all of them in contemporary times is a movement away from pure Eng-lit to literatures in English. Academics located

**OPEN ACCESS**

in Asian countries started seriously questioning the validity of teaching the literature emanating from Great Britain or the United States of America that were culturally remote and not considered relevant to students' immediate experiences and their socio-cultural milieu.

## 2. Historical Lineage

This was the predominant feeling in a country like India with a history of British colonialism where English Studies as a formal discipline had established itself even before it did so in England or Great Britain. During the course of the paper I will make frequent references to India, because among all the South Asian countries it is in India that English Studies has been fully entrenched for the longest time, and the changes and shifts taking place in India have often its impact in the rest of South Asia.

English Studies was used as an important instrument of acculturation in India and it grew firm roots in the length and breadth of the country. The British administrators viewed English literature as embodying the highest values of the British nation which they wanted to impart to the natives in India. English literature was sought to convey the higher levels of historical progress and moral standard of the English society. In other words, they thought of English literature as constituting the cultural history of the nation, or as Charles Kingley put it in his inaugural lecture at the Queen's College in London in 1848, English literature was nothing less than "the autobiography of the nation." The British educational policy makers in India, from 1835 onwards, saw to it that English was taught from the school levels. In his notorious *Minute on Education* (1835), Charles Babington Macaulay, who was responsible for a paradigm shift in the education policy in India declared:

I have no knowledge of either Sanskrit or Arabic. But I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value. I have read translations of the most celebrated Arabic and Sanskrit works. I have conversed, both here and at home, with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. I am quite ready to take the oriental learning at the valuation of the orientalist themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. (Macaulay, 1835)

It is simply breathtaking how Macaulay could dismiss out of hand the rich literary traditions of India and Arabia in a single sentence. It was the arrogance of power that

made him pass judgements on the centuries-old civilizations without making the necessary efforts to understand them. This infamous statement of Macaulay has attracted much criticism over the ages. Edward Said, the great postcolonial critic, writes:

Macaulay's was an ethnocentric opinion with ascertainable results. He was speaking from a position of power where he could translate his opinions into the decision to make an entire subcontinent of natives submit to studying a language not their own. This in fact is what happened. In turn this validated the culture to itself by providing a precedent, and a case, by which superiority and power are lodged both in a rhetoric of belonging, or being "at home", so to speak, and in a rhetoric of administration: the two become interchangeable. (Said, 1983: 12-13)

No wonder that it was institutionalised in India much ahead than in any other country. It did not disappear after the independence of the country. Instead, it consolidated further as it was patronised by the new elite that had made significant investments in ES. English changed from the language of the colonial masters to the language of the privileged in India. It continued to remain the language of power. Of course, there were fierce debates in India about the validity of retaining the coloniser's language and demands were sporadically made by certain groups to do away with it. However, for a variety of reasons English was retained, and in many cases, it became the medium of Higher Education in colleges and universities in India. From then onwards, it has grown from strength to strength.

### 3. A Stagnation and a Revival

However, in the seventies and eighties of the last century, there was growing restlessness about the limited nature of English Studies. Several volumes and essays came out (Joshi: 1991; Rajan: 1992; Marathe, Ramanan and Bellarmine: 1993) that reflected the anxiety of teachers of English studies who felt that the domain had stagnated and required new innovations to keep it relevant and keep the students abreast of the changes that were taking place in the area.

A need was felt to make ES more relevant to the learners' needs. One way it was sought to be done was to expand the canon of ES to embrace literatures produced in English in different parts of the world. This came to be known as 'New Literature in English'. Such courses included literature in English produced in settler colonies such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand etc. This led to an expansion of the canon and study of a much wider range of literature than was earlier done under the rubric of ES. Within India, a rich body of literature written originally in English appeared and there

was no reason not to include this body of literature in the English canon. This body of literature has been variously known as 'Anglo-India' 'Indo-Anglian' and 'Indian English' literature. Such bodies of literature have now emerged from Pakistan and Srilanka as well. Perhaps, Bangladesh will be the latest entrant in this field. Still later, in the late nineties of the last century and the first decade of the twentieth century literature from the former British colonies began to emerge and gradually made a splash and then totally transformed the complexion and contours of the ES. This literature has come to be known as postcolonial literature. The scope of postcolonial literature is so vast and it embraces so many areas that it has proved truly liberating for English Studies and its practitioners. It has also carved a niche in the Western academia where postcolonial literature and theory are being studied. The texts and writers in these courses are generally non-western, as also the theorist. For the first time in the history of English Studies, texts and theorists from Asia occupied the central place.

