

Revisiting the Contours of English in the Indian Context in Poile Sengupta's Keats was a Tuber

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Macaulay's name needs no introduction whenever English in India is considered in its historical perspective. Much discourse has been generated on Macaulay's famous Minute of 1835 representing the position of power of the English language. His intention in making English the medium of instruction in Indian institutions stand almost in contrast with what it actually turned out to be. Macaulay, with the available resources, intended to "form a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect". He wanted this class to act and work as interpreters between the British and the millions of Indian masses they governed. Time witnessed occasional debates revolving around the merits and demerits of Macaulay's intentions and assertions. Here, it is pertinent to quote Edward Said, who in his work, *The World, the Text and The Critic* says,

Macaulay's was an ethnocentric opinion with ascertainable results. He was speaking from a position of power where he could translate his opinions into the decision to make an entire subcontinent of natives submit to studying in a language not their own. This in fact is what happened. In turn this validated the culture to itself by providing a precedent, and a case, by which superiority and power are lodged both in a rhetoric of belonging, or being "at home", so to speak, and in a rhetoric of administration: the two become interchangeable (p12-13).

Since the introduction of the English language in India, after the policy framework was created to propagate the idea of superiority of thought and culture, to rear a literate middle class and to procure human work force, English has served not only to strengthen the country and its people but also to backfire on the assumptions of the likes of Macaulay. The adoption of English affected the lives of common people by expanding the horizon of their thoughts and value system, invoking their nationalistic spirit and finally culminating in attaining freedom. After India gained independence in 1947, the linguistic and cultural implications of colonization still remained operative, with a dual purpose of acting as a unifying linguistic agency for administration and as a means of wider international communication (Kachru, 1983). Post independent scenario witnessed conflicting dialectics of both support and opposition towards a language which still was to cross the threshold of acceptance in a multilingual country like India.

Postcolonial criticism has viewed the construction of English literary education both as part of the colonial cultural design (Viswanathan) as well as a densely political and cultural phenomenon

(Ashcroft, Griffins 1989). But this very design has yielded results in such diverse textual patterns which have become an integral part of the Indian reality. As Iyengar states: "English has become ours, it is not less ours for being primarily the Englishman's or the American's". Post independence Indian English writers have given an authentic Indian voice to their works. Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand were among the first few authors to gain recognition by adopting English as the medium to express their concerns. Raja Rao in the Preface to his novel *Kanthapura* says: "One has to convey in a language that is not one's own, the spirit that is one's own". R.K. Narayan in his essay titled "A Literary Alchemy" puts forth his idea regarding Indian English as an inevitable outcome of a natural process: 'We have fostered the language for over a century and we are entitled to bring it in line with our own habits of thought and idiom'. The journey of English language and literature in India witnessed many a victory as individual writers experimented and coloured it with local hues and flavours. However, the centre stage was primarily occupied by the male bastion. Fiction was the main genre in which Indian English writings flourished and occasionally women writers entered the scene until the last two or three decades witnessed many women novelists making a mark on the Indian literary landscape. Drama, however, remained the neglected genre when it came to Indian women writing plays in the English language.

The emergence of women playwrights with innovative semiotics and sensitive treatment of social issues has opened new vistas in modern Indian drama. It becomes all the more important because theatre was considered as a realm belonging to the patriarchal setup. Many women dramatists who have ventured into this genre have written plays in vernacular languages, some of which have been translated into English. Poile Sengupta has written a number of plays, all of them in English, but set in very Indian contexts.

The importance of English in all the major Indian cities and towns has brought about a radical change in the present scenario. There is a scramble to learn English with 'institutes' offering to teach English and as these proliferate, the language seems to serve as a means of unifying the country.

Sengupta's play titled *Keats was a Tuber* is a satire on Indian English – very relevant to the current scenario of a globalized world. It takes on the shape of a parody to question the relevance and ownership of the English language by Indians. It is simultaneously thought-provoking and humorous. The method of memorising and rote-learning is painfully familiar to both the teacher and the taught in the Indian context. Sengupta makes a brilliant use of this method of teaching and learning to bring home the futility of such language learning. Further, she tactfully shows how English can be used as a bridge amongst people.

