



Research Paper

English Literature Teaching: Current Trends and Possibilities in Rural General Degree Colleges in India.

Joydeb Das

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Aghorekamini Prakash Chandra Mahavidyalaya, Hooghly, West Bengal, India

“Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information”.

----- Paulo
Freier (p. 79)

“The real point we need to agree on is that good education is about helping students enter the culture of ideas and arguments”.

----- Gerald Graff
(p. xvii)

Abstract:

Study of English literature holds a special position in the academia around the world. In India, English literature as an academic discipline is viewed as a means to entering the world of pride, privilege, prosperity because of one's attachment with the English language. It is rightly wrong sometimes to feel that the study of English classics could heighten one's prospects thus. But due to the colonial hangover students get confused between the language of and literature in English as a choice of a subject for academic studies. In this light, situation in rural India is far worse. In many respects, colleges there are not upgraded enough to cater to the needs and aspirations of the first generation students of the English literature. Students also lack the basic apparatus for such a study i.e. they do not have sound knowledge in English language. But if motivated properly with a view to actual trends in literature teaching, students can work wonders. Innovative English Literature teaching especially with a focus to repair the long accumulated language related wounds and build new strength in rural locations in India, thus, could be a major thrust area for the teachers and researchers of the day to come up with suitable and effective teaching methods and thereby contribute to the field of academic research and national development.

Keywords:

Colonial Hangover, Rural India, English Literature Teaching, Career Opportunities and English Studies.

Received 07 June, 2024; Revised 19 June, 2024; Accepted 21 June, 2024 © The author(s) 2024.

Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

I. Introduction

Thoughts concerning career options today are many and almost highly mystifying to students in India from middle-class families as a mind-numbing thought often spreads like wildfire that the scopes of good jobs (preferably in the Government sectors) are dwindling away rapidly. Hence, students from class IX onwards in India are immersed in myriad thoughts of an almost depressing nature concerning the choice of the most attractive, lucrative career options. Here, English medium school students, generally from rich families, having specific advantages and a sense of superiority from the very beginning of their academic life because of their English oriented academic environments, are excluded. Now, students and guardians today tend to believe that careers in the fields of science and technology or medicine are safe and promising options but that, again, demands a high percentage of marks (only attainable by a few academically bright, hard-working students) at the secondary and higher secondary levels and other personal qualitative attributes to secure seats in the NITs, IITs, IIMs or several other prestigious colleges and higher educational institutions in India. But poor infrastructural

facilities, class and gender bias, spell of old conventional beliefs, misinformation, peer pressure, misguided thoughts, lack of cultural, moral, financial support, psychological motivation at the early stages, to name a few, make things worse for a vast section of first generation learners in State Board run vernacular medium schools especially in rural areas. Sometimes, continual experimentations (like introduction of CBCS curriculum, earlier the exclusion of English from class I onwards etc.) with educational strategies from time to time to bring in innovative practices and reform or to conform to the global (sometimes local) standards worsen the situation even more. In such a scenario, therefore, with high energy and enthusiasm after securing 70%-90% marks in English, their second language, at the higher secondary level, a group of students, either unwilling or unfit (socially, economically or for other reasons) for engineering or medical studies, flock to the departments of English every year for their B.A. in English Honours course, not knowing in R. J. Rees' words that "That young people should be helped and encouraged and guided in their reading is good, but that they should study literature only in order to pass examinations is certainly bad" (Rees, 1973, p. 12). "The picture emerging from overseas institutions", also laments Neil Gilroy-Scott, "is of increasing number of new students lacking both the background and the necessary study skills" (Brumfit, 1983, p. 1). An idea on students' skills and qualities (or better say their under preparedness for such a course from the school level) in our rural colleges is indeed alarming to prove that instead of gaining essential background knowledge, acquiring requisite reading, writing, communication skills, students aim only at passing a few examinations naively at any cost with the help of their rote learning. As if, "Success consists in obtaining the largest number of marks with the strictest economy of knowledge" (Tagore, 2017, p. 1390). But, arguably, students are compelled to choose this wrong route of rote learning because the teaching methods that are supposed to be specifically adopted in such rural colleges receiving backward students/First Generation Learners to cope with the challenges are not adhered to in true spirit. In many such institutions no specific student-centric plans are adopted. Oftentimes, there are also no scopes even if the teacher is willing to bring in necessary reforms to change the scenario due to the rigid examination schedules and many other unexpected circumstances, both internal and external. Thus, learning, actually, is at stake and India's XII Plan's lofty goal to make higher education "more relevant to the global needs and to remove the inequalities in access to education among various social groups" (RUSA, 2013, p. XIII), at least in case of English literature teaching in many rural undergraduate colleges, sadly remains unfulfilled till date. A temporary shift towards online examinations due to COVID-19 has worsened the situation, in a rural context, to an unexpected level nowadays. As we are aware of the diverse career opportunities for the English Honours graduates because of the dynamism of a subject like English literature and the generic language specific advantages in this twenty-first century world, the objective of this paper is, thus, to have a detailed look at the present trends in teaching English literature to rural students and also to find out new, possible ways and means to improve the current situation.