#### 4. English Literature and ELT

In the era after independence from colonial rule in several countries, English was mainly studied for two purposes – first, learning English language for an instrumentalist purpose, i.e. as a skill for business and other requirements, and then studying English literature for its critical, cultural and aesthetic values. We have seen a great surge forward of English as a language not just of communication but also of creative endeavour. There have always been debates in ES about how much of language and how much of literature should make the correct combination. It was also debated whether language should be taught through literature or special skill-based teaching of language should be adopted. There is sometimes a split in English Studies departments between those who have completed their degrees and started teaching both literature and language and those who have done their specialised degrees in ELT and emphasise techniques of teaching in language acquisition. They stress that students must develop the ability to critically review theories of and issues on methods of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) or Teaching English as a second language, or Teaching English for Special Purpose (ESP). The most recent trend is that some English departments are turning themselves into 'Departments of English and Cultural Studies', while proficiency in English is being taught separately and independently under ELT departments. This is not a very welcome development. Separating ELT from other aspects of English Studies, and therefore putting ELT outside current English Departments, could be counterproductive for such departments. Language skills have a crucial bearing

on all aspects of English Studies, and teaching thereof needs to be integrated within English Studies departments.

English proficiency has become the new buzzword in the age of globalisation, transnational market and internet. Educational administrators at universities, Vice chancellors and presidents want students to acquire a certain level of proficiency in English, whatever their subject of study. Susan Sontag's essay "The World as India" (2003) and David Crystal's books, particularly *English as a Global Language* (2003) point out the extraordinary reach and penetration of the spoken English in India and all around the world. Sontag refers to the large-scale mushrooming of call-centres where workers are trained to speak a certain variety of spoken English in order to cater to customers located thousands of miles away. She celebrates the success of Indians in harvesting their efficient English speaking skills in the global economy through call centres and other outsourcing services. Crystal demonstrates with facts and figures how English has truly become a global language, developing varieties and inflections in different regions. This variety of English is not what was supposed to be 'good', 'correct' or 'proper' English. Under the circumstances, English Studies can no longer subscribe to an academic view of English as primarily a language of creativity and criticism, and nor to a purely instrumental view of English as serving functional market-oriented ends. A balance needs to be struck. To do so, the purposes of a rounded education at different levels need to be considered. HE English Studies has to reflect the multiple dimensions of English usage. Language skills have a crucial bearing on all aspects of English Studies, and teaching thereof needs to be integrated within English Studies departments. We can also no longer adhere to one standard English because we have many englishes [8] now with their own validity. It is futile to waste time and energy in trying to speak like the British or the Americans or the Australian. In fact, the largest numbers of speakers of English are now outside these countries. The primary criterion of spoken English should be intelligibility and nothing else.

## 5. Advent/Invasion of Theory

The advent, some would call it 'invasion', of literary theory several decades ago has transformed English literary studies in a significant way. Old style literary criticism has largely been replaced by literary theory. A vast array of literary theories – from the post-structural to deconstruction to postcolonial -is deployed in the analysis of literary texts. The reader is now seen not only as a passive receiver but an active producer

of meaning. The old style Leavisite criticism gradually lost its purchase and validity giving way to a more active, interventionist and sometimes more robust interpretation of literary texts. After the significant interventions of critics like Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton, reading and criticism of literature underwent a sea-change. They, along with a host of other theorists advocated the view that there is nothing that can be called an innocent reading of literature, as literature is deeply ideological... English literature developed in many colonies as an ideological tool for the British imperialists. In the context of India, Gauri Viswanathan's Book, *Masks of Conquest* (1989) explores how the British in India has used the study of English literature as a cultural tool to consolidate and perpetuate their power and exploit the natives, by colonising their mind.

Theory has certainly brought a breath of fresh air in the domain of English literary studies. However, at its extreme, it had its harmful effects too. An over-enthusiasm about theory has taken the focus off from the text to its theoretical dissection. Reading of literature as a joyful and delightful activity is sometimes reduced to its purported ideological implications and its amenability to certain theoretical interpretation. Theorists seem to acquire the ability to make the text yield whatever meaning they want it to.

