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**WESTERN THEMES AND ENGLISH STUDIES IN INDIA: TRANSLATION,  
LITERARY CRITICISM AND OTHER PROBLEMS**

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**Abstract:**

*What happens when themes internal to Western cultural and experiential world gets discussed in Indian classrooms among teachers and students who come from the Indian cultural and experiential world? Nobody in at least the last sixty years have even raised this question in this particular manner. The Department of English Studies in Indian universities, can be used as a case to study this question because this department here, has witnessed its teachers and students discussing texts and themes from western culture. Some think discussing Western themes in India gives Indians some understanding about Western culture. Some think doing so creates and develops contempt towards Indian culture and society. Nevertheless, the English Departments have moved ahead doing Translation Studies, Literary Criticism and so on without saying much about or around the two existing positions. In this paper, we intend to move beyond the two positions and show how discussing Western themes in Indian classrooms, the way it happens in English Studies in Indian universities, is problematic. This paper discusses some problems and brings them to the fore keeping in the background Prof. Balagangadhara's hypothesis on 'Cultural Difference', the way it is formulated in his monograph "The Heathen in his Blindness ..."*

**Key Words:** *Western Culture, Indian Culture, Cultural Difference, English Studies, Translation, Literary Criticism, Teaching and Learning.*

**Introduction**

If we look at the scenario of higher education in India today, at least fifty percent of the students opt to study Humanities and Social Sciences in the universities. Even though one can see a decline in the number of students seeking admissions to the same and even though one can see certain subjects getting closed in the universities, yet a reasonable number of students manage to find place in different streams of Humanities and Social Sciences. All these students, including those who choose to study Natural sciences, have to compulsorily study English language and literature as a part of their curriculum. Some students among them opt to study English Studies further into their masters and beyond. There is a verity of reasons why students opt to study English. Some of them are as follows: today, English as a lingua franca of the world, opens up a host of opportunities to pursue various careers. Some think that studying English gives them an exposure to many literatures across the world which enable them to open up to a verity of interests and concerns globally. These arguments appear reasonable and to some extent indisputable.

If we delve into the curriculum to take a look at what is being taught and learnt in English studies, we see teachers and students discussing, as a part of their syllabi, literatures of Europe, America, Indian Writings in English, African literatures etc. In European and American literatures, the students are introduced to a verity of themes, questions and concerns, raised by those authors, pertaining to their social and cultural world. While doing Indian Writing in English, one claims that it raises questions and concerns of Indian society and culture. Students having studied these domains, mostly come out of the universities

with an idea that their training in English has made them into individuals who can think about their lives and society. In fact, one can even notice among many who teach English, carrying a sense of pride that it is they who possess an ability to think about, write and offer solutions to the many problems of the world.

However, we think that there is a problem which is insidious to the faculty of English in the Indian universities. It can, if not diagnosed correctly, like cancer, spread itself and eat away the cognitive abilities of those in the faculty of Literary studies alongside other Humanities and Social science streams. This paper attempts to bring to the surface some problems and raise some issues that requires urgent attention.

### **Some Contemporary Arguments and Stances**

The problems which we want to talk about are not new issues altogether. Many have made attempts to talk about it, understand its nature and have, for different reasons, inadequately understood the problem, even though some don't seem to have sensed the persistence of the problem at all. For example, consider those who argue that engaging with English literature is important because it opens up an otherwise closed reading community, to the world literary arena and the Western themes and concerns. For example, look at what the most popular Kannada literary figure Kuvempu says, in a similar fashion:

“ಉಷ್ಣವಲಯದ ಬಿಸಿಲಿಗೆ ಬತ್ತಿ, ಹಲಿಯದೆ ನಿಂತುಹೋಗಿ, ಪಾಚಿ ಹಜ್ಜಿ ಹುಳುವಾಗಿ, ಕೊಳೆಗೇರಿಯಂತಿದ್ದ ಭಾರತದ ಬಾಳಿಗೆ ನವೀನವಾದ ಶೈತ್ಯವನ್ನು, ಜೈತನ್ಯವನ್ನು, ಕಾರ್ಯೋತ್ಸಾಹ ನೈಪುಣ್ಯಗಳನ್ನು ಮೂಡಮತ ಬಿದ್ದುಂಸಕವಾದ ವೈಜ್ಞಾನಿಕ ಮತಿಯನ್ನು ಒಳಗೊಂಡ ಪಾಶ್ಚಾತ್ಯ ಜೀವನ ಪರ್ವತದ ನಿರ್ಮಲಿಣಿಯ ಹೊಸ ನೀರು ಧುಮುಕಿದಂತಾಯಿತು.”

