
AN APOLOGY FOR ADOPTING BILINGUAL PEDAGOGY AND TRANSLATED TEXTS FOR TEACHING LITERATURES IN ENGLISH IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

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The choice of language and the use to which language is put are central to a people's definition of itself in relation to its natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe.

- Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*

In consonance with Ngūgĩ's idea, taken as the epigraph here, the present paper proposes that English language can be put to best use in our classrooms when translated texts of native literatures are adopted as teaching resources, and when they are taught in the light of a bilingual pedagogy. The proposal is informed by the presumption that there cannot be a single uniform pedagogy for teaching English literature or, to use the right expression that suits our context, literatures in English, effectively.

Instead, it is assumed, that different contexts demand different pedagogies; and this paper aims at proposing what it contends as a better teaching strategy for a multilingual country, India. As the title makes it clear the two important changes proposed are: 1) using a Bilingual Pedagogy that defines the approach of teaching, and 2) using translated (again bilingual) Texts taken from vernacular literatures, as teaching resources. The paper presents these ideas not as incontrovertible pronouncements, but as tentative suggestions. The tentativeness of the tone is a corollary of the fact that the paper is not conceived as a contribution to the mainstream pedagogy, but as an attempt at addressing some sustained dilemmas that the writer faced as a teacher of literature. Taking off from these pedagogic predicaments, the kind of which may be familiar for the teachers of English literature operating in Indian rural backdrops, the paper attempts at analysing the issues and suggesting some alternative possibilities—although in an avowedly tentative manner

To begin with, different texts of English literature figure in various syllabi of Indian educational institutions, at different levels, where the objectives of the courses are understandably diverse. What I am trying to problematize here is not the use of texts from English literature as an opted subject of specialization, but the exclusive or predominant use of them when the objective is to develop either the general proficiency of English language or to develop the literary sensibilities of the students and/or to develop the ability of literary appreciation through the medium of English.

When these texts are used as part of general English paper at the undergraduate level, this is mostly the case. Most of the times, the main objective here is to develop proficiency in English language. But for this purpose, texts from English literature are usually prescribed. Teaching English language through literary texts is not at all a new idea, nor is it something to be objected to in general. The underpinning idea is that the literary texts embody the best use of language that could serve as examples. What resources could be better than these texts when one wants to exemplify the working of a language with all its nuances and subtleties?

Coleridge's famous definition that "prose," is "words in their best order," and poetry is "the best words in their best order" (Cited in Bartlett), eloquently testifies this view of literature. When students are exposed to these best examples of the use of language, they will be naturally motivated and initiated to engage with these instances of linguistic usage, and imbibe the nuances and subtleties of the language concerned. In the process, as an added advantage, they will also acquire the cultural legacy transmitted through that language.

In Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, it is clear that his idea of culture predominantly comprises literature understood in this way, as he says that "culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world." The idea that culture, language, literature are inextricably interwoven is also beyond any dispute. In this context, for a native student of English literature, these texts, perhaps, are ideal resources, and we can readily concede that making use of them will have the double advantage— i.e., 1) Developing the literary sensibility, 2) Improving the proficiency of language thereby.

The key contention of my paper is that, in the real classrooms belonging to the rural parts of India, which comprise the majority of the cases, instead of facilitating a double advantage, these texts can foster a double disability, i.e., 1) stultifying the literary sensibility, because of the linguistic barrier, 2) hindering the linguistic proficiency because of the cultural and literary foreignness. I will take the liberty of citing an incident from my own teaching experience, to exemplify the first point. At the beginning of my career, I taught Wilkie Collins' novel, *The Moonstone*, to the intermediate students, and the plot of the novel is quite interesting. The female

protagonist, Rachel Verinder, and her male counterpart, her cousin, Franklin Blake, have a troubled romantic relation because of the stolen eponymous diamond.

Even as a fledgling teacher, I haven't failed to notice a kind of giggle from some of the students, every time the narration involves both these characters, and initially I imputed this to the youthful over-enthusiasm of the adolescent students towards love affairs. But later, I realised that something more is at work, a more deep-rooted reason. In Telugu, we have different words for the cousins who can be united in wedlock, and for those between whom it is prohibited, and the word cousin as used by native Telugus is reserved for the latter group.

Thus, however much I tried to bridge the cultural and linguistic barrier by means of elaborate explanations, I couldn't shake off the unwanted association with a vague sense of incest from their minds. In a way, the real theme is sidelined, and a false theme has resorted to thematic encroachment in its place. Indeed, as is well-known, vague suggestiveness, and multiple layers of signification are not alien to literature, and these are the ingredients that actually enrich its artistic appeal. But this incident has led to my realization as to how the aesthetic function operates through cultural codes, in a specific social context.