II. Literature and Its Appreciation

Now at the beginning it will be better to draw a picture of what can be considered as literature. 'It is easier', says Robert Eaglestone, 'to understand literature not as something that can be defined, but as something that *overflows* or *escapes* from any attempt to limit it or put it in a box' (Eaglestone, 2000, p. 50). Generally speaking, literature can be a floating term for anything written on a given topic i.e. a medical or scientific literature. 'Knowingly or not', defines Robert Eaglestone, 'the term is used to make a value judgement about the worth of a piece of writing'. (Eaglestone, 2000, p. 51). Thus, when we, the teachers in the departments of English, today think of it at the time of prescribing syllabus or when Macaulay once thought of replacing the "whole native *literature* of India and Arabia" with "a single good shelf of European library" (qtd. in Mahanta and Sharma, 2019, p. vii.), the concept of literature changes to a great extent. Literature, then, to quote William Henry Hudson, "is composed of those books, and of those books only, which, in the first place, by reason of their subject-matter, and their mode of treating it, are of general human interest; and in which, in the second place, the element of form and the pleasure which form gives are to be regarded as essential" (Hudson, 1913, p. 10). When elaborated, three very important points become clear as we go through Hudson's words. At first, it is noteworthy that literature has its connection with the life of human beings and as such they give us pleasure as we oftentimes become one with the characters, find ourselves in situations where the characters we love are. 'Indeed it would be impossible to live for a year without disaster', writes Virginia Woolf, 'unless one practised character-reading and had some skill in the art' (Hoffman & Murphy, 2005, p. 22). Secondly, they have a specific, very unique form that gives them distinction from any other broadly conceived notion of literature. The third important point that requires special attention is the effect of the so called specifically distinguishable form on the mind of the reader. "The object of study in literary science", writes Roman Jakobson, "is not literature but 'literariness', that is, what makes a given work a literary work" (Qtd. in Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 139). Again, it is also believed "that the pursuit of literary culture will produce better people" (Jusdanis, 2010, p. 1). But literature, to think slightly beyond Hudson's conceptualizations, is not only composed of books, it is also something else. It is a feeling and a force which is imaginative, creative, liberating, and aesthetic at once. The

writer pours forth his offerings like Shelley's Skylark, and the reader oftentimes is drowsed with numbness and a dream and later/he wakes up to find that s/he has been cheated (like bachelor Charles Lamb with his dream children) by her/his own imaginative self throughout her/his journey down the pages of a work of literature. It is infused with an unknown power that resides unseen and yet it has an overwhelming influence. 'Literature seems to move freely', writes Alex Thomson, 'in such ways, between real and represented worlds, truths and imaginations, and it is not surprising that playful and provocative writers have written works which tease at the boundaries, taking advantage of literature's licence to deceive' (Cavanagh et al., 2010, p.7). This is a fair instance of the creativity of literature (at the same time of a literary artist) which is capable of mesmerizing our mind. Thus, dramatists such as Shakespeare decorate the Forest of Arden with flowers and other natural settings; poets like Coleridge wish to build 'a miracle of rare device'; novelists like Hardy detail us minutely about their imaginary towns and communities. Therefore, the appeal and originality of a work of art increases manifold and it becomes lifelike. At the same time we must not forget that the use of appropriate words (i.e. poetic/artistic diction), phrases, meter, rhythm, tone etc. are at the heart of this creative enterprise. To make literature a phenomenon of joy and pleasure, these have a huge impact. Literature, therefore, is a narrative that is like a broad canvas with differently coloured landscapes, a continuous story, and emotional notes of 'a sort of diary existing only in the mind' (Orwell, 2004, p. 2).