(Shivareddy, K. C. 2016. "Kannada Samskriti mattu Shakespeare." In Shakespeare: Kannada Spandana, by Nataraj Hulyar, 133. Bangalore: Kuvempu Bhasha Bharati Pradhikara.)

Such people think that such opening up of Indian readers to the Western culture would also make cross-cultural exchange possible resulting in knowing human beings across cultures. However, such thoughts simply seem to suggest that everything about Indian culture and society is bad, and that Europe is the only hope for India. Making such claims sound absurd and can be disputed because it does not account to the survival of an almost four-thousand-year-old civilization despite foreign onslaughts. Besides, taking this stance without asking if just reading literatures from across cultures can bring about understanding of another culture and even make cross-cultural exchange possible, is dangerous. Then, there are those who argue that opening up to Western themes is not advisable because it makes the native readers and writers fall into the influence of western thought which makes them develop contempt to Indian culture and traditions. Even though, this argument captures the sentiments of such thinkers towards Indian culture, it does not quite adequately point out at what exactly they want to say. There is also the danger here of slipping into taking nationalist positions where one can only see the West as bad like the postcolonial scholars do. However, one cannot completely reject the fact that Western themes somehow bring about contempt towards Indian culture and society. In the following paragraphs, this article will explicate and demonstrate some problems through examples and we hope this exercise will make the point of these scholars sharper and more adequate.

### **Explicating the Problem**

As we have already mentioned, the teachers and students of English studies discuss European literature, American literature along with Indian Writing in English (IWE) and African literatures. While English and American literature introduce western themes, IWE and others are studied under postcolonial and cultural studies. Given this as the context of Indian students of English studies and keeping aside the notions of postcolonial studies, cultural studies etc, let us simply imagine an Indian teacher discussing a poem from European or American literature which normally carries themes integral and internal to Western culture. We will come back to IWE and others later. Let us take for example, the American poem “Ethics” (<https://www.poetrynook.com/poem/ethics>).

In the poem the poet, Linda Paston, recalls a question which her teacher had asked in the "Ethics" class (like there is an Economics class or a Mathematics class, for instance) every fall years ago. Back in that class, the teacher had asked the students every fall, to imagine that they are in a museum and that the museum is on fire where there is an old lady and an only Rembrandt painting. The teacher then had asked the students as to whom they would save? The poet then remembers how the many students had chosen to save the old lady and not the painting, half-heartedly. The poet even remembers answering the teacher ones that the old lady should decide for herself and the teacher complaining that the poet was running away from the 'burden of responsibility'. However, the poet writes that on this particular fall, she as an old lady found herself in a museum which was on fire, along with the painting. She says in the last lines that everything was one and beyond saving by the children.

When this poem is read in the Indian class room, mostly one gets caught in a trap. That is to say, it is difficult to really get the crux of the issue: what is 'ethical' about the poem? Or, what is ethical about the children saving or choosing to save either of the two or choosing not to save at all? In fact, many die in fire accidents not just in museums but elsewhere. During the classroom discussion in Indian classroom, the students here might choose to save either of the two, or both of them or neither of them. What makes discussing this, into discussing an issue which is 'ethical' in nature? This is unclear. To make it clearer, we can put it this way: we know that a question asked in a mathematics class should have something to do with mathematics. Similarly, a question asked in Economics or Biology classes should have something to do with Economics and Biology respectively. In the same way, a question asked in Ethics class should have something to do with Ethics and we see that choosing to save either of the two is asked as a question of Ethics. We would like to argue that it is difficult to understand as Indian teachers and students, as to what the relationship is between choosing to save and 'Ethics'. One might say that running away leaving an old lady in the burning fire is 'unethical' and that one should try and save life. But why should saving life become 'ethical' at all? Suppose one does not save life. How do we know that it is 'unethical'? Should one keep risking one's life trying to save somebody else just to be 'ethical'? This sounds absurd. Or, let's even assume cases where we ourselves have tried helping the one in need many times. Did we do it because we wanted to be ethical or because we would become unethical if we wouldn't have done it? The point we are trying to assert is this: it is almost impossible to see where is the question of ethics in the entire poem, while the title of the poem stresses on the idea of ethics. Given this difficulty, we would like to argue that discussing such themes in the Indian classrooms by the Indian teachers is difficult. Because, 'ethics' or 'normative ethics' the way it is depicted in the poem (or in most English texts or treatises) is an experiential entity in the western culture and not at all an experiential entity in the Indian culture. Does this mean all Indians are 'unethical'? The answer is simple. Indian culture has possibly a completely different notion to talk about good/bad behaviours of human beings and therefore cannot be spoken in terms of ethical/unethical. It might be true that a western teacher in the western classroom might fail to convey the point that the poet is making. But one cannot deny the fact that themes specific to western culture are embedded within the experiential world of the west and therefore the student in the west can easily relate to the concern the poet is raising here.