Later on, one of my colleagues told me, on different occasions, that in his tribe, at least until recently, it has been quite normal for the brother of a widowed wife's husband to marry her in the place of his brother. With my hind sight, I wondered how one can teach a text like *Macbeth*, to the students of that tribe. In short, it is very hard to drive home the incest theme effectively, to these students, although the theme is unmistakably ingrained in the text, unless the teacher is ready for some creative interventions, either by way of commissions or by way of omissions. Although I have taken some literary examples here, even at the basic linguistic level, the alien-ness of English is a common experience, especially in the rural backdrops. Even the very common expressions like thanks and sorry, between close friends or relations is taken as a kind of offence, although very slight, or as an indication of lack of intimacy. Another interesting case in point is provided by the very common utterances of Telugu speakers that may be called bilingual tautologies, such as paper *kaagitham*, or double cot *mancham*, or danger *apaayam* etc. The prevalence and persistence of such obvious verbal redundancy call for some explanation. My hypothesis is that although most of these speakers are perfectly aware of the signification of the first English words in these pairs, they fail to develop a feel for the word at an early stage, or they have got used to the feeling that these words cannot convey the feel that the native words in Telugu carry with them.

It is a common experience, for the teachers who teach for the students from rural backdrops, that there is a socio-linguistic divide among the students. Generally, it is only a few students with an elitist backdrop of convent education, who can develop a feel and felicity for English, which is more or less comparable to the native language, or

to the mother tongue. This seems to be a common experience for many of the peoples colonised by the English. Thus, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o says in his influential work, *Decolonising the Mind* that "the most coveted place in the pyramid and in the system was only available to the holder of an English language credit card. English was the official vehicle and the magic formula to colonial elitedom (12)."

We can safely presume, I believe, that a big majority of Indian writers in English, as well as a large portion of their readership belongs to this socio-linguistic elitist class. It can also be added that this linguistic divide greatly overlaps, although it may not completely coincide, with the urban-rural divide in India. Pierre Bourdieu's influential work, including his best known work, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, has made it clear how cultural and educational status can contribute to the polarisation of people on the lines that are analogous to the class distinctions.

Moving from the classes in the society, to the academic classrooms, we can reflect upon the hegemonic and hierarchical nature of this socio-linguistic divide. This cultural-linguistic distinction is a part of the daily reality felt by many teachers working in Indian academia. For the students who cannot acquire this linguistic credit card, the classroom is a constant experience of humiliation and degradation. Many Indian students from rural backdrops will identify themselves with the description of Ngũgĩ in the following words:

Thus one of the most humiliating experiences was to be caught speaking Gikuyu in the vicinity of the school. The culprit was given corporal punishment — three to five strokes of the cane on bare buttocks — or was made to carry a metal plate around the neck with inscriptions such as I AM STUPID or I AM A DONKEY. Sometimes the culprits were fined money they could hardly afford (11).

In the Indian context, for the students from the rural backdrop, the literary and linguistic dilemmas I have mentioned above are a common experience. It is for these students, who form a majority of our class strength, that I contend English literary texts may be source of double disability rather than a double advantage.

When the ordinary English words are so alien for the students from the rural areas, it is easy to imagine how more difficult would be the case of literary texts written in that language, as any literature is greatly informed by the cultural and linguistic peculiarities of the people. In fact, for many of these students, the English class is almost like what is life for Macbeth, i.e. "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

If I can venture into a personal pedagogic experience again, I would like to discuss a seemingly eccentric example here. One of my PG students, who is otherwise a quite normal person, always writes the word poeter, instead of the word poet. As a teacher, I am taken aback at this consistently observed blunder, and initially I took it as an instance of mistaken spelling. However, on second thought, I have come to appreciate a different dimension to the problem. Perhaps the student is convinced that when a person who drives is a driver, and a person who writes is a writer, it is quite

reasonable that a person who produces poetry should be called a poeter. What initially looked like the personal idiosyncrasy of a student, eventually looked like the demonstration of the idiosyncrasy of a foreign tongue.

If one would suggest that the student in question is somebody who can be ranked as below average, or abnormal, as a teacher, I am constrained to take exception to that view, based on my long-standing acquaintance with the student. Logically, and cognitively he is quite a normal student or even an above-average student. Given the backdrop of these students, one can imagine how much literary sensibility can be imparted to them through a language that doesn't voice their lived reality. For an illustration, we can perhaps turn to a novel like *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. We can concede that many aspects of Tess's suffering are almost universal, such as poverty, sexual exploitation, and victimisation due to the double standards of the moral code. But at the centre of all her problems is the peculiar class system that is specific to the time and place, in which relative upward mobility is considered a possibility by claiming kinship with the people of the aristocratic class. How far can we, as teachers, succeed in making our students understand this system? As a teaching strategy, I usually bring in an analogy with the caste system in India, but am I not guilty of deviating from the main text and context, when achieving a pragmatic or a pedagogic goal?

In his provocative essay, "On the abolition of the English Department," Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o puts it thoughtfully that "the primary duty of any literature department is to illuminate the spirit animating the people, to show how it meets new challenges, and to investigate possible areas of development and involvement (439)." How many of us, the teachers of English literature or literatures in English, can say for sure that the kind of literature we teach meets this criterion? I, for one, do not believe that it is possible to meet this criterion, to any considerable degree, using any English literary texts in the classroom.

