

Pedagogy of Alienation: Epistemic Hegemony of the Mental Space and Fatal Fault Lines in the National Space

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into pedagogic practices that privilege the remote over the proximate, the unfamiliar over the familiar, and the far-off over the intimate. It delineates how this pedagogy of alienation entails embedding of ‘the west’ in cognitive spaces of the subjects and conditions ways in which they negotiate their familiar terrain: the national space. Spatial dynamics of the humanistic functions attached with the teaching of E. literature: “the shaping of character, the development of aesthetics and the disciplines of ethical thinking” will also be identified. The paper investigates how English literary texts in an institutionalized space win assent for their judgments in a “clandestine” manner. An attempt has been made to equate these acts of assent, on part of the subjects, as steps of spatial alienation ensuring successive approximation to a desired behavior or a reconfiguration of the cognitive space, ultimately “transforming the way in which objects of knowledge are constructed.” The resulting epistemes have then been mapped onto the fatal fault lines of the proximal, national space to test their political efficacy.

Key Words: Institutionalization of English literature, epistemic hegemony, English literary education in Pakistan, politics of education.

Introduction

In this paper I look at the epistemic consequences of the engagement of a pedagogic subject with Anglo-centric curriculum in an English literature (E.Lit) programme. I argue that the engagement that is facilitated in an Anglo-centric E.Lit classroom leads to colonization of the mental space. Crucial epistemes, which do not emerge from the spatio-temporal, historical, political, geographical and cultural locale (national space) of the pedagogic subject but which have emerged elsewhere and have been embedded in the mental architecture of the subjects, cause the hegemony of the mind. An effort has been made to identify such epistemes through a cursory glance at English literary texts, which are taught in such programmes.

Episteme

The word episteme, in the history of western knowledge has been generally understood as *knowledge* and its study is thus called epistemology. However,

Foucault (2004) a French intellectual, defines the word episteme as "...the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures..." (p. 211). These "epistemological figures" can simply be understood, in the words of Spivak(1993), as "objects of knowledge"(p. 139). She further thinks that the goal of *teaching* literature is to transform the ways in which such objects of knowledge are constructed." According to her, the "chief object" of such constructions is a human being (p. 139). The description of the episteme for Foucault "opens up an inexhaustible field" which "can never be closed; its aim is not to reconstitute the system of postulates that governs all the branches of knowledge (connaissances) of a given period, but to cover an indefinite field of relations" (p. 211). He further writes, the episteme "makes it possible to grasp the set of constraints and limitations which, at a given moment, are imposed on discourse" (p. 211-2).

In this paper, I attempt to make a case that in the present-day Pakistan, facilitating pedagogic subjects to study English literary texts in a university's academic programme without making them critically aware of the historic imperatives that necessitated the institutionalization of English literature, makes them mentally adopt a system of epistemes which limit their ability to engage with the challenges of their national space. I intend to sensitize the readers to the epistemic politics of education, particularly when that education entails teaching of texts that have been produced in a different geo-political locale and hence fail to address organically the challenges of the geo-political locale of the subject. Literature, in this case English literature, taught in our universities, can thus be seen as "the staged battleground of epistemes" (p. 154) in the words of Spivak (1993).

The paper, thus, can be read as a critique of Anglocentricity that governs the teaching of English literature in Pakistan. It points out the problematic consequences of continuing with British colonial imaginings. The argument is built up to conclude with a recommendation which suggests change in the focus from *English* literature to *literature in English* which will open up the discipline to texts which have been written in a geo-political locale that the pedagogic subject is intimate with. Such a process, the paper concludes, will be inevitable to the enablement of the pedagogic subject to handle challenges of the national space.

A glance at the two-year syllabus of MA taught at the University of the Punjab, Lahore, established in 1882, reveals that there is, literally, a single author from South-Asia that is taught in the 66-credit programme. The rest are from Europe. Out of 66 credits, 44 are devoted to British writers, 7 to American writers, 8 to European writers and just 3 to postcolonial writers. Out of these 3, there is only one, as mentioned earlier, who is from South Asia. Such an expediency reveals three things: colonial, euro-centric hangover; institutional inertia in keeping up with international developments in the discipline, particularly in the postcolonial world and; a deeply embedded belief that the English texts written primarily by

English/European authors are aesthetically superior to those produced by the authors whose first language has not been English.

Why is it dangerous?

Such an epistemic hegemony can work in ways that might not be conducive to a cognition that works in enabling ways. Literature, according to Spivak (1993), buys our approval in a discreet manner. It does not state a claim explicitly; rather it “buys” our “assent” in a “clandestine” manner. It happens because literature “... advances its point through its form, images, and metaphors, and indeed its general rhetoricity ...” (p. 136). She considers literature to “be the best complement to ideological transformation.” She also presents the idea that literary texts, when they are written presume an implied reader, who in the case of an English literary text, is someone from the culture of the author. So when a reader from a different culture reads a text, s/he, in case of an uncritical and unaware subject, in all probability would say ‘yes’ to a text and “the assent might bring a degree of alienation”. This, in the words of the same theorist is called “alienating cultural indoctrination” which “is a poison or a medicine, a base on which both elitism and critique can be built” (p. 136-7). The experience, thus, of engaging with English literature, brings with it a transformation in the epistemic framework that has its origins elsewhere and would demand a lot of effort to relate to unfolding of human actions in alien locales.

