

ARIEL

A Review of International English Literature



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Editorial Note

Then and Now

Should James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence be included in the Modern British Literature syllabus? This is the issue that members of the Syllabus Committee of the Department of English of Brahmput University are hotly debating at one of their meetings — in Vikram Seth's novel *A Suitable Boy* (1993). A senior scholar argues that "by tradition, the Modern British Literature paper does not include writers who were living at the time of the Second World War" (55). How then, asks one of the radical young scholars, is T. S. Eliot on the syllabus and not Joyce? Richly comic and exaggerated as this scene is, it raises crucial issues that postindependence societies have been contending with in choosing to continue institutionalizing the discipline of English that had played a critical role in their colonization.

What is interesting about Seth's Brahmput University debate is that despite the Department Head's pronouncement that "We in India pride ourselves on our Independence — an Independence won at great expense by the best men of our generation" (51), none of the academics, including the young radicals, questions the inclusion of a paper on Modern British Literature to the exclusion of papers on Indian Writers in English. Nothing is said about the role of English in their colonization. There is a ready acceptance of the template they inherited from the colonial days. What is missing also from the discussion is the important question of how British (and other Western) texts should be taught — in a country where the teaching of English literature became an important means of implementing Thomas Babington Macaulay's directive (in his Minute on Indian higher education) to "form a class . . . of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in opinions, in morals, and in intellect [who will] be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern" (Rushdie 376).

What, one wonders, would the Syllabus Committee have done about Charles Dickens's texts if one of its members had raised the issue of Dickens's declared hatred of Indians. (Believing reports of Indian men's raping of British women during the Rebellion of 1857 — reports that are now dismissed as false by historians [Judd 66] — Dickens declared that "I should do my utmost to exterminate the Race upon whom the stain of the late cruelties rested" [qtd. in James 283]). Would the Syllabus Committee perhaps have chosen Wilkie Collins instead, who, when asked by Dickens to contribute an article to Dickens's *Household Words* condemning the Rebellion, wrote understandingly of the Indians, drawing, as he said, "excellent moral lessons" from "their own Oriental literature" (587). Collins's *The Moonstone*, seen as an early anti-imperial novel, sympathetically portrays its Indian players, exhibiting none of Dickens's anti-Indian sentiments and xenophobia (Trodd xviii, viii). Would the Syllabus Committee have taken this ideological factor into account in deciding on Collins and Dickens? Would formal and esthetic merits have prevailed instead? And would hegemonic considerations have dictated what criteria determined these merits?

The meeting of Seth's Syllabus Committee takes place in 1951, less than three years after India ceased to be an occupied country, in August 1947. This temporal detail may explain the still "colonial" mindset of members of the Department of English — the evident descendants of what Rushtie calls in *The Moor's Last Sigh* "Macaulay's Minutemen" (367). Brahmpur's English syllabus appears to be no different from its actual counterparts in universities all over the Commonwealth. At Queen's University of Belfast, for instance, the English syllabus in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when Seamus Heaney was an undergraduate there, was "narrowly focused on an Anglocentric canon, including very few Irish or twentieth century texts" (Eskestad 7).

What is surprising, however, is that in some actual institutions things still had not changed much two or three decades on since the meeting of Seth's fictional Syllabus Committee. In 1985, Edward Said on a visit to a national university of one of the Persian Gulf States, found that the literary courses were traditional, "anachronistic" fare. "Young Arabs dutifully read

Milton, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Austen, and Dickens.” Said is astonished to learn that “no emphasis was placed on the relationship between English and the colonial process that brought the language and its literature to the Arab world.” And he found that except in private discussions with a few faculty members, there was no interest in “the English-language literatures of the Caribbean, Africa, or Asia” (305).

Such disciplinary approaches prevailed in these institutions in total obliviousness to the plethora of theoretical and practical literary studies that have examined the soul of the discipline and brought about changes in the way it is institutionalized in Anglo-American universities — its most radical transformation being its approximation with Cultural Studies in some Departments of English. Syllabi and approaches have changed drastically. The canon has gone through various metamorphoses. Just this spring, Oxford University announced that Anglo-Saxon is no longer a compulsory part of its English degree programme (Clare 2). Anglo-Saxon was compulsory in the English syllabus of many colonial universities. On this point, Alvin Kernan notes, that a text like *Beowulf* made its way into the syllabus in no small measure because of nationalism, which “played its part in pushing literature into the educational system, for during the nineteenth century it became increasingly the mark of a great people and a great language to have produced a great literature, the older the better. *Beowulf* with its seventh- or eighth-century date (recently revised to circa 1000) gave the English a distinct advantage over the Germans, who were, to their chagrin, never able to claim anything so early” (34). Over at Cambridge (where at the turn of the twentieth century, as Tim Cribb mentions in *Imagined Commonwealths: Cambridge Essays on Commonwealth and International Literature in English*, Anglo-Saxon along with Norse and Celtic were part of the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology), Gillian Beer (King Edward VII Professor of English) says of the current Faculty of English, “What’s so remarkable about Cambridge English is that you can study Arundhati Roy as well as Dickens and Chaucer” (20). These changes in the syllabi of Britain’s venerable institutions point up the irony in Said’s observations on

English as it is taught in such postindependence/postcolonial universities as the one he visited in the Middle East.

In the last decade or two, however, there have been reevaluations of the discipline in postindependence/postcolonial institutions, reflecting current postcolonial and postmodern thinking. The University of the West Indies, in 1964, while still a College of the University of London, had but one text from the Commonwealth on its syllabus — V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*, published in 1961. (American literature had a sole representative as well, Ernest Hemingway.) Today, there are numerous courses on Caribbean literature and other "Commonwealth" literatures, and the Department of English is now the Department of Literatures in English. There have been major modifications in approach as well — undertaken cautiously, as shown in West Indian scholars' wariness of literary "postcolonialism," viewed as originating in the Anglo-American orbit.

ARIEL has been planning for a number of years to undertake a review of these postcolonial/postindependence disciplinary developments of English studies. Now that we are at the turn of the century, we thought that this is as good a time to get the project going. We approached Gauri Viswanathan — whose milestone research into the Indian origins of the discipline of English, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (1989), is one of the studies prompting us to reassess the discipline — to co-edit a special issue of *ARIEL* on the disciplinary developments. We were pleased that she agreed to do so and would like to thank her for the outstanding work she has done in acquiring, selecting, and editing submissions. We received so many fine contributions from scholars around the world that we had to make this a double issue — a first for *ARIEL*. Even so, as happens with all special issues, which operate within space and time constraints, some articles and poems regrettably had to be held over for later numbers, resulting in some regions and issues not receiving the coverage they deserve. What we were able to include, however, will give *ARIEL*'s readers an excellent idea of where the discipline of English stands in various parts of the contemporary world.

VICTOR J. RAMRAJ

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