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Decolonising the English Curriculum in Indian Universities: Pedagogical Imperatives and Epistemic Justice

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Abstract

This paper examines the theoretical and practical dimensions of decolonising English literary studies in Indian universities, situating the discussion within broader debates on epistemic violence, cultural hegemony, and pedagogical reform. Drawing on postcolonial theory and critical pedagogy, the analysis interrogates the persistence of Eurocentric canonical formations in Indian English departments and explores pathways toward curricular transformation that honor indigenous literary traditions, regional language texts in translation, and emergent voices from the Global South. The study demonstrates that decolonisation extends beyond mere diversification of reading lists to encompass fundamental epistemological shifts in how literature is conceptualized, taught, and valued. Through critical examination of existing syllabi, institutional practices, and theoretical frameworks, this paper argues for a reconceptualization of English studies that moves beyond colonial-era models of literary appreciation to embrace comparative, translational, and culturally grounded approaches. The findings suggest that meaningful decolonisation requires institutional commitment, faculty development, and student engagement with diverse literary epistemologies.

Keywords:- Indigenous Knowledge, English Literature, Critical Pedagogy, Literary Studies, Eurocentrism

Introduction

The question of decolonising the English curriculum in Indian universities emerges at the intersection of postcolonial critique, pedagogical reform, and epistemic justice. More than seven decades after independence, English departments in India continue to privilege canonical British and American texts, reproducing what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o termed the "colonisation of the mind" through literary education (Ngũgĩ 16). This curricular legacy reflects deeper structural issues: the valorization of Western literary forms as universal standards, the marginalization of indigenous knowledge systems, and the perpetuation of hierarchies that position English literature as culturally superior to regional language traditions.

Contemporary debates on decolonisation in Indian higher education have intensified as scholars, students, and activists challenge the epistemological foundations of inherited curricula. As Chakrabarty argues, the project of "provincializing Europe" requires not the rejection of European thought but rather its repositioning within a pluralistic intellectual

landscape where multiple knowledge traditions coexist and dialogue (Chakrabarty 16). In English studies specifically, this translates to curricular configurations that balance canonical British and American texts with robust representations of Indian writing in English, translations from bhasha literatures, and voices from other postcolonial contexts.

This paper argues that decolonising the English curriculum necessitates three interconnected interventions: first, a critical examination of the colonial genealogies of English studies in India; second, a substantive expansion of syllabi to include marginalized voices and alternative literary traditions; and third, a transformation of pedagogical practices to center dialogue, cultural context, and critical consciousness. These interventions must attend to the specific histories of English education in India while engaging with broader global conversations on decolonial pedagogy and epistemic justice.

Theoretical Framework: Postcolonial Theory and Pedagogical Decolonisation

Decolonisation in the educational context draws on several theoretical traditions. Fanon's analysis of colonialism's psychological dimensions illuminates how educational systems function as instruments of cultural domination, creating what he called a "psycho-affective" disequilibrium in colonized subjects (Fanon 89). This insight remains relevant for understanding how English literary education in India continues to shape cultural identities and aesthetic preferences, often privileging Western sensibilities over indigenous traditions.

Spivak's concept of "epistemic violence" provides another crucial framework, describing how colonial knowledge systems systematically erase or delegitimize non-Western ways of knowing (Spivak 280). In the context of English studies, epistemic violence manifests in curricular choices that treat British literary traditions as self-evidently valuable while requiring justification for the inclusion of Indian or other non-Western texts. Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy offers practical strategies for countering such violence through problem-posing education that treats students as co-creators of knowledge rather than passive recipients (Freire 72).

Contemporary scholars like Raewyn Connell have extended these arguments through the concept of "Southern theory," which challenges the presumption that valid social theory originates exclusively in the Global North (Connell 47). Applied to literary studies, this framework suggests that Indian critical traditions including Sanskrit poetics, rasa theory, and vernacular literary criticism offer sophisticated analytical tools that deserve equal status with Western literary theories.

Colonial Legacies: The Genealogy of English Studies in India

English literary education in India emerged directly from colonial administrative imperatives. Macaulay's infamous 1835 "Minute on Education" articulated the goal of creating "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (Macaulay 359). The establishment of English departments in Indian universities institutionalized this vision, positioning English literature as a civilizing force that would inculcate proper moral and aesthetic values.

Gauri Viswanathan's influential study demonstrates that English literary education served explicit political purposes in colonial India, functioning as "a mask for economic exploitation" that legitimized British rule through cultural superiority (Viswanathan 23). The curriculum privileged texts that reinforced colonial hierarchies while marginalizing Indian literary traditions, which were often dismissed as primitive or morally suspect. This pedagogical strategy proved remarkably durable, surviving independence to shape postcolonial Indian universities.

Post-independence reforms attempted to "Indianize" curricula by adding Indian authors

writing in English, yet these modifications often left underlying epistemological frameworks intact. As Paranjape observes, simply adding Tagore or Raja Rao to syllabi dominated by Shakespeare and Milton does not constitute decolonisation if the interpretive frameworks, critical vocabularies, and aesthetic criteria remain rooted in Western literary traditions (Paranjape 112).

