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PROVINCIALIZING ENGLISH: THE DECOLONIAL TURN IN
ENGLISH STUDIES IN INDIA

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Keywords	Abstract
<i>Decoloniality,</i> <i>Epistemic Disobedience,</i> <i>Coloniality of Power,</i> <i>Linguistic Capital,</i> <i>Critical Pedagogy.</i>	The study of English in Postcolonial India remains heavily influenced by colonial ideologies, academic structures and canon development. Post-colonial theory has been critical of colonial ideologies for many decades, but recently, academics and researchers have begun to re-evaluate their previous conceptual work, looking more towards what is called the 'decolonial turn' - a stronger, more revolutionary effort designed not just to critique, but also to take apart and substantially reshape the fundamental conceptual basis of English Studies. In relation to this re-evaluative process, this paper focuses on the decolonial turn in the field of English Studies with reference to India, emphasising how the decolonial turn shall impact canon development, pedagogy/teaching methods, language politics, and systems of knowledge development. By drawing on decolonial theorists such as Aníbal Quijano, Walter Mignolo and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o to interconnect the theoretical underpinnings of their writings to current developments in the field of English Studies, the paper argues that English Studies must not



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simply add to existing knowledge, but must move towards a new epistemic basis by including indigenous knowledge systems, oral traditions, Dalit and Adivasi literature and multilingualism as a means of achieving this goal. The paper concludes that the decolonial turn will provide a new location for English studies to engage with contemporary socio-cultural realities in India, as a site for resistance, critical discussion and activism.

The field of English Studies in India was fundamentally shaped as an academic discipline during British colonisation. This was largely based on Thomas Babington Macaulay's famous Minute on Indian Education (1835). The overriding intention behind this was to create a class of intermediaries, "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste," who would serve as conduits for the transfer of knowledge from Britain to India. This was achieved by constructing a colonial education system that privileged British literature and modes of knowing as "universal" (Macaulay). The continued impact of this colonial education system can be explicitly observed in multiple facets of English Studies today, including curriculum development, pedagogy, theoretical frameworks and even assessment methods.

Although Postcolonial studies emerged in the late twentieth century in response to colonialism and was intended to challenge imperial discourses, their institutionalization within academic settings has often impeded their ability to effect meaningful change. In recent years, scholars have articulated what is now referred to as the "decolonial turn": a paradigm shift that seeks to transcend critique and initiate a broader epistemic transformation. The decolonial turn challenges not only what is taught but also how knowledge is generated, legitimised, and disseminated.

This paper attempts to demonstrate the implications of the decolonial turn for English Studies in general and for English Studies in India in particular. It argues that endeavours toward decolonisation must extend beyond merely including previously marginalised perspectives and must focus on fundamentally rethinking the nature of the canon, language, pedagogy, and knowledge systems.

Postcolonial theory, developed by theorists such as Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, has been important in highlighting the discursive function of colonialism. For example, Said's *Orientalism* demonstrates how the West constructed the East to be the lesser or subordinate Other (Said 3). However, critics also point out that such studies are often entangled in Western paradigms of both theory and institution.

The decolonial approach transcends this entanglement by highlighting Miguel Quijano's concept of the "coloniality of power"—the structural foundations of control that endure after the actual end of colonial domination (Quijano 533). This means addressing the idea of "epistemic disobedience," a term coined by Walter D. Mignolo (Mignolo 122) that refers to the refusal to recognize the dominance of Western paradigms of knowledge. Decolonization thus shifts its emphasis from representation to epistemology. Another goal of decolonization is to reject Eurocentric perspectives. Decoloniality aims to undermine and dismantle the foundations of colonial discourse, whilst postcolonial studies critique it. As a result, it is a more comprehensive, intellectually and politically charged endeavour that aims to reconstruct knowledge itself rather than merely an academic exercise. One cannot help but recall Namvar Singh's powerful essay, "Decolonising the Indian Mind," in which he advocates a refusal to measure Indian literary achievement