This discussion now naturally provokes us, as a matter of curiosity, to go in search of the lovers/readers of literature and their faculties. There is no denying that literature delights everyone, for more than one reason but most importantly in Harold Bloom's words it is that '[W]e read Shakespeare, Dante, Chaucer, Cervantes, Dickens, Proust, and all their peers because they more than enlarge life' (Bloom, 2001, p.28). But at the same time it is also true, in psychoanalyst W.R. Bion's words, that "[I]f a person cannot 'think' with his thoughts, that is to say that he has thoughts but lacks the apparatus of 'thinking' which enables him to use his thoughts, to think them as it were, then the personality is incapable of learning from experience. This failure is serious" (Qtd. in Davis, 2013, p. ix). Reading or enjoying literature, therefore, ideally involves readers' artistic self and requires strong sensibility and a meditative mind, 'For the arts' according to I.A. Richards, 'are supreme forms of communicating activity' (Richards, 2004, p.21). Therefore, in the event of a communication gap and not the difference in opinion, between the reader and the writer the work of literature fails to put an impression on the mind. Since the late Twentieth Century the reader is at the focal point in interpreting, and thus of course or supposedly, gifted, among other things, with the exquisite art of interpretation, a sensible mind, and enough emotional and psychological maturity and leisure to concentrate or appreciate. Moreover, a writer's trade of jugglery of words, phrases to heighten the effects of communication are also not alien to the reader in general. Above all, s/he enjoys a socio-cultural consciousness either similar to or above the level enjoyed by the writer if we consider literary writing, like all other art forms, as a product of intellect. It, anyhow, needs to have an effect on the intended/unintended reader. Reader response theories today have immensely shown the power of reading and interpretation and, nonetheless, have established the superiority of the reader and her/his faculties. Thus, we are not surprised at all as several canonical texts today get rewritten from the perspective of the reader. Appreciation of literature, therefore, holds the key to the sphere of literary activities.

Rural Students and B.A. Honours in English

As so much of trust and thrust is placed on the readers of literature and their power of appreciation, it is time now to have a look at our rural general degree colleges offering B.A. degree to ascertain why studying English Literature as an Honours/Major discipline has disappointed many, if not all, of those who choose it at the undergraduate level. "While Indian students of English literature", says Dr. J. John Sekar, "treat English Studies as an alien and alienating discipline, students of General English find it as a foreign language" (Sekar, 2015, p.125). In this context, Professor Somdev Banik comments, "While the elitist students approach the course (English Literature) through the texts, the students from the rural backgrounds do the same circumventing the texts" (Mahanta & Sharma, 2019, p. 172). As a teacher it is, first of all, very difficult to understand whether it is the English or the Literature in English that attracts the students. Due to the hidden colonial hangover people still cannot distinguish between these two and commit mistakes at the choice of a topic for higher education. They, probably, expect to have a better mastery of the English language with the study of literature in the same. Irrefutably, researchers have discovered links between literary studies and language learning but that does not guarantee that a mere, whimsical choice of B.A. in English Literature is a safe way to acquire English language proficiency of the highest level. At least, there is no difficulty in understanding that English (mistakenly the literature in English) is still considered, with obvious reasons, as a subject that offers social mobility, economic gains, higher appointments and several other advantages. But the difficulty arises when our students and their guardians in rural areas fail to realise factors like the minimum required standards to undertake a course like this, the prospects of a college and the dedication of the teaching staff to help underprepared students in the appropriate manner. "It is not uncommon to hear a flustered teacher in an English literature classroom asking certain groups of students repeatedly, 'why did you take this course at all?' " (Mahanta & Sharma 2019, p. 168).

