

The Canon and the Curriculum:¹ The Teaching of English Literature in the Post Colonial Context

At the height of post colonial activity, crisis, and international debate over the hegemony that imperialism exerts through manipulation, I hope to examine the politics of the teaching of English literature in the postcolonial context and propose a viable alternative to the hegemonic practices of centralist-super-power canonical modes, taking Sri Lanka as my focus. What exactly does post-colonialism mean in this context? Postcolonialism as a socio-political category goes through different mutations and processes in different countries. It marks a tension between the desire on the part of the (postcolonial) subject and theory to move away from colonialism and neo-colonialism and the forces holding such a movement back. Thus postcolonialism becomes a social movement as well as an approach produced by the socio-political conditions of the historical stage following colonialism. Postcolonial theory — like feminist theory — implies an engagement with socio-political issues. This places colonialism and the complexities of postcolonial situations in the centre of its theoretical rationale. Postcolonial literary theory is an offshoot of postcolonial theory as a whole but differs from the latter in that its chief involvement is with the production of different frameworks of discourse that ultimately have a bearing on the politics of postcolonialism. Postcolonial theory, both general and literary, have also to reckon with paradigms that recognise and value the contradictions and configurations of processes prevailing within the binary opposition of power and powerlessness.

Living in an age of increased globalization, and, accompanying that, cultural communication, the intersection of nationalism and internationalism is one of the most crucial grounding forces of the postcolonial era. Thus, postcoloniality is both history specific space/s and a discourse which, as Radhakrishnan puts it, is the "theme of spaces times time" (752). The diversity of spaces interlocked in time describes both the physical (geographical) distribution of postcolonialism and its discourses. In this regard it becomes important to study precisely this

1 This phrase is borrowed from a casual remark of Ashley Halpe made with respect to curriculum re-evaluation.

intersection and carve out a theoretical position that understands the postcolonial dynamic without sliding into narrow partisan positions. In my study here I treat the Sri Lankan body politic as deeply inscribed with the significations of a post-colonial "nation" and situate the role of English literature in its educational curriculum as partaking in the process of postcolonialism.

The institutionalization of English language and literature have followed a peculiar course in post independence Sri Lanka, its role in national development coming into much debate in recent times.² This paper is undertaken in the hope that it will contribute to that debate and that what I have delineated will be helpful in constructing an alternative curriculum to that of the unilinear historical approach emphasizing English-English literature in teaching traditional matter, and in general the "Western canon" on the whole. Although English is not in the strict technical sense an official language, it has maintained and increased its hegemonic influence in the economic arena as well as the cultural make up of the country since independence. This has to be taken note of in any understanding of the ideological implications of the formations and even formulation of the canon today, especially in postcolonial countries, where the tension between imperialist domination and national liberation is underscored by the dependence of these countries, socio-politically, on the centres of imperial power whose metonyms have become technological advance, cultural cosmopolitanism and the English language. In fact, the imperial centre has shifted from Europe and Britain to the United States drawing postcolonial countries into another phase of postcolonialism. It is at this juncture of international relations where the international(al) struggle appears to be over control of modes of production that the examination of the place and teaching of English in a postcolonial country takes on significance.

From the time of Independence in 1948, along with which emerged quite rapidly a national middle class and dependent bourgeoisie, Sri Lanka has grappled with the task of nation building. English, as Said notes about certain West Asian countries is considered on the one hand to be mastered and on the other to be resisted and suspected as the instrument of domination (5). The scene is a familiar one covering a range of countries from South East Asia to parts of South America. Nation building as part of the decolonizing process is caught in this vise for, in the dependent socio political culture that obtains in Sri Lanka, English represents power and domination, subversively termed, by sections of the under-privileged and dispossessed, kaduva — the sword; the sword of power and domination not only internationally but intra-nationally too. In Thiru Kandiah's words,

2 The different propositions and criticism of those involved can be taken to represent different ideological positions on this thorny issue. Thus, a sensitive but conservative approach would be Rajiva Wijesinghe's, whereas Ashley Halpe's and Reggie Siriwardene's are much more in tune with the radical voices of the time.

The term crystallises the socio-psychological attitude of the underdog to all this, of the man who has no chance of beating the English dominated system and of rising by means of the language to the positions that in the kind of society he finds himself in, will help him realise himself and preserve his self-esteem. To him the English language is only too evidently a sword, the symbol of power (1984, 139).