Poile Sengupta was born in 1948 as Ambika Gopalakrishnan. Today she is one of the foremost Indian writers in English especially well known as a playwright and writer for children. As a playwright, her first full length play *Mangalam* won the award for the most socially relevant theme in the Hindu-Madras players playscripts competition in 1993. In addition, she has been an accomplished actor on stage and owns her own theatre group named 'Theatre Club'. The collection of her plays titled *Women Centre Stage: The Dramatist and the Play*, with an Introduction by Shashi Deshpande is valuable for varied reasons and Poile Sengupta's passion for theatre is evident in her dedication: 'To my husband Abhijit, who shares my theatre madness and helps me balance the formalities of the stage with its magic.'

The play 'Keats was a Tuber' is set in a college staff room in a small town in Tamil Nadu and the plot unravels in the context of the manner in which English is taught in colleges all over the country – this particular college serving more as an example than anything else. The mechanical memorising of facts, often not the essential ones, is what provides the title of the play. Students are taught to memorize the line 'Keats was a tuberculosis patient' by breaking it up into two meaningless portions – 'Keats was a tuber, Keats was a tuber' and 'culosis patient, culosis patient'. This method is familiar to Indians in a typically Indian context. It is clearly evident that the line so memorized has little to do with Keats' claim to renown in the literary world, as Raghu rightly points out:

I am expanding their minds, helping them grow, that's what teaching is about. Real teaching. Not this cramming and vomiting out that you and your colleagues expect them to do. Memorise! By heart! Mug up! (Chants.) Keats was a tuber... Keats was a tuber ... Keats was a tuber ...culosis patient ...culosis patient ... Is that all you can tell them about Keats? That he had tuberculosis? (168)

Before Act 1 of the play begins, a woman as a teacher of English from India, is shown addressing an unseen audience on the stage. She begins by acknowledging that English is not her language but something she learnt when she was sent to an English medium school because her parents attributed the glory of the British to the power of their language. Now the same language has become the language of her thoughts, reasons and the language she uses for loving. She confesses: 'My perceptions are finer, my judgements more subtle, the range and depth of my emotions seem to be much greater in this language than in any other.' (145)

This woman becomes the mouthpiece of all those Indians who adopted English as their own language. She appears several times during the play to address the audience, with the entire stage in darkness and a spot of light on her, highlighting the importance of her words. Recalling her apprehensions, her frustrations, her adjustments with the English language at various stages of her life, she comes to question the place of English in her life:

WOMAN: The land of my birth is equatorial, dramatic, dense with colour and sound. The language I first heard was as vivid, with its spice filled consonants, its images large, overpowering, invading the nooks of my mind. How was I to reconcile this with the language of my education, which seemed to be as ordered as an English garden, as predictable, as rational?

In the harsh clear light of logic, of the rules of law, of morality, I was fenced in, safe with my skills in the English language. But when I wanted to express the wilderness of the monsoon, when I needed more urgent endearments, when I looked for words as pulsating as passion itself, I found Macaulay had done me wrong. My English upbringing could not cope with my Indian experience. (195)

All such musings and confessions get resolved towards the end when she realizes that language is always on the move. 'Across land and water, over hills and deserts, language is a travelling. It can never arrive.' Finally she tells the audience that she can express her feelings and emotions in English and it is how she has taken her revenge – by making the English language her own. Against the backdrop of this woman's expressions is laid out the entire play with the main theme revolving around the present status of English in the Indian context.

Scene 1 introduces us to the various staff members of the 'English Dept' who consciously or unconsciously are concerned about the plight of the English language in their college. The piece of

polished wood with words 'English Dept' painted on it is shown to be constantly an object of envy. It is knocked down deliberately or splashed with ink by unknown people but obviously of the same college. The attitude towards this language is typical of the response of some Indians who think that English is still a foreign language. This particular group comprises mostly the political class who for personal gains make English their target, questioning its validity in our country. The same people send their own children to foreign countries to get Western education. A lot of debate, time and again, pushes the role of English in India into precarious situations.