Assume that the Indian teacher translates ethics into one or the other Indian language as 'naitikate' for his/her Indian students. The problem still persists because all that the teacher would be doing is to substitute the English word 'ethics' with the Indian word 'naitikate'. This in fact multiplies the problem. Because it is unclear what 'naitikate' is in Indian languages, or even if one knows what 'naitikate' is in Indian languages, one cannot say whether the Indian 'naitikate' is equivalent to western 'ethics'. One should note that the issue is therefore not about language and translation. No amount of discussions on 'fidelity in translation', 'adoption', 'recreation' would help (Bassnett, Susan. 2005. *Translation Studies* (third edition). London & New York: Routledge). It appears therefore that translation is not a convenient tool for cross-cultural communication. All that is happening here is this: the Indian English classrooms do not tell us

anything either about western 'ethics' nor about Indian 'naitikate'. Consequently, both are getting distorted. This then is the first problem.

We would like to suggest that there is yet another problem here. This has to do with an attitude that what is taught in the English class is experientially universal. In the sense that there exists a belief that the themes taught and discussed in the English classrooms are common to humanity and to all people across all cultures. For example, most English teachers invariably believe that many things that Shakespeare has written is universal and time tested. Elements like the 'guilt' of Lady Macbeth, 'procrastination' of Hamlet, 'ambition' of Macbeth, 'jealousy' of Othello are said to be experienced by all people across cultures in the same manner. We would like to argue that this is a false assumption because it pushes us into the trap of believing that culturally and experientially both the west and Indians experience many things in the same manner. Do we really experience many things in the same way given that we differ culturally in different ways? Only an appropriate research about 'cultural difference' can tell us. Not only that. Because we think that the many themes taught in the English classrooms are universal, and that there is 'normative ethics', for example, also exists in Indian culture, there are places where empirical and experiential entities integral to Indian culture and society gets looked down as inferior. Let's look back at the problem of 'ethics'.

When the west came to India and more specifically when the British saw the lives, practices and rituals of Indians, they found it immoral and unethical. The western experience of something being ethical/unethical made Europeans look at Indian culture and society as unethical. Over a period of time, Indians and especially the Indian intellectuals have settled to reproduce the story that India is unethical and immoral. With this in the background, if we are told, the way western themes are discussed in English classroom, that Ethics is universal, we are only left to conclude that Indians have become unethical because of their traditions and practices. It does not allow us to ask and understand if certain practices have anything to do with ethics at all, any more than know why choosing to save between two is a question of ethics, while our own experience about our lives tell us that things are just fine with regard to our doing rituals and practices. This points out clearly to show that 'ethics' is not universal rather an idea internal to western culture. In this sense, western themes discussed in the English classrooms are experiences of one particular culture. Therefore, we suggest that the attitude that what is taught in the English class is universal generates the second problem. Should we then stop discussing western themes in Indian classrooms at all? We will take this question a little later.

There is a danger now of thinking that only IWE should be taught in Indian classrooms since the prevalent idea is that IWE focus on issues pertaining to Indian culture and society. Though it appears that IWE deals with only issues pertaining to Indian culture and society, we argue that this is not true. That is to say, even though problems of Indian society are the subject matters of discussion, they are discussed based on the concepts of western culture. Take for example, the way some or the other story is read and understood in IWE. We must remember that these stories are either stories from the puranas or some modern stories written based again on issues which has its origin in the western culture.