On the other hand English is viewed by many educationists and policy planners as a "link" language, linking the civil war torn country's different ethnic communities to one another as well as to the rest of the world (Gooneratne). This same "link" ideology is *linked* to the dependent open market policy of the present government of Sri Lanka under which the private sector both in production and service sectors has achieved a mammoth growth. Modernization, as it is defined by capitalist systems emphasizing the development of a class structure, has become an economic imperative even if not a political one. Given the dynamics of the situation, any modern curriculum of English literature has to weigh the ideological implications of the "Western canon," consider what it promotes through the perpetuation of such an institution and look to alternative structures of teaching literature.³

The formation of the Western literary canon and the study of literature as a separate discipline is closely interwoven with the development of colonialism, particularly in the subcontinent. The concept of the canon acquired its present meaning in association with the rise of the Roman Catholic Church, militarism and, in the Greek context, "a superior body of works" (Scholes 140), in other words, in association with the rise of European institutions of power. Gauri Viswanathan, in a careful study of the institutionalization of English literary study in colonial India, traces it to the interactive conflict between Orientalists and Anglicists which led up "to a seemingly innocuous and not yet fully formed discipline, English literature, to perform the functions of those social institutions (such as the Church) that in England served as the chief disseminators of value, tradition and authority" (7). "English literary study had its beginnings as a strategy of containment" (7) in colonial India where in 1835 the English Education Act was passed.

In Ceylon (Sri Lanka) the 1831 Colebrooke-Cameron Commission recommended the introduction of English education along with the unification of the whole island under a central command. In India, particularly after the 1857-58 Mutiny/National liberation war, a secular liberal education became the most effective way of creating loyal subjects. Viswanathan demonstrates that the rise of the current notion of canon as exemplifying "established usage, historical precedent

3 Peter Hyland's "Discharging the Canon" is an important essay that looks into the ideological implications of the Eurocentric canon.

and social convention" (119) is a spin off from the significance accruing to it from the heyday of British colonial consolidation.

The canon, evolving through such social movements during which British hegemony strove to consolidate itself, is inscribed with all the ideological baggage of imperialism (Batsleer *et al.*) The resilience of the "canon" becomes patent when in the hands of Frank Kermode the deconstruction of the canon itself endows it with perpetual modernity (62). This principle underlying Kermode's appropriation of the deconstructive methodology to validate a conservative claim may be extreme but not all that eccentric. Much of modern critical theoretical practice coming from the West, even the more radical ones, contribute to entrenching the canon in the literary curriculum. For the postcolonial subject the entire gamut of English literature reveals itself to be problematic. The canon has come to stand for the flexible body of texts (open to change) which forms the basis of the literary curriculum and a literary heritage.

A deviant position which nevertheless retains the centrality of the "canon" would be intertextuality which privileges the text and thereby the written word. The general drift of intertextuality has to do with the dismantling of the notion of the inviolability of the individual work and replacing it with the concept of the primacy of discourse, structure and language. Thus intertextuality in Scholes's sense of the word aims to recover albeit indeterminately by deconstructing an entire network of significations. In Eagleton's words: "Literature .. now reaches out and colonizes [that] history, rewriting it in its own image, viewing famines, revolutions, soccer matches and sherry trifle, as yet more undecidable text" (146).

Multicultural and Comparative Literature methodologies, too, have a tendency to be subsumed within the pragmatics of socio-political hierarchies. This is most apparent in Ann Paolucci's essay "Multi Comparative Literary Perspectives." Her rather thoughtful examination and evaluation of multi culturalism unintentionally smacks of a "First World" approach that proceeds to look at the production of literature from the privileged portals of the US academe: "Not all expert power comes from the faculty in special institutes and area studies centers; there are, in most of our departments of Comparative Literature, faculty who have special interest and training in other literatures" (4). Comparative Literature practised in such uncritically depoliticised terms does not serve any purpose to the postcolonial/third world subject seeking interdependence and multiculturalism in his/her own terms. Theoretically, Comparative Literature can provide a tool for comparison between literatures of different languages and cultures, but in practice, it largely ignores the historical movements and contributes to the perpetuation of the hegemonic hold of the Western canon and its paradigms in postcolonial countries (colonized by Britain), where English plays such a crucial role in any case.