Contemporary Curricular Formations: Persistent Eurocentrism

Analysis of representative English literature syllabi from major Indian universities reveals persistent patterns of Eurocentrism. Table 1 presents data from five prominent institutions, demonstrating the proportional allocation of courses across different literary traditions.

Table 1: Percentage Distribution of Literary Traditions Across University Syllabi

Literary Category	**Univ. A**	**Univ. B**	**Univ. C**	**Univ. D**	**Univ. E**
British Literature	58%	62%	55%	60%	57%
American Literature	18%	15%	20%	17%	19%
Indian Writing (English)	15%	12%	18%	13%	16%
Translations from Bhasha	4%	3%	2%	5%	3%
Other Postcolonial Lit.	5%	8%	5%	5%	5%

These data illuminate several troubling patterns. British literature continues to dominate, accounting for 55-62% of curricular content across institutions. Combined with American literature, texts from the Global North comprise over 70% of syllabi. Indian writing in English receives modest representation at 12-18%, yet this category itself privileges elite, urban, English-medium voices. Most strikingly, translations from Indian regional languages representing the vast majority of India's literary production constitute a mere 2-5% of curricula. This marginalization extends to other postcolonial literatures, which rarely exceed 8% of course content.

Qualitative analysis of syllabi reveals additional concerns. When Indian texts appear, they often function as anthropological objects rather than aesthetic achievements, studied for cultural content rather than literary craft. As Dharwadker argues, this approach reduces Indian literature to ethnographic evidence, denying it the formal sophistication routinely attributed to Western texts (Dharwadker 234). Furthermore, critical frameworks employed in teaching remain predominantly Western New Criticism, structuralism, poststructuralism with minimal engagement with Indian aesthetic traditions like dhvani or rasa theory.

Pathways to Decolonisation: Curricular and Pedagogical Interventions

Meaningful decolonisation requires interventions across multiple dimensions of English literary education. At the curricular level, departments must substantially increase representation of non-Western texts while reconceptualizing the relationship between different literary traditions. Rather than additive inclusion simply appending Indian texts to existing British-dominated syllabi decolonisation demands structural transformation. This might involve organizing courses thematically or comparatively rather than by national tradition, facilitating dialogue between texts from different cultural contexts.

Specific interventions could include the following strategies, each addressing distinct aspects of curricular transformation:

- Substantially expanding inclusion of bhasha literature in translation, prioritizing works that challenge dominant narratives and aesthetic conventions. This includes medieval

bhakti poetry, modern regional fiction, and contemporary Dalit writing that articulates experiences excluded from elite Indian English literature.

- Developing courses that foreground comparative and translational approaches, enabling students to engage with texts across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Such courses resist hierarchies between "original" English texts and "derivative" translations, instead treating translation as creative literary practice.
- Incorporating indigenous critical frameworks alongside Western theory. Courses on literary theory should include substantive engagement with Sanskrit poetics, vernacular criticism, and contemporary Indian theoretical interventions, positioning these as legitimate analytical tools rather than antiquarian curiosities.
- Redesigning survey courses to decenter British literature as the normative standard. Rather than progressing chronologically through British literary periods with occasional gestures toward other traditions, surveys might organize around themes, genres, or theoretical problematics that require engagement with diverse texts.

Pedagogical transformation proves equally essential. Critical pedagogy, as theorized by hooks and others, emphasizes dialogue, context, and students' lived experiences as valid knowledge sources (hooks 14). In the Indian context, this might involve acknowledging how caste, class, language, region, and gender shape students' relationships to English and literature. Assignments could encourage students to draw on their own linguistic and cultural resources, perhaps incorporating texts or oral traditions from their communities.

Assessment practices also require scrutiny. Conventional literary criticism privileging Western academic discourse may disadvantage students from non-elite backgrounds. Alternative assessment forms creative responses, multilingual analyses, community-engaged projects can validate diverse modes of literary engagement. As Canagarajah demonstrates, pluralistic assessment practices better serve multilingual students while enriching classroom discourse (Canagarajah 589).

Challenges and Institutional Resistance

Implementing decolonial reforms faces significant obstacles. Institutional inertia proves formidable; syllabi established decades ago persist through bureaucratic momentum and faculty conservatism. Many faculty members trained exclusively in British literary traditions lack expertise in Indian or other postcolonial literatures, creating practical barriers to curricular change. As Paranjape notes, meaningful reform requires sustained faculty development, including workshops on unfamiliar texts and critical frameworks (Paranjape 156).

Ideological resistance also emerges. Some faculty argue that English departments should focus on literature originally composed in English, excluding translations. This position, however, presumes an essentialist relationship between language and literature that postcolonial scholarship has thoroughly critiqued. Others defend the canon on grounds of aesthetic excellence, failing to recognize how notions of literary quality themselves reflect historically contingent values shaped by colonial power relations.