Since students are at the receiving end of the teaching process, it is worthwhile to begin by saying that many of our students in rural colleges are almost unfit to understand their lessons in the initial stages of the English Literature course. Jonathan Culler Says, "The problem is structural, involving the marginal situation of literature within the students' cultures" (Culler, 2005, p. 238). The problem also stems from the poor English teaching methods in schools here. Mainly, the English poems and essays form part of the English syllabus in schools from class VI onwards but the teaching focuses mainly on mastering the grammar and understanding of the text in the mother tongue of the learner. "Literature", Alessandra Korner rightly observes, "has the great power of enchanting people and catching their attention, but unfortunately at school we are too worried about didactic demands and grammatical constrictions, to fully enhance those characteristics" (Qtd. in Antonic, 2015, p. 281). There are inadequate attempts at explaining the socio-cultural, literary background of the given pieces of literature. Students are rarely advised to read English newspapers, listen to English language broadcast, increase their stock of words or develop creative writing skills. Tutors, to put it jokingly, act on behalf of the students and students only memorize tutors' notes purchased at high rates and often reproduce a distorted version of those second or third hand materials in examinations. To curtail the dropout rate, the evaluation process again is based on the idea of increasing the pass percentage. The reality is that such system-generated apparently-bright-yet-ordinary students are not able to even communicate fluently in oral or written English in comparison to their counterparts in English medium schools. Sadly, teaching has become a profession and not a vocation nowadays in the hands of, as Freier says, 'innumerable well-intentioned bank-clerk teachers' (Freier, 2005, p. 71). Thus, poor alignment between high schools and colleges, substandard high school preparation, and achievement gap, according to Gerald Graff (Graff, 2007, ix), have always been matters of concern as far as teaching literature in college classes are concerned and they are even more relevant in the context of a rural location in India.

Practice of Literature Teaching and New Possibilities

After the discussion above it is presumable that teaching English Literature in Indian colleges, especially in rural areas, is an uphill task. The situation demands special care and concern but despite the Indian Independence in 1947, the age old practice is still prevalent here. 'As early as 1820s', writes Prof. Gauri Viswanathan, 'when the classical curriculum still reigned supreme in England despite the strenuous efforts of some concerned critics to loosen its hold, English as the study of culture and not simply the study of language has already found a secure place in the British Indian curriculum' (Viswanathan, 1988, p.3). As a result, the study of English literature to a vast majority in India has always been concerned with the humanistic functions of 'the shaping of character or the development of the aesthetic sense or the discipline of ethical thinking' (Viswanathan, 1988, p.3). Therefore, teachers have their typical mentality of problematizing the students on the point of their moral and intellectual deficiency instead of focusing on newly emerging concepts associated with the study of literature. They are like the existing torch bearers of an alien strategy that was promoted to subjugate people culturally and ideologically. Paulo Freier identifies such a teacher as one who 'presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence' (Freier, 2005, p. 72). Thus the resources of a democratic welfare state like India are spent to promote and perpetuate ignorance. Even today there are only a few who think psychologically while teaching English literature in rural colleges. Teaching gives them scope to problematize students on their use of language. Such teachers are even in a habit to make bombastic statements regarding the age old methods of teaching literature and continue to employ the same out-dated techniques. It could well be said that, "They tend to forget the heterogeneity of the classroom and ignore the fact that not all students take English literature with the same expectations of cultural code-switching" (Mahanta & Sharma, 2019, p. 168)

The need of the hour, therefore, is to focus on the expectations from and the necessities of a course like B.A. in English Honours/Major, i.e. to connect it to the market driven economy of the twenty-first century. To put things sardonically first, B.A. in English Honours degree sets a rural student apart from others in her/his own locality and often places on the degree holder a sign of nominal superiority. The female students with such a degree attain respectability as a good match in marriage. A little smattering of the English tongue in rural locations is preferable for a temporary low wage local office job just as quack doctors replace trained ones. All these to a teacher of English literature working in rural areas do look like futile things and far removed from the real objectives of a course like this. "We need to replace old educational standards with the educational framework that combines knowledge with the 21st century skills of creativity, critical thinking, communication and collaboration" (Qtd. in FICCI & EY Report, 2021, p.4). Hence, teachers need to focus on new avenues instead of the mere humanistic angles from within the same English literature syllabus made up of classics as well as the avant-garde. 1) Students in rural colleges must be trained to work with English words and sentences in a creative way. As vernacular medium students in rural India are not well trained in English language, besides their literary studies they must be encouraged to make notes of new words and phrases, their origins, and