Postcolonial theoretical activity has been one of the most devastating instruments of exposure of the ideological underpinnings of the Western canon. Much intellectual energy is expended in recovering English literature as part of the postcolonial heritage and canon formation itself is exposed as part of the grand imperialist project and later on neo-colonialism. In the climate of the continued existence of English literature as a hegemonic practice in itself (as it is practised in postcolonial countries in relation to its marginalized or dispossessed peoples), the critical methodology of postcolonialism becomes the critical space from which to approach the canon. Thus Shakespeare, Chaucer, the modernist texts, etc. may be recovered as part of the continuum of imperialism. But the need to move away from that continuum, even when it is approached from a subversive or subaltern position, is also rooted in the tension within postcolonialism. Ironically, although postcolonial literary criticism has sought to centralize colonial domination and experience in Western literary/cultural production and the formation of the canon, it has failed in some ways to centralize the peoples of postcolonial countries in that experience, perpetuating the dominance of the Western canon and what Kermode has termed its modernity.

Shirley Lim, in an evocative essay on her English literary ancestry, dwells on the predicament of the postcolonial subject whose literary tastes cannot be neatly dismissed as colonialist. Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud" allowed her to construct a subjectivity for herself through the "inward eye" (128) in a system that collectivized people and subordinated her as a woman. Although I do not share Lim's penchant for Wordsworth's Daffodils, yet given my own enjoyment of dead, white, male, English writers like Shakespeare and Milton, I can easily understand the sense of empowerment such a knowledge may give the individual.

Tired though I am of Wordsworthian sublimity, I still find in it those ancestral springs which lead me to write poetry in English. The very act itself is a statement of dispossession, and as Malaysia progresses further and further into its nationalistic future, claiming its own language, its own history, its own traditions, I am in danger of further losing possession of a national self, my public and social traditions. (131)

For Lim, as she seems to imply, nationalism, quite rightly in my opinion, contains grave dangers. Nationalist rhetoric is, more often than not, empty sloganizing of a chauvinistic order. What I would like to achieve through a broad-based curriculum is not merely the dislodging of the imperialist canon from its pedestal so that it be replaced by the dislodging of the imperialist canon construction of a cultural space centralizing postcolonial peoples, from which to approach both sets of literature.

Postcolonial literary theory is almost always exclusively applied to literary productions in English literature creating perhaps an unintentional hierarchy among the literatures of a given country (see, for example, Rutherford). My

quarrel with most postcolonial literary theorists over this is not because I think that somehow entry into "postcolonial" discourse elevates indigenous literatures but because the "reality" of the postcolonial state marks literary productions of all languages (Ashcroft *et al.*). Also, an exclusive term only reinforces the rigidity of the language based mould of literature and destroys any sense of intertextuality or multi linguality of literatures. A classic instance of a multilingual text would be a trilingual play in Sri Lanka which would not fit the English language base of "postcolonial" literature. Furthermore, to exclude indigenous literatures would imply the presence of a stasis in their development as though they are not part of the evolving postcolonial nature of the countries concerned.

How is a curriculum which is heedful of these factors to be set up? This is the question that besets many a Sri Lankan academic and student of literature. Under the circumstances described above what does one do saddled with the task of teaching/studying English literature without perpetuating the privileges that go along with it? In *Yearning*, bell hooks pleads for a shifting of the margin to the centre which will create a counter-hegemonic space to that of the dominant one. Viewed from this counter-hegemonic space canon formation may become the thrust of inquiry which seeks to, as Said says, "interpret a novel as the selection of one mode of writing among others, and the activity of writing as one social act among several and the category of literature as a creation made to serve various worldly aims" (13-14). For instance, a relatively marginalized novel like Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* has been resurrected, studied and considered worthy of canonical elevation, in the West. In the curriculum I propose, the study of the novel will not only deal with gender relations in the south (United States) in the nineteenth century but also with post-slavery social relations and the modern feminist movement in the West and in the international arena. So with Virginia Woolf, Tillie Olsen as well as Balzac, Tolstoy, Emily Brontë, and Shakespeare.

Does the so-called New Literatures provide the counter-hegemonic space hooks calls for? Does the shifting of the margins entail centralizing what has been rather pathetically termed New Literatures? In a preliminary sketch of what he hopes to propose Halpe remarks,

An English/Literature department would be entirely justified in placing the New Literatures at the centre of its curriculum — if it were not for the new compartmentalisations and complexities threatened by the term itself. [Yet] how can a department do justice to all the New Literatures — Australian, Canadian, Indian, Nigerian, Sri Lankan, Singaporean, West Indian etc, etc.? Where do we place Filipino literature in English, and such phenomena as the works of writers of colour in the USA or of non-English writers in the UK and the politics of expression in South Africa? Should not literature in English translation be an essential element of the curriculum, as this would only rationalise what has always tended to be there? (1992b, 1)

