The Problems of English Studies in Bangladesh

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Abstract: English Studies in Bangladesh today does not have the same prospect it enjoyed even twenty years ago. Although there has been expansion of English Studies—as new university departments teaching the subject have opened, and most university colleges have English Literature as a major subject, there has been a continuous slide in quality. The situation has almost reached a crisis point, and many academics openly raise questions as to the viability of English Studies in its present form. The challenges that English Studies today faces are many, some ideological, some methodological and pedagogical, and some have to do with such things as poor logistics, lack of libraries and books and qualified teachers. In addition, the challenges coming from the bifurcation of English departments into Language/Linguistics and Literature streams, and increasing marketability of such courses as TESOL, ESP and the like pose a grave threat to English Studies in Bangladesh. The paper will discuss these problems in some detail, and will attempt a way out of the current crisis.

With the global decline in English literature departments, some unsettling questions are already being asked in the academia: Will these departments suffer the same fate as Classics departments? Will they survive mainly as language teaching centres – with creative writing and business English thrown in? If Business English sounds a distant proposition here in Bangladesh, listen again: a private university has already started offering a 4-year B.A. Honours programme in the subject, which includes such courses as Airlines English and English for Hospitality Service Providers. If ELT is a global growth industry, we may see more such bizarre proliferations of market savvy English. But market forces are something else. You resist them, you perish, or accept them, and flourish. Or so it seems.

The answers to the above questions are not easy, especially if English Studies is confined only to English Literature, as purists and canonists would like to do. Persisting only with literature will be problematic, since English departments, besides linguistics and ELT, are already coping with Theory and Cultural Studies, and in some cases, Media Studies (not just Media English). Diversification along these discipline-lines carries both the promise of consolation and a threat of dismemberment – already brought home by the literature, linguistics divide. Add to that the problems of pedagogy and the arrival of new technology that threatens to cut both ways; the loss of reading habit; a freshman admission system in the public universities, which from the English

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departments' perspective is faulty; political influence on the selection of faculty; a lack of resources; and the operation of a publish or perish academic Darwinism. This last is particularly worrisome as what gets published is not always what is essentially publishable. Recently, the National University asked the English teachers of its constituent colleges to publish articles for promotion and incentive bonuses. A private college requested me to unofficially review four such articles. I found one passable, two quite mediocre, and a fourth one just googled, from cover page to bibliography. And speaking about colleges that offer B.A. Honours and Master's degrees in English: compared to their richer cousins, the university English departments, they fare much worse, although they exist in a canon-based, pre-theory, and cultural studies/linguistics free age of innocence. But that innocence, I am afraid, is taking them nowhere.

Time was when English Studies had to deal with English language and culture rooted in England. Then came the colonial and postcolonial English – the English of the Empire. And now, a global English is emerging – call it cyber English, media English or postmodern English. While ELT and ESP specialists find in this latest brand of English a fertile ground for research, and new opportunities for materials design and teaching, English literature teachers can only look with amazement and ask, 'What next?'

So far, I have talked about the *problems* that confront English Studies. Custom demands that I now talk about *prospects*. But prospects, I am afraid, do not seem bright as far as purely literature based English Studies is concerned. I wouldn't be far off the mark if I say that a threat of eventual extinction now looms on the horizon. In the English department of Dhaka University where I teach, I can see signs of decline of literature. The 4-year B.A. Honours programme admits about 150 students in the first year. Out of these, about 30 drop out, change subjects, fail in the year ending examinations or simply disappear, leaving about 120 students who eventually reach the 4th year level. At this stage, a large majority of them are weaned away by the linguistics stream. The same is the case with the Master's programme. The few hardy souls that remain in the literature stream are nowadays encouraged by an attractive course mix, a result of recent innovations in the syllabus. A selective decanonization has been at work which has seen the incorporation of texts from 'other Englishes' and a generous fare of theory and an exposure of students to what Harold Bloom so dismissively called the 'multicultural virus'. Instead of prospects, therefore, one should talk about innovation. If English Studies doesn't grow with time, address changing needs and emergent energies, and most importantly, improve its home base, including an all round development in pedagogy, I am afraid, it will only be buying a one way ticket to academic dodo land.