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against Western standards of “progress” or “civilization”. His quoting of Tagore’s eponymous character, Gora in the novel *Gora* predates what is termed “epistemic disobedience” by contemporary decolonial thinkers: “We shall not let our country stand like an accused in an alien court to be tried under alien law. We shall not compare ourselves point by point with some Western ideal, in order to feel either shame or pride.” (Tagore qtd in Singh 149) His belief that political decolonization in the twentieth century has shifted the focus of literary creation from Europe to Asia, Africa and Latin America is a clarion call for expanding the canon beyond Europe. (Namvar Singh

The lasting impact of coloniality within English Studies is evident in many areas, that includes, first and foremost, the concept of the canon. British writers like Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, and others continue to dominate the recognized English canon. Although these writers are undoubtedly canonized, their ongoing dominance maintains a hierarchical privilege structure that privileges European literary traditions over all others, thereby marginalizing diverse literary voices from non-European cultures and reinforcing colonial ideologies. Gauri Viswanathan argues that the introduction of English literature in colonial India was a calculated means of instilling British values among the colonized. (Viswanathan 85) As a result, non-Western works are still often included in contemporary curriculum as supplements rather than on an equal footing with the colonial canon.

Secondly, over time, English Studies has privileged forms of written literature while rejecting literature in other media, especially oral and performative traditions. This has led to the marginalization of Indigenous knowledge systems, which tend to be based on oral traditions and passed down through practices of the community. As a result, these hierarchies can be seen as representative of what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o calls the “cultural bomb” of colonialism that has led to the devaluation of cultures and of local languages. (Ngũgĩ 3: p. 11).

Additionally, English's status as a dominant medium of instruction reinforces its role in perpetuating and reinforcing linguistic inequality worldwide. As a global lingua franca, English is used globally; however, it is so embedded in institutional privilege that it often comes at the expense of many regional and Indigenous languages (and generally excludes the people associated with those languages). Overall, this dynamic supports Pierre Bourdieu's ideas on the social importance of language through a theory of linguistic capital (what Bourdieu refers to as the appropriation of value through language (Bourdieu 55)).

The decolonial turn in English studies unfolds across a number of interrelated dimensions. First, the decanonization and restructuring of the curriculum. Decoloniality requires a significant rethinking of the literary canon; therefore, there is not only a need to add writings by underrepresented groups to the canon, but rather to rethink and alter how the canon is defined. For instance, Dalit autobiographies that give voice to the experiences of caste-affected individuals under caste oppression challenge the established way the canon should be defined. In a similar way, the literature produced by Adivasi and Tribes in South Asia challenges the perceived need for “writings ”/ Literature to be in printed form and should also include oral literature, Folklore, and community storytelling.

Second, to approach literature from a decolonized perspective also involves recognizing the coexistence of multiple knowledge systems. For example, indigenous knowledge systems commonly integrate ecological, spiritual, and communal knowledge; therefore, they offer additional ways of understanding the



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decolonisation of literary studies. For Example, Oral Traditions record many complex systems of environmental knowledge that are usually not addressed by traditional or print-based literary studies. By grasping such epistemic plurality, English Studies moves toward an “Ecology of Knowledge” (Santos 188).

In considering the politics surrounding Decoloniality, it is essential to recognize that language is no longer treated as a neutral object; rather, it is part of a historical system from which contemporary society derives its privileges from colonial power. English, therefore, can still be used for resistance and expression. At the same time, it is important to note that translation is not solely about experiencing another language through writing; as Sujit Mukherjee suggests, when he describes translation as “new writing,” it is an important means of entering into conversation between cultures (Mukherjee 12). Thus, if English Studies centres on both translation and dialogic/participatory pedagogy, it may encourage inclusivity and multilinguality by providing economically deprived/under-resourced students with equal opportunities to learn and succeed as learners.

This new focus on decoloniality will require a rethinking of the role teachers have traditionally played in education, from a teacher-centred role focused on students (as their “recipient” or “product”) to one in which both teacher and student share equally as co-participants in the learning process. According to Freire’s definition of critical pedagogy, this requires teaching methods that promote active participation in the learning experience (Freire 72). In India, this means recognizing the “reality” of students’ lives (caste/class/gender) as a part of whatever type of literature is being taught. Rather than being viewed as only an object of scholarly inquiry, literature becomes an extension of a student’s individuality through which they become aware of social issues that they experience firsthand.

