

RETHINKING RESEARCH IN ENGLISH STUDIES

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Lead In:

English Studies has had an intriguing trajectory of evolution, starting as a 'Utilitarian and Evangelical' initiative and later developing into a cultural and political project of colonizing the world. The Empire used the same English Studies and wrote back, adding a new chapter to the evolution of English Studies. In the course of time, the sacrosanct title 'English Studies' has been subjected to thorough and minute investigation with countless questions as to what 'English' is and what one is required to or should 'study'. There are also a few like Terry Eagleton who take the inquiry to the most fundamental question as to what literature is. It would be simplistic to limit the objectives of English Studies to studying 'plot', 'characterization' and 'thematic concerns', as it is practiced today in literature classes in many of the colleges and university departments.

In the light of half-baked notions and practices with respect English Studies today, it is easy to deduce the nuances for research in English Studies. While research in humanities and social sciences per se is a cause of concern, research in English Studies stands out as a momentous disappointment. In the last century, English Departments in the country made their fateful choices in terms of areas of research that they identified with and the way they pursued the same. Barring a few glorious exceptions, the rest have not addressed the key questions of English Studies research. As if it was not enough for the erosion of research in the discipline, API has inspired an avalanche of third-rate publications that has left us clueless and embarrassed. As researchers are 'guided' today by 'latest trends', areas wherein either their research proposal is likely to be accepted or UGC is most likely to grant funds for projects, and similar motivations which are other than academic, research in English Studies has consequently suffered. It will not only be fitting but also fruitful to closely examine the underpinnings of contemporary research and research culture in English Studies.

Current Scenario of Research in English Studies

When one considers the present scenario of English Studies with a measure of objectivity, one can deconstruct the way English Studies has been perceived and approached in the Indian context. Research in English Studies has grown manifold in terms of sheer volumes of PhD Dissertations, research papers and books on a variety of areas such as Indian Writing in English (IWE), Translation Studies, English Language Teaching (ELT) etc. Research in its quantity is overwhelming but it is the quality that one cannot uphold with certainty. It is also necessary to understand how research in English Studies is undertaken in the Indian context. Firstly, a student who registers for PhD is the most likely candidate to make a contribution to the existing body of research in English Studies. It is also important that the PhD research scholars are appropriately

oriented towards research at it will form the foundation of a lifelong pursuit and practice of research. Secondly, it is the teachers working in undergraduate colleges and PG departments at the University who undertake research in English Studies and enrich the existing understanding of theory or texts.

To assess the quality of a practice, it is required to go into the motivation of the endeavour. If research is about breaking a new ground, conceptualizing a new mode of thinking or adding to the existing knowledge, we defeat the purpose in the way research scholars are motivated to undertake PhD. It is interesting that students seek admission in PhD not because they are driven by the desire to break a new ground in English Studies but because it is the ticket to lectureship, a sure formula for a job. When one has a job in mind, it is easy to understand the desperation to get the admission and complete the PhD in 2 years flat! What happens in these two years is an open secret for those who have been through the same exercise. Research in its purity and original objective of making a genuine contribution takes a back seat at the beginning when it comes to selection of a topic. Students are motivated to take up topics which are in vogue, fashionable literary trends which can guarantee the admission and also ensure quick submission of dissertation. Students are also good at reading the mind of a university department as well as its teachers. They know that a particular department at a particular university has a UGC SAP on post colonialism or diaspora writing, and hence if one proposes a topic related to the same, the chances of getting through the RDC are quite high. The students at times also know that a particular faculty memberspecializes in ELT, or Translation or Gender Studies and hence, one should be wise enough to choose a related topic for securing a berth via RDC. When selection of a topic is not as per the interest of the candidate but in accordance with the research interests of a university department or its faculty, one can see why the quality of research in English Studies is plummeting with each passing year. It is also easy to correlate why no researcher of repute comes out of university departments who can contribute to the theory like the scholars in the West do or provide a new interpretation of an existing text. Research scholars take the safe path mostly and pursue the conventional trend and this is why groundbreaking research in English Studies is a thing of the past.