This would seem at least temporarily a viable alternative to the rigid unilinear structure generally followed by English departments in Sri Lanka particularly if one takes into account the alacrity with which students take to "postcolonial" English texts. The problem lies with the concept of new literatures itself which isolates the product from production and privileges postcolonial literatures in English making it independent of the literatures, traditions and the political dynamics of the areas in question. In fact, postcolonial literatures are treated as comprising only English literature of the countries colonized by Britain. Thus, the so called new literatures are taught as a body of works or texts related to one another through a network of imperial and imperialist significations and not as part of a national body of literature. Also just mere inclusion of non-canonical texts is not going to solve the problem. According to Hazel Carby, "reducing the complex modes of inequality to questions of representation on a syllabus is a far too simple method of appearing to resolve [these] social contradictions" (37).

Although in the main, I would deplore the constricting parameters of the national context and nationalism itself, postcolonial relations are firmly rooted in the intersection of nationalism and internationalism. Thus, while the so called new literatures have powerful arguments promoting them, one has to be wary of that same power that tips the scales in their favor. Ngugi Thiong'o wa's nationalist response to this situation illustrates the dilemma of the postcolonial subject. His plea for a primarily African and secondarily liberationist, anti-imperialist literary curriculum arises precisely as a reaction to universalist-European canon formations. While I would disagree, tooth and nail, with such an essentialist position, it is easy to see where the need for such a formulation arises from. But, whereas Ngugi sees a kind of solidarity forming among postcolonial peoples and nations through such an endeavour, I entertain no such hope. Nationalism and internationalism are merely two sides of the same coin and have to be treated as such. Thus, both the national character of Tagore's *Home and the World* or Buchi Emecheta's *Bride Price* and the cosmopolitan nature of Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* or Bharati Mukherjee's *The Holder of the World* are inextricably bound up with the politics of cultural production in the international order. Thus it becomes important, given the ground realities, to confront canon formation and the politics of literary production from the spaces offered by the nation-state even while assessing the ideological stance of such a construction (see also Gikandi).

Literature through English — another option — is a powerful argument for using English as a tool in coming into contact with literature produced in a language other than English. A pioneering work of this kind of curriculum was designed by the examination committee for the Higher National Certificate Examination in the late 1970s — which also served as the qualifying examination for university entrance — where literary pieces and poems culled from different languages and historical times were arranged thematically.⁴ Despite some of its

4 Sirwardene, one of the architects of this anthology, is a leading literary critic and educationist in Sri Lanka today and has contributed to the debate on the English curriculum in many ways.

obvious shortcomings it was a path breaking effort and has contributed to changing the ground, on which the curriculum is setup, forever (cf. Wijesinghe 2). Literature through English remains a viable alternative provided it is combined with an awareness of politics, hegemonic hierarchical structures and the historical role of literary production in these processes.

Another way is to break out of the narrow language oriented mould that defines literature in general and make the study of English literature part of the study of literary production at the national level. This would dislocate the central position that the English canon or the Western canon possesses at present and locate it within the dynamics of the Sri Lankan polity. Such a curricular make-up would be necessarily accompanied by a study of the cultural traditions of the Sri Lankan peoples as well as other countries. Thus, along with Western classical culture that forms a time-hallowed component of the curriculum, Sanskrit poetics, its cultural composition and its political development, as well as the other traditions of the Sri Lankan people shall be incorporated. Also a deeper understanding of classical as well as modern literature of Sri Lanka than that required in a student today also becomes necessary in this decentering process.

At this point let us take a look at the present literature curriculum of the University of Peradeniya, a Sri Lankan university with a fifty-year tradition of teaching literature. Changes have been wrought in the syllabus which started with a very canonical English syllabus and has accommodated down the line of time continental literature in translation, courses in Sri Lankan literatures, and doses of the New Literatures. The university curricula have been taken to task for not making systematic structural changes (Ismail). But although sweeping changes have not been made there is much to say for these *ad hoc* changes that have brought in some measure of reflection on this issue. A student, specializing in English literature and language today, would go through a four year course, in which the first year would consist of three main subjects, one of which would be English literature and language. The next three years would be devoted almost wholly to the study of literature in English around which background courses in Sri Lankan literatures, European social structures, and Western classical culture are structured.⁵ In the final two years apart from an emphasis on canonical literature historically reviewed, new literatures, continental literatures, and English literatures of imperialism along with Western critical theory that comes right up to postcolonialism and recent feminist theory form a good part of the

contents. Yet, despite these changes towards diffusing and decentering the curriculum, the Euro-centric base has remained intact even when it comes to post-colonialism.

