

In Pursuit of Paradigm Shift: Indian Literary Criticism in English

Abstract:

The goal of the current paper is to demonstrate that literary criticism in India written in English has not been able to attract much interest as a subject deserving of its own investigation. The research was motivated by the observation that, although being more than a century old and displays considerable variety, the majority of historical analyses of Indian English literature do not even have room to discuss the contributions of different Indian English critics to the corpus of Indian English literature. Thus, it is said that from the commencement of English studies in India until the present, one scarcely finds a distinct study of the major tendencies in Indian English criticism. One of the main characteristics of the current article that indicates a crisis in the area of literary criticism in India is the absence of meta-critical resources in connection to Indian English criticism. The critical riders in focus are:

- Why is it so usual for any researcher to encounter limits in Indian critical practice?
- What is the reason for the predominance of an Anglo-centric approach in Indian critical practice?
- How can Indian literary criticism in English be decolonized?

Keywords/phrases: Critical tradition, Western academia, Indian critical practice in English

Introduction:

Contemporary Indian literary criticism in English encompasses the study and analysis of literature written in English by Indian authors. It involves examining the various elements of literary works, such as themes, characters, narrative techniques, and social and cultural contexts, with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of the text and its significance. Indian literary criticism in English is a dynamic field that reflects the diverse literary traditions, cultural identities, and historical experiences of the Indian subcontinent.

Indian critical practice appears to have significant limitations based on the English-language critical works published in Indian magazines, book-length studies, monographs, and PhD dissertations. The texts in this collection are highly derivative. Prior to the integration of "theory" in the Indian academic sphere, Indian critical practise was largely influenced by Anglo-centric perspectives. Indian literary critics readily embraced various British literary criticism trends, including biographical, textual, and moral approaches. As a result, Indian literary criticism in English appeared as a weaker version of its Anglo counterpart. Following the emergence of "theory" in the 1980s, most English-language Indian literary criticism became Euro-American in nature. European models and frameworks were filtered through the use of English translations, commentaries, and practises, which were largely derived from American publishing companies. Indian literary criticism in English is considered a "colonised" discourse due to its derivative nature, resembling that of a parasite. Aijaz Ahmad speaks on how derivative English education is in India:

...So fundamental and even genetic is the Indian university's relation with – indeed, dependence upon – its British and American counterparts that knowledge produced there become immediately effective here, in a relation of imperial dominance, shaping even the way we think of ourselves...

Nowhere is this parasitic intellectual dependence of the Indian university upon its metropolitan counterparts so obvious as in the teaching of English. ((1992)1994: 44)

The strength of major movements or clearly defined schools is lacking in Indian English literary criticism, despite the proliferation of critical practice. This derivativeness is evident in the entire critical baggage, which consists of frameworks, concepts, and methodologies that are almost entirely borrowed (Rajan 2004: xii)

Second, Indian literary criticism is both backward and derivative. Between what is created and stated at Euro-American institutions and its imitation in Indian universities, there is a lag in time. When discussing the nature and extent of literary criticism in India, C.D. Narasimhaiah perfectly captures the situation when he says, “You mean those carbon copies of Mathiessen, Blackmur, and Leavis.?” (Narasimhaiah quoted in Kapoor [2001]: 5)

The Western trend takes approximately a decade or two to reach the Indian English department, and its impact is evident in various academic activities, including curriculum development and evaluation, with a noticeable delay. This represents a backward aspect of the department. The adaptation of imported frameworks to a new cultural context and the proposal of alternative frameworks that are relevant and acceptable are not addressed.

Finally, English-language criticism of Indian literature is cyclical. Kapil Kapoor asserts that Indian literary reality has consistently assimilated each subsequent Anglo-American school fashion without any alteration or adjustment, as each framework has been deemed to be a suitable match for the adaptable Indian context. (Ibid, 5)

Furthermore, these Western-influenced theoretical frameworks speak to a body of literature that is predominantly urban and produced in response to Western literary trends. As a result, it only appeals to the metropolitan, English-educated elite.

How is Criticism Practiced in India?

Contemporary Indian literature students seek literary inspiration from their European counterparts. The Indian student perceives them as the foremost leaders who have consistently exerted a direct influence on him. Ironically, the Indian reader has failed to recognise a valuable resource in their own backyard for generations due to their eagerness to rely on Western criticism. It is important to acknowledge the recent revival of Indian criticism in English, which is attributed to the persistent endeavours of contemporary Indian critics.