For English Studies to maintain a healthy progress as a discipline, it has to address the following issues:

- a blurring of genres; the rise of theory; other Englishes and Cultural and Media Studies, translation studies;
- questions about the canon;
- threat from the market and the ascendance of linguistics and language studies;
- new technology and the resultant stress on visuality and aurality;
- pedagogical and other related problems.

In the subcontinental setting, one would like to include another factor to the list: the issue of colonial complicity, of which English Studies is often accused. Many postcolonialists and Saidian orientalists believe that English departments in India were set up as colonial outposts. They resent the fact that even after the British had left, the English departments remained colonial in their mindset. One doesn't doubt that it was once the case, particularly in the days when a colonial hangover persisted, but today, 'elitist' should be the last word to describe how English departments view themselves. Besides, the suggestion of colonial complicity beyond a certain point of time has been forcefully contested. In a very perceptive essay published in a book produced by International Association of University Professors in English (IAUPE), Kaiser Haq has examined the complicity claims made by Gauri Viswanathan in her influential book *Masks of Conquest*. After challenging many of the points that Viswanathan raises, and correcting some historical misreadings, particularly as regards the institutionalization of English literature in the subcontinent, Haq concludes, borrowing a phrase from Aijaz Ahmed, that many of Viswanathan's contentions arise from "metropolitan theory's inflationary rhetoric" (Haq 219).

I am not denying the merit of Gauri Viswanathan's book – or for that matter any other book that examines the history of English Studies in the subcontinent postcolonially. But, in my opinion, we would be better off concentrating on the real world worries as they arise now than reviving old ghosts. As it were, there are plenty of new ghosts released by newer forms of colonization that globalization has sanctioned. How about Call Center English, for example? A recent BBC report showed that in Bangalore in India, young men and women working in these centres are given intensive training in American English as well as American culture. They are also encouraged to think like Americans, so that no US caller catches them off guard. If Mr. Thomas Babington Macaulay's ghost were not enough, we now have Corporate America's spectre to contend with.

A possible list of innovations should include the following, but should not necessarily be limited to them:

Small is beautiful. The way English departments in Bangladesh are run now verges on the absurd: a classroom with 75 students and barely 45 working minutes, with most of these students unable to write a paragraph in plain, good English. Most have unredeemable problems with grammar and pronunciation. And thanks to the introduction of communicative English in the school curricula, and the banishment of literature, most of these students haven't read a single poem or literary prose piece in English. One wonders why these students, the beneficiaries of the much flaunted communicative English, cannot communicate even a simple idea in English. May be their inability to switch codes and registers? Or overcrowded classrooms denying full functionality of facilitative and participatory classrooms? Who knows!

The English departments should cut down on class size. The undergraduate admission should be revamped to allow English departments to examine students' proficiency in English before – and not after – they are admitted. A small class is an interactive and receptive class; a class that can overcome problems faster than a large one.

Handle with care. Theory should not be taken as a whipping boy for detractors, or seen as a threat, but as a tool of literary analysis. People who are against theory form a school of resentment who identify all theoretical practices as threats to good old-style textual scholarship. The particular villains of the piece in this case are new historicism and postmodernism. It is true that new historicism tends to dehistoricize individual authors as well as the men and women they create; but it is equally true that by focusing on social energies at work behind literary texts, New Historicism also contextualizes issues of power and patriarchal structures and other related social/political agencies that impact on a literary text. Postmodernism, similarly, has been dismissed for its attack on all unities, absolutes and transcendental signifieds. But postmodernism, instead of eliminating humanism, as its critics claim, has rather added to it by its insistence on the local, the particular, the marginal as well as on the minoitarian ethnics. The devices and tricks that postmodernism employs – and I can cite a whole range of them from irony and pastiche to self-reflexivity and play – allow readers to enter into newer engagements with literary and non-literary texts. Besides, times are indeed a-changing. The globalization fever is upon us. It is futile to ask, as Terry Eagleton does, rather patronizingly, why we in Mali or Mayo need postmodernism. As if theories practiced in the western metropolitan centres are protected by intellectual property rights, and a scholar in Mali or Manikganj making a postmodern critique of his world infringes on their sanctity!