How we in India have adapted English to our convenience is evident from the way we use it. When Iyer asks Sarala if she was looking for her attendance register, Sarala answers in a typically Indian manner: 'Yes sir, I was finding it but ...' and Iyer gently puts it right 'You mean you were looking for it but could not find it.' At another instance when Iyer and Sarala are discussing about the venue for the farewell function for Raghu, Iyer suggests using the staffroom instead of a class room. He wants to give a reason for his preference: 'It would be more ...' but before he could finish Sarala interrupts: 'Intimate, Sir?' and Iyer's reply is: 'It would be more informal.' This method of error correction is different from the traditional approach as the correction is made without pointing out to the user that he is wrong. Another teacher, Dr. Dennis, is shown exhibiting his knowledge of the famous English writers whom he can quote and make changes and adjustments according to the situations. When Ms. Nathan announces that her nephew would soon join the college, Dennis replies: 'What is this about a new face? Let me not to the marriage of new faces admit impediments ...' He further adds: 'Ah! Prepare to meet thy doom. Beware, beware his flashing eyes, his flowing hair ... How long do you think he will survive in our little Hades?' (152)

When Raghu, Nathan's nephew finally arrives we are certain of the much needed changes which would take place in this college. When Raghu enquires about the teaching system in that college he is informed that the syllabus has not been changed for many years. Sarala appreciates the fact that Dr. Dennis has maintained his notes from 'those days itself' and therefore is a good teacher. Raghu's interaction with other faculty members reveals some flaws in our own teaching system which needs to be seriously looked upon. Although presented in a humorous manner, the point in consideration not only reflects how our students perform but also how ineffective our teaching is.

Sarala: Oh, you should see how they write, Raghu. My remedial class does not know how to use English words at all. Today, I wanted them to write about a college excursion. See what this student has written ... one one boy sat on one one cycle. (172)

The fact, however, is that the teachers are also to be blamed. Sarala is shown to be the typical teacher who is most of the times confused herself. She gives much importance to unnecessary details:

Sarala: You know, in Indian history, there was a battle between the Indians and the British in 1857.

Nathan: Yes?

Sarala: The thing is, in school, they used to call it the Sepoy Mutiny or the Indian Mutiny of 1857. But now my students are saying it is the First Indian War of Independence. What is the right name? I am really confused.

Nathan: What does the name matter, Sarala? In any case, we did not get independence for nearly a hundred years after that.

Sarala: But I should not make a mistake about the name, isn't it, Mrs. Nathan? That is why I am searching through these books. But they all say it is the Sepoy Mutiny. I don't know what to do.

Nathan: Why are you wasting so much of your time on this, Sarala? Are you teaching History or English?

Sarala: The first year BAs. Nowadays they ask me so many questions, my head goes round and round. (183)

Raghu's objection to the type of syllabus being taught at that college results in an argumentative debate. He brings a practical vision in making changes in the syllabus. He argues to delete things like Charles Lamb's essay 'A Dissertation Upon Roast Pig' as it does not benefit the students in any way: 'I have to take apart Lamb's delicate whimsy to boys and girls who are first generation literate. And worse, much worse, I have to talk about the mouth-watering and irresistible taste of crackling of roast pork to a group of students, a great many of whom don't eat meat and over half of whom are Muslims.' (168)

Raghu's suggestion of replacing the present prescribed texts with more practical material like 'newspapers, magazines and advertisements.... Real life material' to teach the English language seems a far-fetched idea in this college but at the same time full of hope and positive results.

Raghu: First of all, this non-detailed text. It should be banned.

Dennis : So we are left no tools to teach with nor no stick neither?

Raghu : We put together small prose pieces which allow our students to learn language skills that they can use in their immediate environment.

Sarala : Oh Raghu. You are sounding so much like sir.

Raghu : And we simulate real life situations in the classroom where they have to weave together their knowledge of English vocabulary, sentence structure, the question form and so on.