On the contrary, vernacular literatures, Telugu literature in my own case, can richly meet this criterion. However, I don't believe that in the present circumstances, we can take up Ngūgĩ's proposal for the abolition of English departments, because of the obvious socio-economic importance of the language, which a country like the present day India can only ignore to its own disadvantage. The way out, I believe, is to use the texts of native literatures in translation, as bilingual versions: one in mother tongue, the other in English. The methodology of teaching could also be bilingual, to avoid the double disability mentioned above.

To be sure, language serves a dual role. To quote Ngūgĩ again, who already formulated the idea cogently:

Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture. Take English; it is spoken in Britain and in Sweden and Denmark. But for Swedish and Danish people English is only a means of communication with non-Scandinavians. It is not a carrier of their culture. For the British, and particularly the English, it is additionally, and inseparably from its use as a tool of communication, a carrier of their culture and history (13).

This clarifies for us what role English could play in Indian classrooms. Typically, it could be taken in the role of means of communication, rather than a carrier of culture as long as native literary texts (in translation) are not used. Whenever the objectives include developing the literary sensibility for the students from the rural areas, it is better, I believe, to teach a literary text in the native language first, and once the literary appreciation of the text is assured, one can take up the same text in translation, so that the student would be exposed to the literary nuances and subtleties, in a foreign tongue, and thereby learn to appreciate them in a foreign tongue. It is a well-known pedagogical principle that once a skill or faculty is acquired it is relatively easy to transfer the learning to a new domain.

According central stage to the translated texts may seem objectionable for the ones who subscribe to the original/translation binary, which is prominent in the western literary traditions that are predominantly monolingual, and link their single language with national identity. But, in India, translations are typically the points of departure for many native literatures. In Indian, texts in translations are usually not accorded a secondary status, and, on the contrary, at least in the case of Telugu, taking up completely original themes is often discouraged as *swakapolakalpana* (whims of one's own mind). Any language, including English, becomes the carrier of our culture when it is used to convey our lived reality. When Kamala Das declares in her eloquent "Introduction" that whatever language she speaks becomes her own including its oddities and peculiarities, she could be taken as speaking for the whole people. When a student asked me what is meant by exile I explained to him its denotation, and he looked fairly satisfied, but when I tried to offer an example by telling that Rama was exiled to keep the promise of his father, I could see the difference in his countenance. I could see that he feels familiar with the word now, and it might have entered his personal lexicon as he now feels that the word is no more alien to him. When English is used to translate the texts of native literatures, it could also become a carrier of our culture, and it gets closer to our sense of identity, and eventually it could become our own language.

Of course, I am aware of the alternative pedagogic possibility of teaching the sociocultural context of the texts from English literature first, and then teaching the text in question, to ensure a proper appreciation of the work. In fact, this is what most of the teachers of English literature do in the classrooms. For instance, one can indulge in an introductory lecture about the roaring 20s, and the Last generation, before taking up a discussion of the plot of a novel such as *The Great Gatsby*. Although the novels central thematic concern is the universal theme of love, many crucial aspects of the text could not be appreciated properly without at least a nodding acquaintance with its socio-historical backdrop.

This way, in a roundabout manner, we can make the student appropriate aesthetically the text from American Literature. But, unless the objective is to appreciate the literary expression of a particular people (the English or American in our case), as a chosen option, I fear that making this a general rule can only enhance the colonial alienation in the minds of the people in the postcolonial societies such as ours. Ngūgĩ has vividly delineated the features of this alienation long ago when he wrote:

Colonial alienation takes two interlinked forms: an active (or passive) distancing of oneself from the reality around; and an active (or passive) identification with .that which is most external to one's environment. It starts with a deliberate disassociation of the language of conceptualisation, of thinking, of formal education; of mental development, from the language of daily interaction in the home and in the community. It is like separating the mind from the body so that they are occupying two unrelated linguistic spheres in the same person. On a larger social scale it is like producing a society of bodiless heads and headless bodies (28).

To avoid this sorry state of affairs, the signs of which are unmistakable in our educational institutions, radical pedagogic departures, such as the one proposed here, are mandatory, or at least worthy of serious consideration.

To take up such radical reforms, the main obstacle is, perhaps, our conventional intellectual habits, and even some professional inertia, as a teacher following this method, is expected to handle two different literatures simultaneously. To cite an expert opinion about a similar syllabus reform, expressed by a writer who is well known for many of his controversial ideas, I will turn to C. D. Narasimhaiah's thought-provokingly titled essay, "Can Indian Writing in English Replace English Literature in our Colleges?" wherein he suggests, among other things, that self-sufficiency in humanities can be disastrous to the growing minds, and so he went on to recommend that everyone should read at least two other literatures (173).

Understandably, he doesn't subscribe to the replacement interrogatively proposed by the title of his essay; however, he concedes at the conclusion of the essay that a major share may be given to Indian writing in English. When the concern is to develop a cosmopolitan literary sensibility, this is definitely understandable. But when the objectives are to develop the basic literary sensibility, as well as to improve the linguistic proficiency in English, which, I think, is or should be the case with many of our academic programmes, I don't see any point in not seriously considering a fundamental pedagogic departure such as the one proposed here.

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