But talking of theory: Eagleton does provide us with a caveat when he says that the academy should not take theory as new textual techniques or intellectual capital to replenish its diminishing stocks. Indeed, theory should best be used as a guide for interpretation. It shouldn't be an abstract discipline by itself – viciously

jargon-filled, and "cut off from that which it is supposed to be the theory of". As Peter Barry reminds us, we should look in literary theory "for something we can use, not something which will use us" (Barry 8).

Canon to right of us/Canon to left of us. The canon wars throughout the 20th century have ranged the two sides – the canonists and the anti or non-canonists – along a forever shifting battle front. The canonists' zeal has been fuelled by the pursuers of Great Tradition – from F. R. Leavis to Harold Bloom. But increasingly the canonists, whose ideals are distinctly Euro-centric and WASPish (White Anglo Saxon Protestant), are losing ground. There have been demands for a radical revisioning of the canon. English departments have happily accommodated feminist, cultural materialist, multiculturist and ethnic and minority writers – a few though for political correctness rather than for merit. Bloom seems like yesterday. Someone asks, "Is canon a reprehensible representation of a bankrupt western intellectual tradition?" There is a view that because of the overresearched archives of the canon, the Opening Up of the Canon was inevitable (pursued by, among others, Leslie Fiedler and Houston Blake). Whatever the sound and fury of the canon wars, one is reassured to see that sanity has begun to prevail. We don't stand to lose our Shakespeare or Milton or Eliot, but neither do we have to sacrifice our Chinua Achebe or our Jhumpa Lahiri as "overvalued, regional inputs not worthy of a high chair".

If our focus is right, the blurring of genres shouldn't augur a collapse of the discipline.

Return to the origin. If the old focus of English Studies has to be restored without having to encapsulate it in a time warp, it will be necessary to part ways with English Language Teaching and Linguistics, which then can be assigned to fledgling departments of Language Teaching and Linguistics. Bifurcation of literature and language will be healthy for both the disciplines. English departments will of course have to include some elements of Language and Linguistics – history of English Language, sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, for example – in addition to a range of other subjects that I have mentioned above. If the American Course System has to continue, we must make it more flexible, and give students more choice.

No virtue in being Luddites. New technology in the form of e-books or virtual classrooms has not yet swamped us, and the prospect looks quite distant. But the internet is here. Sometimes students, while writing their assignments, lift pages or entire essays from electronic Cliff Notes and free term paper websites. But the internet can also be deceptive: it is offering newer versions of bazaar notes that are often inferior to the Indian ones currently swamping the book stores. Then again, these websites are quickly turning into pay-per-view profit making sites, necessarily excluding Bangladeshi students.

Back to the basics. Elaine Showalter, in her useful book *Teaching Literature* writes about seven types of anxiety stalking a literature teacher: lack of pedagogical training, isolation, stage fright, the conflict between teaching and publication, coverage, grading and student or peer evaluation. Although Showalter's focus is predominantly American – in the chapter "Teaching Literature in Dark Times," she means by dark times not the globally uncertain time the English departments are facing, but the post 9/11 times in USA – and the anxieties she lists are familiar ones here too. To these we may add, from our perspective, the anxieties about resources and also of relevance: Am I teaching something quite remote from the students' life experience? Am I making any sense? Am I teaching them for merely a degree?

These questions are not easily answered, but we need to take a fresh look at the state of English teaching in Bangladesh and work out a methodology of teaching and learning English which will be both 'useful' – in the practical sense one likes to evaluate education today – and rewarding. No language learning is possible without understanding its cultural and historical contexts, and the social energy that ensures its animated use. At the same time, however, the language should also take on the cultural specificities of the learner. Such a fine balance can only be achieved if experts, academics, policy planners and educational administrators work together for a common end. That end will have to do more with quality than with quantity. But once quality is ensured, quantity can be taken care of.

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