Decoloniality doesn't entirely reject the established canon; rather it advocates a critical re-reading of it. For instance, examining Shakespeare's works through the lens of colonial discourse, power structures, and race/identity reveals the canon's limitations and opens new avenues for interpretation. As Namvar Singh says, “Decolonization does not mean a rejection of the West altogether. There are many even among the writers of the West who have raised their pens against colonization and imperialism. It will be shortsighted on our part to dissociate ourselves from this tradition of the West.” (155)

Decolonial thought has significant effects on English studies in India. In terms of curriculum reform, Indian universities need to go beyond merely including some non-Western texts; they should plan their courses thematically (e.g., a course on caste, ecology, and indigeneity) rather than by national boundaries or time periods. Also, the inclusion of marginalized voices is a significant intervention in the project. Rather than positioning Dalit, Adivasi, and feminist literatures at the “margins” of the curriculum, they should occupy the “centre” of it. The inclusion of these literatures in English studies will both widen the scope of the discipline and challenge the assumptions of the discipline.

Moreover, decoloniality encourages collaboration across disciplines (including anthropology, sociology, environmental studies, and others) to allow for a more holistic view of literature within a social context.



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Traditional assessment practices, with their emphasis on memorization and standardized answers, need to be replaced with more flexible and reflective assessments; for example, through the use of oral presentations, field trips, and creative projects.

While the decolonial turn has the potential to overhaul the field of English Studies in India, challenges still impede its development. The most significant of these is institutional resistance. Most universities are resistant to significant change for either bureaucratic reasons or ideological ones. Secondly, the pressure to adhere to current Western academic standards and publishing criteria might limit the scope of decolonial contributions to the discipline. Also, there is a risk of tokenism involved in adding marginalized texts into the curriculum as it could potentially be of little more than symbolic value, unless there is actual institutional change.

In addition, some critics contend that the decolonial turn may lead to an idealization of indigenous knowledge systems or an outright rejection of Western forms of thought. Therefore, an approach that values both traditions as equal forms of knowledge, rather than creating new hierarchies, would represent a more balanced position.

The implementation of NEP 2020 in India offers a structural framework that aligns with many of the decolonial objectives discussed in this paper. By emphasizing a move away from colonial-era "rote learning" toward a more holistic, multidisciplinary, and value-based education, the NEP 2020 serves as a potential vehicle for many of the following decolonial interventions mentioned above. For instance, the NEP 2020 emphatically mandates the inclusion of Indian Knowledge Systems in the curriculum, which can be extended to include the oral and Adivasi "literary" traditions as serious objects of study rather than mere supplements to the Western canon. Also, the NEP's emphasis on multilingualism broadens the scope of decolonizing English Studies in India, not only by incorporating translated texts but also through pedagogical intervention and assessment methodologies. The NEP also recommends moving away from a teacher-centric model to a student-centric model of learning that aligns with Freire's model of critical pedagogy mentioned earlier in the paper. In a nutshell the NEP 2020 can be a significant document in decolonizing English Studies in India if implemented in spirit.

The decolonial turn in the discipline of English Studies discipline is an expanding movement as literature evolves from a subject of critique to one of transformation. It accomplishes this by contesting the colonial foundations of English Studies and creating new opportunities for reevaluating literature and our understanding through literature and pedagogy. In the Indian context, this signifies not just a modification of the literary canon—specifically, the inclusion of works from the Global South—but also a profound transformation of the epistemological framework within English Studies. In the end, the decolonial turn is about making English Studies a more active and socially relevant field that can deal with important issues of the day, such as caste, class, gender and racial disparities, ecological catastrophes, questions related to health and sickness, traumatic events, disability, geopolitics so on and so forth. Decoloniality is an attempt at democratizing English Studies by exposing hegemonic power structures embedded in literary and cultural texts and offering more non-hierarchical, democratic and sustainable alternatives.



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