

“Quest for Relevance”: English Literary Studies in Post-colonial India

Dr. Vikram Singh Thakur

Associate Professor, School of Letters, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University Delhi, India.
vikram@aud.ac.in

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Abstract: This essay examines the institutional decolonisation of English Literary Studies in India through the case of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University Delhi (AUD). Situating AUD's curricular interventions within the theoretical legacies of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o on decolonization, Gauri Viswanathan's institutional history of English studies in India, Aníbal Quijano's concept of the colonality of power, and Mignolo's epistemic disobedience and decolonial option, the paper argues that decolonisation in this context has meant not merely diversifying the canon but redistributing the university's ideological orientation toward the margins. Drawing on curricular design, pedagogical practice, and the inclusion of orature and multilingual instruction, the paper offers AUD as a working model – necessarily partial and contested – for what a decolonised Literary Studies programme might look like in a multilingual postcolonial nation.

Keywords: postcolonial pedagogy, epistemic disobedience, decolonial option, colonality of power

Introduction

English Literary Studies arrived in India as an instrument of empire. Introduced in the early nineteenth century, it was designed, in Thomas Macaulay's now-notorious phrase, to produce "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (102). In *Masks of Conquest* (1989), Gauri Viswanathan argues that English literature functioned as a surrogate for religion, enabling the British administration to secure consent for imperial rule through the moral and aesthetic authority attributed to literary texts. More than seven decades after Independence, however, most English departments in India continue to teach a syllabus organised around the British canon, with a smattering of a few non-British and non-European literary works. This essay asks what it might mean, institutionally and pedagogically, to take decolonisation seriously as more than an admission of a few "Commonwealth" or "postcolonial" texts into an otherwise unchanged curriculum. It does so through a case study of English Literary Studies in the curriculum at Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University Delhi (AUD), established in 2011, drawing on the author's experience as a founding faculty member of the department.

The starting point for this inquiry is not new. Upamanyu Chatterjee's novel *English, August: An Indian Story* (1988), Agastya's cousin sarcastically asks:

"Dr Prem Krishen of Meerut University has written a book on E.M. Forster, India's darling Englishman – most of us seem to be so *grateful* that he wrote that novel about India. Dr. Prem Krishen holds a Ph. D. in Jane Austen from Meerut University. Have you ever been to Meerut? A vile place, but comfortably Indian. What is Jane Austen doing in Meerut?"

"Why is some Jat teenager in Meerut reading Jane Austen? Why does a place like Meerut have a course in English at all? Only because the Prem Krishens of the country need a place where they can teach this rubbish?" He jabbed dramatically at the manuscript with his pipe. "Surely they can spend the money they waste on running the department usefully elsewhere" (Chatterjee 170).

The remark resonates because it expresses a sense of alienation that many Indian students of English literature have experienced but never articulated: an estrangement from a syllabus that asks them to inhabit sensibilities – Wordsworth's daffodils and Shakespeare's English summer – with little bearing on their own lived realities and experiences. This essay reads such discomfort not as a personal difficulty to be overcome individually, but as evidence of an unresolved institutional legacy. It therefore considers what concrete forms of curricular and pedagogical reform might follow from a genuine commitment to redressing that legacy.

From Postcolonial Critique to Decoloniality

The critical framework for interrogating English literary studies in the postcolonial world was developed largely in the late 1960s with the publication of the polemic "On the Abolition of the English Department" (1968) by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'O (James Ngugi then), Henry Owuor-Anyumba and Taban Lo Liyong. Writing from the University of Nairobi, the authors questioned the centrality of English literature in the curriculum of Literary Studies in Africa. They argued: "If there is need for a 'study of the historic continuity of a single culture', why can't this be African? Why can't African literature be at the centre so that we can view other cultures in relationship to it?" (439) They proposed to replace English literature with African, Caribbean, and Afro-American literatures, on the grounds that a literature curriculum should orient students towards their immediate cultural and social worlds before requiring them to inhabit the