evolutions as advanced learners. This will introduce them to their subject in a completely new way. Alongside their slow and steady advancement in a new field, they will be gradually repairing their old wounds. Even if they wish to quit further literary studies after graduation for appearing in government services examinations, they will fare well at least in English. Such an activity will be beneficial to their ability in spoken English also. 2) Teaching of poetry and drama especially should be done with loud reading in universally acknowledged standard pronunciation. This will help students identify the correct pronunciation as well as the rhythm, tone etc. of almost all words and sentences. This can make them interpreters in their rural locations and beyond, if possible, and help them earn their living. Interpretation is a thriving industry nowadays. News reading/presenting can be a target area for students adept in good pronunciation skills with good voice in English. Students must be equally encouraged to watch movie versions of the English dramas and stories. 3) Teaching of literature should strongly focus on the aspects of linguistics as well. Students will be encouraged to take interest in ELT and use literary references to that effect. This can bring in a new group of teachers in rural schools who will be motivated to go deep into the teaching of language with reference to literature. 4) Teaching of drama in the right manner can foster abilities to act among rural students. 5) Interpretation of literary texts with a view to cultural studies like Marxism, Feminism, Postcolonialism, Queer theory, Ecocriticism etc. can motivate multifaceted thinking ability and result in promoting good governance, stability, socio-cultural equality in rural locations. Such motivated students might develop student as well as general politics in the country as per the needs of the ever changing scenario. 6) Well nurtured students of English literature, especially from rural locations can shift the focus of journalism, film making etc. towards new heights as and when needed. It has been very rightly pointed out that ‘with the emergence of an “information economy,” the interpretive, critical thinking, and communication skills developed by literary studies and the humanities are highly sought after and rewarded’ (Gerald Graff, 2007, p. xi). Professor David R. Russell writes, “A typical US university provides support for student writing in various programmatic ways, which are usually housed in English departments. There are introductory courses in general academic writing (‘composition’) in the first year or two, required of almost all students (and have been so for 140 years). There is a ‘Writing Centre’ that provides one-on-one or small group tuition for students in any course. There is a ‘Writing Across the Curriculum’ or ‘Writing in the Disciplines’ program that offers support to teaching staff in all departments on ways to use writing more effectively to support students’ learning in their fields. There are English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) courses mainly for international students” (Hewings et al., 2016, p. 139). In rural Indian English departments there is a dire need for courses in sync with the times and it is needless to mention here that all the above mentioned ways and means of teaching will not just open new avenues to the students but those will also create interest to be the teachers of literature in colleges and universities in India. It is time to see if NEP 2020 can usher in the much needed changes.

III. Conclusion

It is a popular notion quoted and reminded again and again that real India lives in its villages. Interpreters, policy makers might be at their liberty with this notion even in this twenty-first century to pinpoint at the level of backwardness in spite of the governments’ claims to rural developments of a magnanimous nature. Teaching of English literature in rural general degree colleges can be an important aspect of discussion in the light of the backwardness of students taking this course in comparison to their counterparts in urban centres in India. “One may not understand the range and complexity of student responses in an English classroom, unless one takes into consideration the location of the institute and the sociocultural constitution of the classroom” (Mahanta & Sharma, p. 168). We must not forget that India in the past was considered as the Vishwaguru because of its rich, world-class, all inclusive teaching learning processes. So, today when a wide disparity is noticeable in the knowledge base and aim of the rural and urban/semi-urban college students of English literature, this is the perfect time to reimagine our past and play a proactive role. It is a proven fact that those groups that cannot come to the mainstream actually keep the whole nation behind. Let us not leave behind the students of English literature in rural areas in India. Socio-economic conditions must be kept in mind and pedagogies must be applied suitably. To conclude, teachers of literature must have the wise advice from T.S. Eliot, i.e. “he can point to good literature and then be silent” (Eliot Vol. II, p.63). “The mind of a boy of fourteen may be deadened by Shakespeare, and may burst into life on collision with Omar or the Blessed Damozel. And none of our tutors could have guessed what piece of printed book would precipitate this crisis” (Eliot Vol. II, p.63). English literary teaching, if conceptualized and executed in true spirit can work real wonders, “We face a dual challenge of making good on the unfulfilled promise to ensure the right to quality education for every child, youth and adult and fully realizing the transformational potential of education as a route for sustainable collective futures. To do this, we need a new social contract for education that can repair injustices while transforming the future” (UNESCO Report, 2021, p.3).