Nathan : Raghu, you are again talking of big issues. We are a small department in a small college. How can we....(174)

In his short span of stay at this college, Raghu also brings to fore another important issue – that of teaching English to the non-teaching employees of our institutions. Generally this section of the employees, constituting the fourth-grade employees, is not given due importance. It is taken for granted that they don't need to get education especially in English. Raghu teaches English to Ramanan by making him write on a slate. 'That's right. C..O..F... Another F..E. C.O.F.F.E.E. coffee. Gone for coffee. Good! What else do you want to learn?' When Mrs. Nathan finds Raghu teaching the peon she is both shocked and angry. 'Ramanan! I have been calling you and calling you and this is where you are. Learning English instead of attending to your duty. Go! There are some more books in the second year class. Bring them ... Learning English' (167)

Besides the teaching staff, a young BA Elective English third year student, Damini also enters the scene. She is an intelligent girl, courteous towards her teachers, self possessed and is shown to interpret Jane Austen according to her own critical thinking. The pattern of repeated questions being asked in the exams is another characteristic in Indian colleges taken up by Sengupta. To the oft repeated question in the exams in that college 'Justify the title of the book, *Pride and Prejudice*', however, Damini brings her own interpretation, highlighting her critical abilities. The college library is not well equipped to provide her the latest criticism. Raghu suggests asking the opinion of Damini as one of the college students to give her feedback on the library. He feels that as a student user of the library, 'her views would be immensely valuable.'

Another interesting fact is brought to light when Mr Iyer tells Damini to read the text first and get her own interpretation of it before she reads any critical material on the author and the text. Damini shown as an exceptional student follows the advice but although not explicitly indicated it is well understood that it is a common practice among students to read the critics before reading the text or sometimes not reading the text at all.

In one of her conversations with Mr. Iyer, Damini tells him of her argument with her cousin who was fond of reading 'cheap kind of romances in circulating libraries ... these trashy sorts of books and magazine stories'. When once she picked up *Pride and Prejudice* and read it, she retorted, 'This is just like the books I read. It's so romantic. Why do you say it is literature?' She argues with Damini that if Jane Austen's novels can be called literature, then those other cheap things she reads should also be called literature and her choice for reading such stuff should not be made fun of. At Mr. Iyer's opinion that everyone has a right to read what they wish, Damini convincingly tries to prove it wrong and shows that literature has a purpose and is true to life. '... those books are false. They carry the reader to some fantasy place with fantasy people where all the problems get solved in the end, like magic. And they make the reader feel frustrated because real life is not like that.' (178)

Damini's maturity of understanding can be seen in her assessment of Wordsworth's sonnet 'Upon Westminster Bridge'. She was taught this poem one year back as part of her core English syllabus by a teacher who made it appear quite dull. She questions the necessity of such a poem being taught to Indian students: 'Why should I study something written by some Englishman who is talking about some bridge in London that I have never seen? If I write a poem 'Upon Howrah Bridge', will it be included in the English syllabus?' (163)

As the human relationships unfold in the play, Sengupta makes brilliant use of the English language as a bridge among different characters. Even cultural differences are brought about which still exist in our country inspite of us speaking English and appearing to be modern. Sarala's criticism of Dr. Dennis' divorce without proper understanding of their personal circumstances and her blaming of Mrs. Dennis for everything reflects not only her immaturity but also the cultural gap existing between the east and the west. In the play, Damini acts as a foil to Sarala. Damini's intelligence strikes Raghu to such an extent that before he leaves for Canada he announces his engagement to her on the occasion of his farewell organised by his colleagues.

The play comes to an end with the woman on the stage giving her views of the transformations the English language has undergone in post-independent India:

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I have taken from the Englishman what was his. I have smoothed it and dented it, given it shape, polished it, fashioned it the way I want. And I know I possess it now.....Macaulay, I have my revenge after all. (213-14)

The journey of the English language and literature, thus, comes full circle with no traces of foreignness left and Indian English coming at par with other 'Englishes' of the world.

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