experiences and sensibilities of foreign literary traditions. Gauri Viswanathan's institutional history of English studies in *Masks of Conquest* (1989), together with Svati Joshi's edited volume *Rethinking English* (1991) and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's *The Lie of the Land: English Literary Studies in India* (1992), extended the postcolonial critique of literary education to the Indian context. Collectively, these works showed that the survival of the colonial curriculum after Independence could not be explained merely as institutional inertia; it also reflected the continuing, and often unexamined, ideological authority of English literary studies. Though such works appearing in the last quarter of the 20th century had set a global debate on the role of English and European literatures in the former European colonies, not many universities, at least in India, attempted to decolonize and decanonize English Literary Studies. More often than not, such postcolonial critiques remain confined within the disciplinary logic they seek to challenge, focusing primarily on which texts should be included or excluded from the curriculum and on the principles governing such choices.

Before one ventures into the issue of rethinking Literary Studies in India today, it is pertinent to know why academic institutions have not been able to decolonise their curriculum. I have found Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano's concept of "coloniality of power" particularly helpful in engaging with this question. Quijano's concept distinguishes colonialism as a historical fact from coloniality as the persistence of the epistemic and classificatory structures colonialism installed – structures that survive even after formal political independence, for they are supported and reproduced by institutions, systems of knowledge, social hierarchies, and prevailing notions of modernity (Quijano, 2000, 533–35). Quijano, in another seminal essay, "Coloniality and modernity/rationality", argues that "[I]t is necessary to extricate oneself from the linkages between rationality/modernity and coloniality, first of all, and definitely from all power which is not constituted by free decisions made by free people (2007, 177). The concept helps one understand the logic for the continuation of English Literary Studies in post-colonial India that still weighs heavily towards British, European and American literatures. The related notion of the "decolonial option," formulated by the semiotician and decolonial theorist Walter D. Mignolo, extends this argument by maintaining that genuine decolonisation requires "epistemic disobedience"—a deliberate delinking from dominant colonial systems of knowledge and from their claims to universality (Mignolo 45). Viewed through this lens, the question confronting an English department in India is not merely which authors/literary works should be taught, but whether "English literary studies" can survive decolonisation in its present form at all. It needs to be fundamentally reconceived and reconstituted, as Ngũgĩ's formulation suggests, rather than through curricular reform alone. This essay's case study also draws its philosophical strength from B.R. Ambedkar's thoughts, after whom the university under discussion is named. Ambedkar's thoughts on education were deeply wedded to his political thought. His insistence that education must be an instrument of social transformation for those historically denied access to it offers a vocabulary for decolonisation that exceeds a narrowly defined postcolonial framework concerned primarily with the nation's relationship to its former coloniser. Named after Ambedkar, and committed to his constitutional vision of equality and social justice, the university is therefore bound to move beyond the binary of "British or non-British" and take into account multiple marginalities including caste, class, gender, location or sexual orientation, whether produced by colonial structures or within the nation itself.

The Case of AUD: Institutional Design

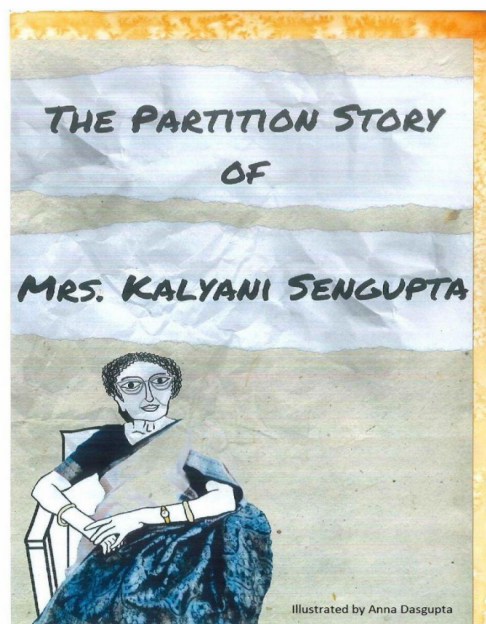
The Department of Literary Studies at AUD was established in 2011 by a group of founding faculty tasked with building an English curriculum from the ground up

rather than inheriting one. This absence of an existing structure was treated as an opportunity: the department's founding conversations centred on questions that most established departments rarely revisit – what should “English Literary Studies” mean in a multilingual nation in which Britain no longer holds any monopoly over the language, and what, in a global scenario, “English” in that phrase should even refer to (British, American, Australian, South African, Caribbean, Indian)?