Imagine an Indian story whose function is to assist one or the other performative traditions like Yakshagana or Talamaddale etc, which have become 'literary texts' to be read and discussed in the IWE syllabi. What happens in the IWE classroom is the following: such stories get considered as 'literary texts' and then gets treated like any other literary text is treated. The question, whether or not the pauranic stories are literary texts has not been raised at all. That is, all the tools used to read a literary text is employed on these stories. So, these stories are read, de-constructed, re-read using arguments from Marxism, Feminism, Historical reading etc. Consequently, all of a sudden, a Marxist interpretation and feminist interpretation and historically deconstructed interpretation of the performative story emerges. This is deeply problematic because it is absurd to use methods of reading and interpretation to understand stories which have a different function to do viz, performative. Teachers and students miserably fail to recognise as to where there is a need to interpret and where there is no need. They simply interpret just everything they get to

read. They fail to recognise that 'interpreting' is a practice which was a necessity in analysing a text with in western textual traditions. When a westerner reads a literary text, he reads it with a presupposition that has come embedded within the reading traditions of western culture. The presupposition is of the following kind: that the text has a message and the message has a meaning and knowing the meaning of the text is how one understands the message of the text. Only under this assumption does one interpret a text because interpreting is seen as a tool which allows one to decipher the meaning of the text. Indian stories on the other hand, do not seem to assume that it has a message and a meaning. Knowing the text therefore in India does not mean to get the meaning of the text. It is rather about the ability to use the text whenever required in terms of generating appropriate reflection. When this is the case, there is no necessity to give multiple readings and multiple interpretations at all. Unfortunately, this is how Indian texts are read in Indian English classrooms and all this is done in the name of literary criticism. In the western world, literary criticism does the function of making the text consistent by offering one or the other interpretation. It is unclear what it means conceptually, to make the text appear consistent when it comes to Indian stories. This does not however mean that Indian stories are inconsistent. To say anything more than this requires research into the nature of Indian texts. Therefore, using tools of literary criticism fundamentally blocks the reasoning ability of the students to ask if Indian texts are of the same nature the way the western texts are. This again distorts the understanding and ways of reflection that the Indian stories assisted in generating. Besides, it brings about pseudo problems into the classroom discussion that some stories have its association to high-caste and others represent rebellion of the low, somehow invoking the western experience of the caste-system in India. The students neither understand literary criticism nor figure out properly the purpose of stories in Indian culture.

One can see again, the attitude that the themes discussed in English studies are universal crops its head. Issues like texts have multiple meanings, author is dead etc are seen as universal truth. It blinds the teachers and students to know whether or not the concerns of a Roland Barth or a Derrida or a Michel Foucault are universal concerns or culture specific. In this sense, IWE very clearly assumes western ways of doing literary practice.

It becomes more and more clear now about what concerns those who argue that opening up to the world literary arena fall into the influence of western thought which makes them develop contempt to Indian culture and traditions actually had. But it was ill-formulated because they don't seem to have an answer when a counter question is asked: Should one then stop teaching and learning anything western in Indian universities at all? Let us now, consider this question seriously. On one hand, it indeed sounds unfair to even imagine that everything western should not be taught in the Indian classrooms. But on the other, we have seen the kind of problem it has generated. So, what should the English studies departments do about this?

### **Should One Stop Teaching Western Themes to Indian Students?**

We suggest that this is not the solution. University is a place where knowledge has to be transmitted. One should know that there is no such thing as Western knowledge and Indian knowledge, though knowledge has to emerge from some culture in the world. Knowledge is for the use of human beings and should be accessible to all beyond limitations of culture etc. Either something is knowledge or there is simply ignorance. In this sense, learning Western themes should not ideally generate the kind of problems they are generating today. Are there then examples of themes which have emerged in the West, which do not generate the kind of problems that Literature, Humanities and Social Sciences are generating, when taught in India? Yes. There is one good example.

Consider an Indian student learning Natural Science. Unlike learning the poem 'Ethics', where the theme itself is inaccessible, learning 'Gravity' does not generate such a problem. Why is it the case? Is it because one is 'Literature'/Humanities' and the other is 'Science'? Many say so, though it is unclear what it means. It appears that there is an assumption that whatever one says in Humanities, has to be inaccessible

and understandable. Whatever be it. Let's look at the question seriously: Why is the 'Ethics' of Humanities inaccessible while 'Gravity' of Science is accessible?