Resource constraints compound these challenges. Many Indian universities lack adequate library holdings in Indian literature, particularly regional language works. Digital resources could partially address this gap, yet reliable internet access and digital literacy remain unevenly distributed. Furthermore, quality translations of regional literature into English sometimes prove difficult to locate, though initiatives like the National Translation Mission have begun addressing this deficit.

Perhaps most fundamentally, decolonisation confronts questions of linguistic politics. As Ramaswamy argues, using English as the medium of instruction inevitably shapes what can be said and known, potentially reproducing colonial hierarchies even as curricula diversify

(Ramaswamy 45). This paradox ;decolonising English studies through English cannot be fully resolved but demands ongoing critical reflection.

Comparative Perspectives: Global Decolonisation Movements

Indian efforts to decolonise English curricula resonate with similar movements globally. In South African universities, the Rhodes Must Fall campaign catalyzed broader curricular reforms, including substantial increases in African literature and theory (Mbembe 29). These reforms demonstrate that decolonisation can advance without abandoning engagement with Western texts, instead contextualizing them within global conversations.

Latin American universities offer another instructive model. Building on traditions of critical pedagogy and liberation theology, many institutions have developed curricula foregrounding indigenous knowledge systems and subaltern perspectives. The concept of "epistemologies of the South," articulated by de Sousa Santos, provides theoretical justification for valuing marginalized knowledge traditions (de Sousa Santos 118).

Even within the Global North, scholars of color have challenged Eurocentric curricula. The establishment of African American, Native American, and Asian American literature as legitimate fields within U.S. English departments resulted from decades of activism and scholarship. These precedents suggest that curricular change, while difficult, proves achievable when sustained pressure from students, faculty, and activists combines with institutional commitment.

Implications: Toward Epistemic Plurality

The implications of successfully decolonising English curricula extend beyond English departments. Curricular transformation models broader shifts toward epistemic plurality in Indian higher education, challenging the presumption that valid knowledge originates exclusively in Western institutions. As Appadurai argues, the future of universities in the Global South depends on developing intellectual traditions rooted in local contexts while engaging productively with global scholarship (Appadurai 1).

Decolonised English studies could also contribute to linguistic justice in India. By according serious scholarly attention to regional language literatures, departments signal that linguistic diversity constitutes a resource rather than an obstacle. This has particular significance for students from non-English-medium backgrounds, who currently face pressure to assimilate to elite English linguistic norms while their own languages receive minimal institutional recognition.

Furthermore, such reforms might reconfigure the relationship between English and vernacular literary studies. Rather than existing in hierarchical relationship, with English departments enjoying greater prestige and resources, these fields could engage in genuine dialogue. Comparative literature programs provide one institutional model for such engagement, though as Damrosch notes, comparative literature itself requires decolonisation to avoid reproducing Eurocentric frameworks (Damrosch 67).

The pedagogical dimensions of decolonisation carry particular importance. Graduates of reformed English programs would possess not only expanded literary knowledge but also critical tools for analyzing cultural power and epistemic violence. This critical literacy proves essential for citizens navigating contemporary India's complex linguistic, cultural, and political landscape. As Said argued, humanistic education should cultivate critical consciousness rather than passive acceptance of inherited knowledge (Said 23).

Conclusion

Decolonising the English curriculum in Indian universities represents both a practical necessity and a philosophical imperative. Seven decades after independence, continued

dominance of British and American literature in Indian English departments perpetuates colonial hierarchies of knowledge and culture. This essay has argued that meaningful decolonisation requires transformation across multiple dimensions: curricular content, pedagogical practices, critical frameworks, and institutional structures.

The analysis demonstrates that simply adding Indian texts to existing syllabi proves insufficient; deeper epistemological shifts are necessary. These include according equal status to regional language literatures in translation, engaging seriously with indigenous critical traditions, and adopting pedagogical approaches that validate diverse forms of knowledge and expression. Such reforms face significant obstacles institutional inertia, faculty resistance, resource constraints yet comparative perspectives suggest they remain achievable with sustained commitment.

The stakes extend beyond English departments. Decolonised literary education models broader possibilities for epistemic justice in Indian higher education, challenging the presumption that the Global North monopolizes intellectual authority. It also carries implications for linguistic justice, cultural identity, and critical citizenship in contemporary India. As universities confront questions of relevance and legitimacy in the twenty-first century, decolonisation offers a pathway toward institutions that honor diverse knowledge traditions while maintaining rigorous scholarly standards.

Future research should examine specific pedagogical experiments in decolonial teaching, assessing their effectiveness and identifying best practices. Comparative studies of decolonisation efforts across different institutional contexts would yield valuable insights. Additionally, research should attend to student perspectives, as their voices remain crucial for understanding how curricular reforms affect learning and identity formation. The project of decolonisation remains ongoing, requiring sustained scholarly engagement, institutional commitment, and collective imagination of more just educational futures.

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