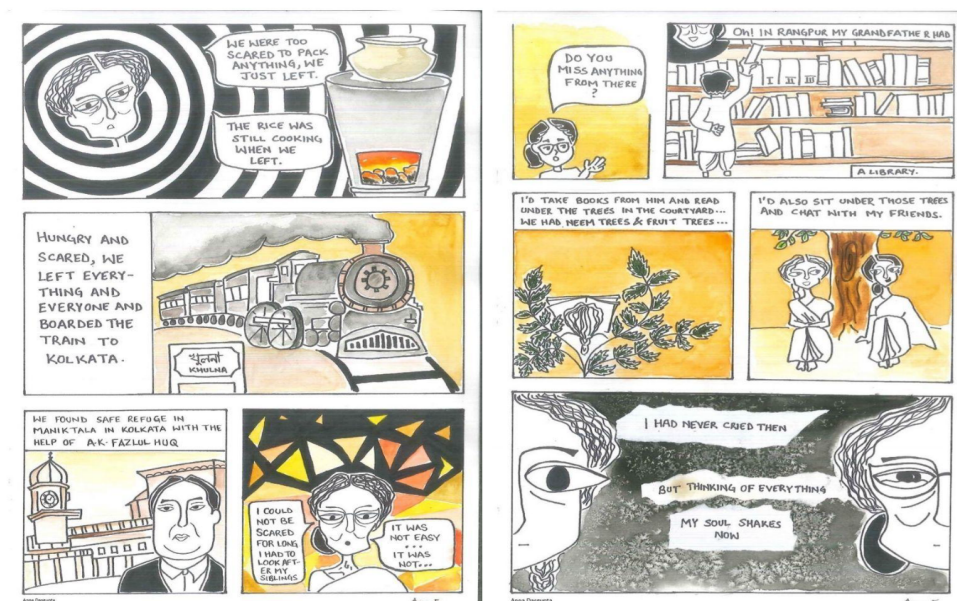
Guided by AUD's institutional charter, which foregrounds equality, social justice, and engagement with the margins, the “department” arrived at a guiding principle: to dismantle the hierarchy between British literature and other literatures in English, including literatures in translation. Taking a cue from Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, the founding faculty briefly considered dropping “English” from the department's name and identifying simply as a Department of Literary Studies, only to be prevented by the institutional constraints. The impulse, however, behind it – to decentre English as the organising category – persisted in curriculum design. The department's course offerings across undergraduate and post-graduate programmes reflect this commitment: “Dalit Literature”, “Literatures from Africa”, “Postcolonial Theory and Practice”, “Radical Poetry of Protest and Resistance”, “Folk, Oral, Indigenous and Popular Cultures”, “Theories of Marginality and Culture”, “Asian-Canadian Literature”, “Remembering Partition”, “Native American Literature”, “Literatures of the Indian Subcontinent”, “Literary and Cultural Confluence in India”, “Modern Indian Drama and Theatre”, “Modern World Drama”, “Conceptual and Philosophical Frameworks in Asian Traditions” and “Revisiting the All India Progressive Writers' Association and the Indian People's Theatre Association” – the last of which is, to the author's knowledge, offered as a full-fledged course at no other English department in the country.

Pedagogy and the Politics of Location

Curricular redesign alone, however, risks becoming a new canon rather than a decolonised one, unless it is accompanied by a pedagogy that connects literary study to the lived realities of students. The department's course “Remembering Partition” illustrates this ambition: students once undertook a field visit to the Partition Museum in Amritsar and produced reflective writing on the experience. Fortunately, another Museum Partition has now been established at the University campus itself. Students enrolled in this course are encouraged to record survivor testimonies, contributing to the wider Partition archive. One such project – a survivor's testimony adapted by a student into a graphic narrative – exemplifies the kind of scholarship the department seeks to cultivate: engaged, archival, and communally accountable rather than purely textual.