The curriculum I propose here attempts to adopt a pluralist approach and does not make any definitive statement on its make-up. The first year student who is just beginning to be introduced to the mysteries of literary production shall have *Maru* by South African Bessie Head, Athol Fugard's *Island* (South Africa), Puniya Kanthie Wijenaike's (Sri Lankan woman writer in English) *Giraya*, and two texts from Sri Lankan languages, for example, Martin Wickremasinghe's *Viragaya* and Kokilam Suppiah's *Thoorathup Pachchai* (mid-twentieth century Sinhala and Sri Lankan-Tamil novels respectively), along with poems from Parakrama Kodithuwaku, Monica Ruwan Pathirana, M.A. Nuhuman (modern Sinhala and Tamil poets), Jean Asranayagam (Sri Lankan English poet), and Ramanujan, Nissim Ezekiel and Kamala Das (Indian English poets). The short story section which at present has *A Pot of Gold* by John Cheever, R.K. Narayan's *A Horse and Two Goats* and Jack Williamson's *Far Side Station* can be changed to accommodate an Isaac Asimov story instead of *Far Side Station* and "Dusty Distance," from Sunita Namjoshi's *The Blue Donkey Fables*. *The Tempest* can be retained if deemed necessary. The second year which focuses on what are termed background courses shall consist of the *Natya Shasthra*, a classical treatise on Sanskrit poetics, an introduction to general principles of Sanskrit and other Indian based aesthetics and a translation of *Songs of Kabir*, along with Western classical culture. The course on Sinhala and Tamil literature which has been squeezed into a corner within the course on European/Sri Lankan back-ground shall be reinstated as a full-fledged course by itself in the attempt to carve out what bell hooks calls the counter-hegemonic space.

Literature courses in the second year of the honours degree are separated into *Poetry and Drama* and *Fiction and Criticism*. The fiction section can be expanded into accommodating Han Suyin's *Crippled Tree*, *To the Light House* by Virginia Woolf, and *Passing* by the early twentieth-century black American woman Nella Larsen replacing Jane Austen's *Emma* and Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, while retaining Stendhal's *Scarlet and Black*, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Joseph Conrad's *Nostramo*. With adequate research and training the literature of the Native peoples of Australia and North America can be incorporated. An increase in Black and Native American literature would further strengthen the counter-hegemonic tendency of the curriculum. In the third and fourth years, which are considered the honours degree proper, the student can embark on canonical British and American literature *per se* with increased emphasis on the so called New Literatures.⁶ The broad base laid down in the

5 I have deliberately avoided dealing with linguistics which is a major component of all years of the degree. Thiru Kandiah, formerly of the University of Peradeniya, is involved in critically examining current models of linguistics and language teaching methodologies. Also, as can be seen from his introduction to Arjuna Parakrama's forthcoming book *Dehegemonizing Standards*, Parakrama is engaged in examining the ideological implications of current English language teaching models such as those based on norms of standard English and such alter-natives as those that would invest language with a sense of resistance to "imperial" hegemony.

6 In this regard post colonial literature in languages other than English or the languages of the subcontinent are important; for example, the Egyptian Nawal el Sadawi's works in Arabic.

first two years should prepare the student to examine the politics of alliance, cooption, and resistance much more critically than s/he would do otherwise. The student will also, hopefully, be able to approach the Western canon with a broader understanding of aesthetics and the politics of aesthetics than may be possible today. One should also be aware of the dangers of replacing the Western canon with a postcolonial canon which is engaged in related hierarchies and hegemonic operations. A streamlining along social movements would avoid the pitfalls of the text-based or author-based curricular make-up. This would also help to historicize literature without necessarily following the unilinear historical development of imperialism.

What I have drawn up above is not a model curriculum but a mapping of the frame of reference for one. What I have suggested as a curriculum is not meant to be exclusive of any other way of thinking about it. An over emphasis on South Asian, particularly Indian, texts and cultural traditions should not replace a broadening-out of the curriculum. This framework assumes a nonlinguistic socio-political base for literature which will enable the student to move away from the constricting parameters of narrow nationalism or mindless cosmopolitanism and understand the dynamics of the Sri Lankan polity as well as post-colonialism itself. It is also hoped that such a curriculum would enable the student of English literature and language to align with formations of inquiry and resistance. Ultimately, I would argue for a de-centered curriculum that would deconstruct itself and also be deconstructed by the student.

Washington State University

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