The way teachers serving in colleges and university departments approach research in English Studies is also a fascinating site of insights into the state of English Studies in the country. When teachers see that the UGC and the affiliating university are quite keen that teachers should pursue research, they begin to understand that there is no escape. The UGC has been transparent enough to link higher pay scales and promotions to research output. API is the buzzword in the teaching fraternity. At times, our brightest teachers fall behind in their APIs and the worst of our colleagues win the API race. In other words, at times the best of teachers do not have as many publications to their credit as compared to the mediocre and opportunist teachers who fake themselves as researchers and strive hard to stretch the list of their publications as much as the distance between Kashmir to KanyaKumari.

The most hilarious of sights is to witness the interview scene when candidates gather with their respective publications which at times are carried in separate bags. If we are researching and publishing so much, the question to be asked is, which is one new idea, theory, interpretation we have given to the field of English Studies in the last twenty years? Is this work which we take enormous pride in recognized worldwide as the groundbreaking research in the respective area? Is it known in other parts of the world as an inevitable resource for anybody working in that area? Or is it forgotten as quickly as it is published? Is it not a fact that we have depended solely and entirely on the West for the new theories and interpretations even of the texts produced in

India? Is it not a fact that all our research papers and books quote Western scholars for substantiating our research? We have none to claim as the theorist or critic who changed the Western paradigm of thinking in that area. One wonders why it is impossible that a country as heavily populated as ours and with a large young population cannot produce researchers of global recognition and worldwide renown. It is rendered impossible due to a mindset that accepts mediocrity and that celebrates mediocrity.

It would be interesting to spot the kind of research is undertaken in the major areas of English Studies.

Comparative Literature

It is interesting the way we carry out research in the area of Comparative Literature. Research scholars or teachers consider this an area of choice as it allows a lot of possibilities. Randomly, one can select any two texts that can offer some common ground for comparative literary analysis and one is well on one's way to earn the status of a 'comparatist' in the feted academic circles. The way the texts and authors are selected is also interesting. An author who has recently received an award or a prize is the first choice for a researcher because it becomes easy to justify the selection of the text or author. If the award is for a particular text, it is further easier to select the text as the researcher does not have to look beyond the text. Another scientific method of selection of an author is the birth or death anniversary. If a particular author's birth anniversary is being celebrated in the current year and RDC is scheduled shortly, there is a gleam in the researcher's eyes in the proud selection of the author. For comparatists, two opportunities have recently arisen. Celebrated author Raghuvver Chaudhary has received the coveted Jnana Pith award and hence his works should be now closely studied. Another opportunity is in the passing away of Labhshankar Thakar. It is saddening to see that researchers as opportunists do not hesitate in pouncing on even an author's death in pursuing one's selfish motives and professional advancement. It would have been fine if the research would be motivated by the death of a particular author and wishes to pay homage to the said author. But it is known to each one of us that it is not the case. We are a community of researchers, most of whom have not read Raghuvver Chaudhary and/or Labhshankar Thakar purely out of literary passion. But now it is easy to predict PhD proposals, books and research papers in the area of comparative literature based on the aforementioned authors.

Translation Studies

Translation Studies is another troubled area of research. How a text is selected for translation follows the same wisdom that has been hinted at in the section on Comparative Literature. RDCs and new publication of books and papers will see a rise in the interest and importance attached to the writings of Raghuvver Chaudhary and Labhshankar Thakar. Their texts will be used as a ladder for climbing the publication food chain and crossing the requisite API mark. Pannalal Patel is another author whose work has been misused for translation in the same way. The interesting thing about translation studies in Gujarat is that anybody and everybody is a translator of some text or another. There is nobody/nothing to deter them. There is no culture of rigorous and incisive translation reviews which can bring out a lot of skeletons from the closet.