To give an answer in very simple terms, here is what we can say: Gravity is accessible because the conditions and limitations under which one can learn gravity is set by a theory which is independent from experiences of religion, culture etc. Ethics is inaccessible because there is no theory which sets independent conditions and limitations which are cognitive in nature outside the experience of religion and culture in order to understand the kind of a phenomenon it is, rather it is still an entity in experience of a particular culture viz, western. In this sense, the many themes in Literature/Humanities and Social Sciences have no cognitive conditions and limitations rather have references to an experiential world of the Western culture. Only when the cognitive conditions and limitations independent of the limits of cultural experience are set, Indian teachers can clearly point out at cognitive propositions and explain what ethics is and show what is ethical about the poem 'Ethics', like 'Gravity' is taught by pointing at cognitively recognisable propositions within its theory. How do we build such a theory is again a question of research. Doing this will help Indians learn what Ethics is like he learns what Gravity is, but he also does not distort Indian conceptions like 'naitikate' which are seen as parallel to 'ethics', since he would have learnt that limitations and conditions under which something becomes 'ethics' and not otherwise. There will be no need either to translate or interpret it also. It is only then the possibility to separately understand what 'naitikate' means to Indians can also be studied. This is the only way we can discuss Indian issues without mixing it with the western themes and really learn to diagnose the problems within Indian society. This then is the challenge.

### **On the Nature of the Challenge**

The challenge that the English studies departments in the universities of India have is to get rid of the problem of using western experiential entities and western descriptions about Indian culture as the reality of India. What west has said about Indian is true only as far as west's experience of India is concerned. The study of Orientalism and Postcolonial Studies today do not recognise that western description have become the true description of other cultures. But it has failed to ask why the west described others the way it has described. In this sense, it fails to study west seriously. That is, instead of recognising that 'literary criticism' is a necessity that western culture has generated within their textual traditions, they make claims that India must also have its own 'Indian literary criticism'. It claims that Indian has its own literary history and its own Indian feminism etc. It blocks the path to even raise a question whether India really had its own feminism, literary history, literary criticism etc. So, there is a need to move ahead from Postcolonial scholarship into a more scientific method of studying cultures.

We suggest that the only scientific method of studying culture and differences among them available today is the research program 'Comparative Science of Cultures'(CSC) by Prof. S.N. Balagangadhara and members of his research program. CSC takes its departure from Orientalism and Postcolonial Studies and builds conceptual tools and methods to study cultures, its constituent properties and the elements that makes cultures differ differently. Because of this, in this paper, we could argue that it is possible for an Indian student to learn 'Ethics' the way he learns 'Gravity' in a scientific manner without any agitation to losing access to one's own culture. Today, the very fact that this paper is talking about an insidious problem without taking any cultural nationalist positions but simply attempting to look for a way to study both cultures as they are without distorting them is due to the theories that CSC has offered. We think that more research has to be taken up in the framework of CSC in the discipline of English Studies. If one does not recognise that cultures differ differently and that languages and literatures of different cultures also differ differently, then, as Prof. Balagangadhara argues, we fall into the trap of Colonial Consciousness. This then, is another problem.

### **On the problem of Colonial Consciousness**

Colonial Consciousness is a phenomenon where once colonized subjects continue to use the

colonizers descriptions of the colonized as the only true description even after colonialism has ended. This makes the once colonized subjects, loose access to once own experience. (Balagangadhara, S.N. 2013. "Colonialism and Colonial Consciousness." In *Reconceptualizing India Studies*, by S.N. Balagangadhara. Oxford.)

If this is what Colonial Consciousness is, in some sense, it appears that, the English Studies Departments are indeed places where Colonial Consciousness take root and spreads. Because Western themes are not only taught as universal ideas but they make the teachers and students blind to see that they are experiences of one particular culture and consequently blind to see what Indian culture has to offer as cognitively interesting problems to discuss. More than all, it blinds one to build any knowledge about human beings given the limitations of cultural difference. Of course, there is a need for more explication to show how the problem of Colonial Consciousness takes root in the English classrooms in Indian universities. Due to lack of space we will stop at just making a mention of this problem.

### **Conclusion**

There is than the need to examine the way teaching and learning happens in the English Studies class rooms in India today. Be it translation or literary criticism or Indian Writing in English or any other literatures, they are read in the framework of the western culture. That is, we only have a partial picture of human cultures and society. We do not know how our own writings and songs and stories would look like if we looked at it our own way, leave alone presenting it as knowledge to the world.

All those who have argued and continue to argue that opening up to the world literary arena would make one develop contempt to Indian culture and society will have to rethink about the way they present their issue. We hope this article has made the attempt: it is not that we should not open to Western themes, but they should be discussed as experiences of that particular culture from which they emerge. Further, conceptual tools need to be built to make sense of what different cultures are talking about without mixing the different descriptions. Doing this, we believe will take the English Studies cognitively interesting and allow the faculty to raise cognitively interesting questions without getting into defending ideological stances.

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