Criticism was traditionally considered as *Samastih Sarvasastranam Sahityarnitigivate*, meaning the comprehensive knowledge of all sciences and literature. criticism is a rigorous discipline that has eliminated irrational approaches to life and literature. The critic must possess a comprehensive understanding of their surroundings. The term commonly used for this was *Vyutpatti* (to grasping the meaning or essence of something, whether it be a concept, a text, or a philosophical idea.). Despite occasional puritanical Indian suspicion towards literature, Indian critics were highly regarded and their claims were considered legitimate and scientific. In India, the emphasis on intellectual and spiritual discipline paved the way for the advancement of scientific analysis and precision. Theoretical criticism in India, thus, is no more than the paraphrasing of ideas, concepts and methods that enter the Indian academic arena from the West in the name of ‘globalization’ of literary criticism. It is important to note that the academic discourse referred to as ‘global’ or ‘international’ is predominantly limited to Euro-American perspectives, thereby excluding significant portions of the world. Consequently, there is a loss

of original theoretical thought. Indian literary criticism in English is generally lacking in theoretical rigour and tends to be more focused on practical applications. The adoption of foreign and exclusive frameworks has led to the neglect of oral and folk literatures in academic research from a local perspective. This has resulted in the commercialization of these dynamic literatures for global consumption. However, only a small number of contemporary Indian critics are actively engaged in the process of decolonization.

First, there is the widespread use of Western tools and methods of literary interpretation, which continues to be the most prevalent aspect of critical practice in India, according to a critical review of theoretical works in the field of Indian literary criticism published in English. Second, some critics have taken up the task of listing and elaborating on the numerous components of Indian classical poetics, contending that even modern texts can be ‘read’ by using the ideas and theories advanced by early Indian theorists. Thirdly, some comparative literary theorists are attempting to combine Indian and Western critical traditions to create a ‘common Indian poetic’. They suggest creating an ‘integrative aesthetics’ that will incorporate the best elements of the two traditions. The works of proponents of the Nativist school can be seen as an attempt to search for alternative aesthetics through research into the local, indigenous, popular, and folk culture.

Many different ‘schools’ have emerged as a result of these distinct inclinations, including the Eurocentric schools, the East-West synthesis school, the Dalit Poetics, Folk aesthetics, the Nativist school, and many more. These disparate systems convey the sense that Indian literary criticism in English is currently at a crossroads. However, it is simple to spot a shared yearning for a decolonized critical discourse that will not only be pertinent and appropriate but also give our critical output a unique character underlying all these differences in critical methods. The need for a critical approach that is more pertinent to the cultural context in which the literary material is being ‘read’ and interpreted is felt by even supporters of Eurocentric schools.

Indian critics, like the Greeks, established a prescriptive system of grammatical structures to mould literary works, but they also placed a strong focus on the meaning and spirit of words. This became *Rasadhvani*’s literary-critical tenet. In contrast to Plato’s aim to banish poets and poetry from his republic, Indian poetry was intended to inspire people to pursue lives that were holy and didactic in nature, resulting in more than merely an Aristotelian idea of “purgation of emotions” and individual liberty, but also a broader, political liberation for society as a whole. Bad *atman*, ‘evil will’, and ‘feelings that cause bad karma’ would be eradicated from society, allowing people to make a living in greater peace with one another.

With this understanding in mind, let us attempt to address the questions presented in the paper.

1. Why is it so usual for any researcher to encounter limits in Indian critical practice?

Several things may restrict Indian critical practice for researchers:

Colonial Legacy: India’s colonial history, especially under British control, shaped critical thought. Western viewpoints, theories, and procedures shaped Indian intellectual traditions throughout the colonial period. Academic research might become Eurocentric or Western, restricting indigenous critical viewpoints.

Linguistic and Regional Diversity: Accessing and analysing materials in multiple languages is difficult for scholars. Researchers may struggle to understand India's extensive literary and critical works due to linguistic barriers.

Interdisciplinary Barriers: Indian critical practice often encourages an interdisciplinary approach, but disciplinary boundaries can still pose challenges. Research funding, institutional structures, and academic departments may prioritize disciplinary specialization, making it difficult for researchers to explore interdisciplinary perspectives and engage with diverse areas of knowledge.

Socio-political Factors: The socio-political climate in India can impact critical practice. Societal norms, cultural sensitivities, and political pressures may influence the kinds of topics that researchers can explore or the perspectives they can express openly. These factors can introduce limitations or constraints on the scope and freedom of critical inquiry.

Evolving Nature of Critical Practice: Critical practice is not static, and it evolves over time. Indian critical practice is influenced by changing intellectual and cultural landscapes. Researchers may encounter challenges in keeping up with emerging theories, methodologies, and debates, especially when there is a lack of institutional support or platforms for critical engagement and dialogue. There is a dynamic and developing community of academics and critics in Indian critical practice, despite its limitations. Researchers may address these problems to expand Indian critical practice and improve literature and cultural comprehension.

2. What is the reason for the predominance of an Anglo-centric approach in Indian critical practice?

The predominance of an Anglo-centric approach in Indian critical practice can be attributed to various historical, social, and cultural factors. Some key reasons for this phenomenon include:

Colonial Influence: British colonial rule in India, which lasted for nearly two centuries, played a significant role in shaping the intellectual landscape of the country. The British brought with them their own literary and critical traditions, which were imposed on Indian education systems and institutions. English language and literature were promoted as privileged domains of knowledge, leading to the marginalization of indigenous languages and literary traditions. This colonial legacy has had a lasting impact on Indian intellectual practices, including critical approaches.

Education System: The Indian education system, established during the colonial era, adopted a Western-centric curriculum that emphasized the English language and literature. English-medium schools and universities became the primary centres of education and intellectual discourse. This focus on English education further reinforced the dominance of an Anglo-centric approach in various academic disciplines, including literary criticism.