© Anna Dasgupta: A Partition Survivor's Testimony adapted as a graphic narrative by Anna Dasgupta



© Anna Dasgupta: A Partition Survivor's Testimony adapted as a graphic narrative by Anna Dasgupta

A second axis of this pedagogy concerns literatures that remain marginal even within India's own literary institutions. Despite the efforts of academic bodies such as the Sahitya Akademi to make regional-language literature available in translation, literature from India's North-East, for instance, remains little known outside its region of origin. Recognising this gap and also the significant number of students enrolled in AUD from the North-East, the department has encouraged sustained engagement – in

English writing, in translation, and in orature from the region – through MA and doctoral dissertations.

Orature and the Limits of the Textual

A further, and theoretically more significant, intervention concerns orature: the vast body of knowledge transmitted through song, riddle, folk theatre, myth, and epic, which in India, as elsewhere, predates the written text while continuing to develop alongside it. Ngũgĩ's own case for orature offers an important intervention in this case:

The oral tradition is rich and many-sided . . . the art did not end yesterday; it is a living tradition . . . familiarity with oral literature could suggest new structures and techniques; and could foster attitudes of mind characterized by the willingness to experiment with new forms. . . By discovering and proclaiming loyalty to indigenous values, the new literature would on the one hand be set in the stream of history to which it belongs and so be better appreciated; and on the other be better able to embrace and assimilate other thoughts without losing its roots" (Ngũgĩ 94-95).

Extending Ngũgĩ's argument to the Indian context, this study proposes that Literary Studies curricula in India must expose students systematically to these oral traditions – neither as relics of a past nor as an exotic material for urban consumption, but as living modes of knowledge production that have developed alongside, and in some cases preceded, the written archive. AUD's response has been to offer courses in Folklore and Folkloristics, Oral and Indigenous Literatures, and mythology and epic (including the Ramayana and Mahabharata), which now anchor a growing body of postgraduate and doctoral research.

NEP 2020 and Literary Studies at AUD

AUD's curricular experiment began in 2011, nearly a decade before the adoption of NEP 2020 and without any policy mandate. However, its founding commitments closely anticipate several principles later articulated in the policy, including multilingual education, the use of regional and classical Indian languages, and the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems, broadly understood to include classical, oral, tribal, and indigenous traditions. Seen in this light, AUD's courses on orature, folklore, North-Eastern, and indigenous literatures appear as an early local expression of ideas later adopted at the national level. This convergence, however, must be approached cautiously. NEP 2020's formulation of "Indian Knowledge Systems" has been criticised for reducing India's plural traditions to a predominantly Sanskritic and civilisational framework, especially by scholars like Kiran Bhatti, Sayan Dey and Rishiraj Sen. AUD's emphasis on multiple and intersecting marginalities, literatures from multiple linguistic traditions across India, and regional and tribal orature suggests a plural approach to multilingualism and indigenous knowledge.

Conclusion

There cannot, and arguably should not, be a single template for decolonised Literary Studies in a country with as many linguistic, literary, performative, and oral traditions as India. What AUD's case suggests instead is a guiding principle rather than a blueprint: a Literary Studies curriculum in which ideology, political location, and domain expertise – rather than an inherited and unexamined canon – are the determining constituents of what gets taught and how. Read alongside Ambedkar's insistence that access to interpretive authority is itself a matter of justice, and alongside Quijano and Mignolo's distinction between anticolonial reform and decolonial

delinking, AUD's decade-long experiment offers not a finished model but a documented, still-contested attempt — one whose partial successes and unresolved tensions may be more instructive, for other institutions considering the same task, than a claim of completion would be.

Note: The title "Quest for Relevance" has been borrowed from Chapter 4 of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonizing the Mind*.

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