It often seems that literary theory has become an autotelic, self-sustaining domain by itself, outside of literature. It has become so rarefied and jargonised that it alienates rather than enlightens readers of literature. I am highlighting the extreme form that over-use of theory has resulted to. That does not mean that I am advocating a totally theory-free reading of literature. A judicious use of theory does have the potentiality to make our readings and interpretations more nuanced and complex. The question is one of balance and discretion. Further, all theories do not travel equally and may not be applicable for all kinds of genre. For example, highly sophisticated French Feminist theory which came out of the specific socio-cultural and political conditions of the time obtaining in France may not be fruitfully deployed to the literature in some Asian countries where feminist writing may be at a nascent stage.

## 6. English Literature and Translation Studies

In the last couple of years, English departments at many places have embraced Translation studies in a major way. Translation or translated texts have always been a part of the English canon, but those translated texts were mainly from European languages, from Greek and Latin, French and German and so on. Often students studied those

texts without being aware of the fact that the texts they were studying were not originally written in but translated into English. But what is happening now is that the literature written in indigenous languages in different Asian countries is being translated into English and students in English departments are studying them under rubrics like, 'Indian Literature in English Translation', 'Pakistani Literature in English Translation', 'Srilankan Literature in English Translation', and so on. I assume that in Indonesia and neighbouring countries, such a phenomenon is already in place, or if not so, efforts could well be under way towards this direction. Such an expansion of the canon is allowing students to expand their knowledge in the literature of their country, alongside the core areas of English literature. This will also build bridges between English departments and other language departments in the university and make for a rich inter-lingual exchange. The exposure of the students of English departments to the literature (s) of their own country, in however rudimentary form, will help them value their own literature and develop a fine sense of discrimination. New insights into translation activity has made us aware that we should be familiar with concepts such as 'domestication' and 'foreignisation' [9] and follow a model in our practice that is suitable for our own purpose and agenda in the contemporary times, not just aping the west.

## 7. English Literature and Comparative Literature

English Studies departments at some places have also made significant forays in Comparative Literature. Comparative literature as a discipline has developed in Europe, mainly comparing literatures from European countries. Within Europe at least there are two prominent schools of comparative literature – the French school and the American school. The French school of comparative literature stressed the linguistic criteria and specialised in influence studies while the American school of comparative literature adopted an interdisciplinary approach as its ideal. Courses can be designed on similar lines on Comparative Asian Literature, Comparative South Asian Literature or Comparative East Asian Literature. In large, multi-lingual countries like India with highly developed literary traditions in many languages, courses in comparative literature can be designed encompassing different languages of the country. For example, courses like 'Comparative Indian Literature' are designed and studied in English departments, where texts available in English translation are drawn from different Indian literatures. The question may arise whether comparative literature should form a part of English studies or it should be studied separately. Both the models are available in India.

Sometimes it is a question of resources. Where resources are available there can be separate and independent departments or centres of comparative literature. Where sources are not available, special papers in comparative literature can be studied under the general rubric of English Studies. Comparison has always been an integral part of English Studies. Study of English literature always involved references to Greek and Latin texts and mythologies.

## 8. Conclusion

As can be seen from the above, English Studies has discovered several new frontiers in its quest for relevance and greater acceptability. In fact, no domain of study can remain static and yet relevant. Over the past three decades the Concept of ES has changed and expanded to embrace several new areas of study so that one can now study a large number of areas covered under the general rubric of English Studies. A valid criticism of this expansion is that the core of English Studies is getting lost because of too much dispersal. The question then will arise what is the core or the centre, and what are the peripheries. The idea of a fixed core of English studies is being challenged now. It is advocated that the phenomenal expansion of knowledge and information in the field demands that we redefine the core for our contemporary times.

## References

- [1] Joshi, Svati ed. (1991). *Rethinking English: Essays in Literature, Language, History*. New Delhi: Trianka.
- [2] Marathe, Sudhakar, Mohan Ramanan, and Robert Bellarmine eds. (1993). *Provocations: The Teaching of English Literature in India*. Chennai: Orient Blackswan.
- [3] Rajan, Rajeswari Sunder ed. (1992). *The Lie of the Land: English Literary Studies in India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- [4] Said, Edward. (1983). *The World, the Text and the Critic*, Harvard: Harvard University Press
- [5] Sontag, Susan. (2003). "The World as India", *Times Literary Supplement*, June 13
- [6] Crystal, David. (2003). *English as a Global Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- [7] Viswanathan, Gauri. (1989). *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, New York: Columbia University Press



- [8] Bolton, Kingsley & Kachru, Braj (ed). (2006). *World Englishes: Critical Concepts in Linguistics*. London: Routledge
- [9] Venuti, Lawrence. (2008). *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, London: Routledge