Global Academic Influence: The influence of Western academic institutions and scholarship, particularly in the field of literary criticism, has been significant worldwide. Many Indian scholars pursue higher education or engage in research within Anglophone universities and are exposed to dominant Western critical theories and methodologies. This exposure often leads to the adoption of Anglo-centric approaches in their own critical practice.

Publishing and Research Networks: The dominance of English language publishing and research networks, both within India and internationally, further reinforces an Anglo-centric approach. English-language publications, conferences, and academic journals tend to receive wider recognition and accessibility, resulting in the proliferation of Anglo-centric scholarship. This creates a cycle where scholars are incentivized to produce work aligned with dominant Western critical paradigms to gain recognition and visibility.

Cultural Hegemony: English language and literature continue to be associated with prestige, social mobility, and global recognition in India. The perceived cultural and economic advantages associated with English proficiency and engagement with Anglophone literary traditions contribute to the perpetuation of an Anglo-centric approach in critical practice. This is often driven by aspirations for global academic recognition and opportunities.

It is important to note that while an Anglo-centric approach has been predominant, there is growing recognition and efforts to promote indigenous critical perspectives and engage with regional languages and literary traditions. Scholars and critics in India are increasingly challenging the hegemony of an Anglo-centric approach and advocating for a more inclusive and diverse critical practice that reflects the rich cultural and linguistic diversity of the country.

3. How can Indian literary criticism in English be decolonized?

Decolonizing Indian literary criticism in English involves challenging and dismantling the dominant Anglo-centric paradigms and perspectives that have been inherited from the colonial past. Here are some ways in which Indian literary criticism in English can be decolonized:

Embrace Multilingualism and Multiculturalism: Indian literary criticism should actively engage with the diverse linguistic and cultural traditions of the country. Encourage the study and interpretation of literature in regional languages, providing translations and resources to make them accessible to a wider audience. By embracing multilingualism and multiculturalism, Indian literary criticism can move beyond the limitations of an Anglo-centric focus.

Engage with Indigenous Knowledge Systems: Incorporate indigenous knowledge systems, including ancient Indian treatises and philosophies, into critical discussions. Explore the rich literary traditions and aesthetic theories present in Indian texts such as the *Natya Shastra*, or Sanskrit critical tradition. By integrating with Vernacular Literary Criticism includes works like "*Tolkappiyam*" and "*Nannūl*," which provide guidelines for Tamil poetics and aesthetics. Bhakti and Sufi poetic critical methodologies (Both Bhakti and Sufi poetic criticism emphasize the experiential and spiritual dimensions of poetry, going beyond mere literary analysis. They explore the transformative power of poetry to evoke devotion, love, and spiritual transcendence.) By using regional methodologies, Indian literary criticism can develop a more rooted and diverse approach.

Highlight Marginalized Voices and Perspectives: Decolonizing Indian literary criticism involves actively amplifying and centring marginalized voices and perspectives. Give space and recognition to voices from historically marginalized communities, including Dalits, Adivasis, women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and other marginalized groups. This can be done through the study of their literature,

providing platforms for their critical engagement, and challenging the dominance of privileged perspectives.

Challenge Eurocentric Theories and Paradigms: Critically engage with Eurocentric theories and paradigms that have traditionally dominated literary criticism. Question their applicability to the Indian context and explore alternative frameworks rooted in Indian philosophies, cultural practices, and socio-political realities. Develop theories and methodologies that emerge from the Indian context rather than being imposed from outside.

Foster Collaborative and Dialogic Spaces: Encourage collaborative and dialogic spaces for critical discussions that include diverse perspectives. Facilitate interdisciplinary conversations, bringing together scholars from literature, history, sociology, philosophy, and other relevant disciplines to explore the multifaceted dimensions of literary texts. This can help break down disciplinary boundaries and foster a more inclusive and holistic approach to literary criticism.

It is crucial to acknowledge that decolonization is an ongoing and complex process. The above suggestions are starting points that can be further explored and adapted based on specific contexts and challenges. By actively challenging the legacy of colonialism and promoting diverse perspectives, Indian literary criticism in English can strive towards decolonization and a more inclusive and reflective practice.

Conclusion:

Despite these challenges, contemporary Indian literary criticism in English continues to evolve and make significant contributions to the understanding and interpretation of Indian literature. It plays a crucial role in shaping literary debates, fostering cultural exchange, and preserving the diverse literary heritage of India.

Thus, contemporary Indian theoretical criticism in English is part of the larger agenda of decolonization that has suddenly become the major preoccupation of literary studies in India. The English-educated elite, comprising the majority of English departments in India, have realized that it is not only difficult for them to assimilate the West despite almost two hundred years of English education, but it is also difficult for the West to assimilate them despite their best efforts to be incorporated into its privileged space. In such a situation, Paranjape opines, “it is crucial for us to work out and formulate our differences with the West and once that is done, to enjoy, celebrate and elaborate these differences. It is here that we can find an alternative uncolonized space”

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