References:

- [1]. Abrams, M.H. & Harpham, Geoffrey Galt (2012). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning.
- [2]. Antonic, Nives Zudic & Koper, Venezia (2015). *Literature in an Intercultural Perspective*, 'Literature for a Social and Cultural Integration', Alessandra Korner in, *Annales University Press*.
- [3]. Bloom, Harold (2001). *How to Read and Why*, New York: Touchstone, 2001.
- [4]. Brumfit, C. J. (Ed.) (1983). *Teaching Literature Overseas: Language-Based Approaches*.
- [5]. Cavanagh, Dermot, Gillis, Alan, Keown, Michelle, Loxley, James, & Stevenson, Randall (2010). *The Edinburgh Introduction to Studying English Literature*, 'What is Literature?', Alex Thomson, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- [6]. Culler, Jonathan (2005). *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*, London and New York: Taylor & Francis e-Library.
- [7]. Davis, Philip (2013). *Reading and the Reader: The Literary Agenda*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [8]. Eaglestone, Robert (2000). *Doing English: A Guide for Literature Students*, London: Routledge.
- [9]. Eliot, T.S. & Cuda, Anthony, Schuchard, Ronald (Ed.) (2014). *The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot: The Critical Edition, Volume II*, Maryland: Faber & Faber Limited and John Hopkins Press.
- [10]. Freire, Paulo & Ramos, Myra Bergman (Tr.) (2005). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York and London: Continuum.
- [11]. Graff, Gerald (2007). *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- [12]. Henry Hudson, William (1913). *An Introduction to the Study of Literature*, London: George G. Harrap & Co.
- [13]. Hewings, Ann, Prescott, Lynda, Seargeant Philip (2016). *Futures for English Studies*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- [14]. *Higher Education in India: Vision 2040*, Kolkata: Ernst & Young LLP, 2021.
- [15]. Hoffman, Michael J. & Murphy Patrick D. (2005). *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*, 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown', Virginia Woolf, Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- [16]. Jusdanis, Gregory (2010). *Fiction Agonistes: In Defence of Literature*, California: Stanford University Press.
- [17]. Mahanta, Banibrata & Sharma, Rajesh Babu (2019). *English Studies in India: Contemporary and Evolving Paradigms*, Singapore: Springer Nature.
- [18]. Orwell, George (2004). *Why I Write*, London: Penguin Books.
- [19]. Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (National Higher Education Mission), A Policy Document, September 2013, Page no. XIII
- [20]. Rees, R. J. (1973). *English Literature: An Introduction for Foreign Readers*.
- [21]. *Reimagining Our Future Together: A New Social Contract for Education*, France: UNESCO, 2021.
- [22]. Richards, I.A. (2004). *Principles of Literary Criticism*, London and New York: Taylor and Francis e-Library.
- [23]. Sekar, Dr. Jeyaraj John (2015). *Are We Decolonizing or Re-colonizing Colonial English Education Policy?*, *ELK Asia Pacific Journals, Special Issue*. PP. 125-137 (978-81-930411-2-3) Available at SSRN: [http://ssrn.com/abstract = 3486793](http://ssrn.com/abstract=3486793) or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3486793>
- [24]. Tagore, Rabindranath (2017). 'An Eastern University' in *The Complete Works of Rabindranath Tagore*, General Press, New Delhi.
- [25]. Viswanathan, Gauri (1988). *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.