As far as translation theory is concerned, we are parasites who feed on the Western scholars' work. The question to be asked is, what is the Indian or Gujarat's contribution to Translation thinking in the country and the world? Barring a few glorious exceptions, the rest is all trivial and mediocre. Research scholars and teachers at large translate and discuss translation in terms

of career prospects but not how translations can contribute to existing knowledge regarding how we perceive the world. There is a surreal amount of politics attached to translation that screams to be unearthed with respect to translation studies in Gujarat. To cite an instance, Bible translations have been a contentious issue in translation studies in the West. To localize the issue, if Bible was the first text to be translated from English into Gujarati, what kind of translation was it? If there have been subsequent translations, what kinds of modifications have been made by subsequent translators? And why? One can discuss similar important earliest and central texts which have been translated from English into Gujarati and Gujarati into English. It can make an enduring contribution to the historiography of translation in Gujarat. One wonders if this is even discussed by researchers in Gujarat. It would be interesting to discover if there are any PhD dissertations on this or any books or papers published on or around this area.

Translation Studies in Gujarat is in a dormant state in Gujarat. Researchers undertake translation of a text as per the whims and fancies and it would be difficult for them to substantiate why they favour a particular text for translation over another. The quality of these translations is another contentious issue. There is no journal to review new or old translations in a matter of fact manner. We are mutually tolerant of each other's translational violence. It is all hush-hush when it comes to pointing finger at the culprit of translation. Translation Studies cannot be allowed to continue to be the last resort of the mediocre.

English Language Teaching (ELT)

For a state that has been struggling to overcome its fear psychosis of English can serve as a rich site of research in English Language Teaching (ELT). Instead, research scholars attempt their PhD on ELT with a focus on imaginary problems. The real problems that general graduates and engineering students face in terms of communication skills in English have not yet been investigated. On the other hand, we have tens of thousands of PhD dissertations and publications on ELT. We have more ELT scholars than we can tolerate. Everyone seems to have something to say on ELT. One look at the titles/topics of PhD dissertations would convince us that we are doing everything else except relevant ELT. In the name of 'action research', a lot of data is gathered and mysterious methods are employed for data interpretation that nobody questions and lo and behold, the dissertation is ready to serve to an ELT savvy readership!

Except the work of a few genuine ELT researchers in the State, history will hold us accountable for propagating unpardonably mediocre ELT research. Topics such as the study of pronunciation patterns and teaching of grammar to undergraduate students etc form the core of our ELT research and will not last a long time. There is little of value in the voluminous work that we would leave behind.

Rethinking Research in English Studies

One can go on and one and deconstruct the state of research in English Studies with respect to each area. One can also cite chapter and verse from the publications to illustrate the frailties of present day researchers. Research for securing a job or for professional advancement cannot help us make enduring contribution to research in English Studies. There is a dire need to rethink the motivations and objectives of research in English Studies. It is inevitably important to engage in a rigorous discourse over what kind of comparative literature we wish to see in future and promote comparative literary studies accordingly. It is a prerequisite to identify the kind of translation studies research we should pursue in Gujarat and why and then chart the path for the said research. The State badly needs an ELT research culture that addresses the actual problems

in the State and provides a set of systematic solutions which can be implemented. ELT in Gujarat should study problems of primary, secondary and higher education and provide an analytic study containing actionable ideas in terms of solutions. The same holds true for research in women's writing, gender studies, Diaspora or any other area of research.

Lead Out:

Research implies a new discovery and breaking a new ground, giving a new turn to the way a phenomenon is perceived, questioning the given or questioning the assumed. Research is also about the dedication and commitment to knowledge and personal politics of professional advancement should be separated from it. We need to orient the young research scholars and teachers starting out on their journey towards research regarding the actual objectives of research. Methodology of research is also something that continues to drive research in new directions. Archival data will open up new avenues for revisiting the historical phenomena and foregone conclusions.

As teachers and researchers, we are role models for students and budding teachers and researchers. Our approach to research will serve as the guiding light to future researchers. Our behavior will hold the key to the way the new generation will engage in research. The way we select texts, write our papers and contest a thesis will pave way for future research. If we can use this conference as an opportunity to rethink research in English Studies, history may take a kind view of us, despite our many and varied shortcomings.

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