Teaching of such texts is always accompanied by the teaching of authors’ lives. This, of course, had been planned in colonial times as the colonial administrators wanted to remove the “original corporate raiders of the East India Company” looting and killing the Indian colony from history by ensuring the presence of a substitute Englishman. As part of the project of “cultural self-representation” Spivak (1993), the Englishman was introduced “to the natives through the products of his mental labor served a valuable purpose in that it removed him from the plane of ongoing colonialist activity—of commercial operations, military expansion, administration of territories – and de-actualized and diffused his material presence in the process.” (Vishwanathan, 1989, p. 436). “His material reality as a subjugator and alien ruler was dissolved in his mental output; the blurring of the man and his works effectively removed him from history.” (Vishwanathan, 1987, p. 437)

“The English literary text functioned as a surrogate Englishman in the highest and the most perfect state” (Vishwanathan, 1989, p. 436-7). Of course the oracles of mental colonization had precisely planned this.

“[The Indians] daily converse with the best and wisest Englishman through the medium of their works, and form ideas, perhaps higher ideas of our nation than if their intercourse with it were of a more personal kind.” (Trevelyan as cited in Vishwanathan, 1989, p. 437).

So far, engagement with English literature is considered to happen in an insulated space where one has to leave one's politics at the door. The advocacy of literature teacher to access works of English literature for the supreme aesthetic pleasure they may impart without looking at the political and colonial undercurrents becomes an act of *epistemic reproduction* that was enacted by the colonial administrators of education.

The reciting of poetry, dramatic set-pieces or prose passages from the works of English writers was not just a practice of literary teaching throughout the empire – it was also an effective mode of moral, spiritual and political inculcation (Bill, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1995, p. 426).

In the absence of historical awareness of how English literature entered into the Indian university system established in 1857, the same year in which a full blown war of independence was waged against the British colonization of India and which led to more than 10 million deaths (Misra *1857: A War of Civilizations*, 2007) leads to a skewed interaction with a foreign culture which only is selectively introduced to the best products of that culture. Engaging with enviable products of that culture sans an awareness of its former brutal expansionist agenda leads the pedagogic subject to a state of overwhelming submission. Recommended pedagogic activities in the classroom hegemonize the mental space of the subject as it begins to identify with the foreign culture and discerns itself as distinct from the common subjects inhabiting the same national space but those who did not have to privilege to engage with the same texts.

Recitation of literary texts thus becomes a ritual act of obedience, often performed by a child before an audience of admiring adults, who, in reciting that English tongue, speaks as if s/he were the imperial speaker/master rather than the subjectified colonial so often represented in English poetry and prose. “ (Ashcroft et al., 1995, p. 426).

This may lead to a state that I call the ubiquity of the west and which Nandy (1983) describes in the following words : “The West is now everywhere, within the West and outside; in structures and in minds” (p. 11). English literary texts are not always apolitical and if one keeps in mind the colonial context in which the discipline was institutionalized, as a way of cultural self-representation, among other reasons, one can see how it leads the native young minds to develop a sense of cultural inferiority while engaging with the masterpieces of western cultural output.

Batsleer (1985) thinks that access to England's “cultural resources” lead to “particular kinds of reasoning and a specific form of subjectivity” and literature thus becomes “both the medium and the standard of linguistic hegemony” (p. 23). Studying national literature of another continent, in the absence of any engagement with cultural resources produced in ones own locale leads to a kind of state in which one understands his own ignorance of equivalent literary/cultural

tradition as absence of it. This is usually coupled with silence from the pedagogic agent on the existence of such corpus leads to a state in which the subject tacitly internalizes an epistemic structure, which accords exalted cultural status to the nation whose output is English literature and tags the culture of his origin an inferior cultural status.

Privileging of English Literature

The exalted status of a national literature is further reinforced when some of the texts consolidate their status in a self-reflexive manner. Literature is privileged over other disciplines. Consider, for instance, an essential text in courses on literary criticism, Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry* (1579). Philip Sidney, the author, is introduced as the father of English literary criticism. The work itself is a strong exposition of how poetry is superior to philosophy and history. Its preeminence is established on the basis of poetry's antiquity, universality and its prophetic nature.

The Episteme of Universalism

An obvious question, which strikes anyone who engages with a literary text written in another country and continent, is its foreignness. Such a question is bound to arise. This objection is settled by evoking the episteme of universalism, which presents to them a convincing case for foreign literature based on the postulate that since literature deals with human beings, thus it is applicable to any human setting, effectively removing the doubts of the pedagogic subjects. Any genuine doubts that might emerge from their personal and collective selves are neutralized since the teaching model is the banking model (Friere 1968) which does not necessitate critical responses from students. Literature emanated from a particular geo-political locale is shown as an expression of universal humanism.

Anglo-centric knowledge or Euro-centric knowledge is considered 'objective.' That English literature, conveys 'universal' values, is a cliché in English literature classrooms. All this is made possible because of a disproportionate curriculum that is predominantly anglo-centric. The geo-politics of knowledge, even after introduction of American or European texts remain the same. History of Europe is taught as history of the world. Cartographically speaking, only European territory is illuminated through a spotlight which renders the rest of the world dark. The agents who facilitate engagement with literature hardly ever doubt the "hubris of the zero-point" (Santiago Castro-Gomes qtd in Mignolo), which refers to west's assumption that the knowledge it produces and the perspective through which it is produced, is objective. The epistemic privilege of the "zero-point" is hardly doubted by those who are supposed to ensure critical engagement with literature. There seems to be a deeply-embedded belief that knowledge has emanated from Western societies and they have the right to spread it to the world and that the knowledge which is accessed through curriculum is free from any bias and conveys true knowledge.

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This experience prepares them to privilege the remote over the proximate, the unfamiliar over the familiar, and the far-off over the intimate. The places that are mentioned in the literary texts, all alien, all foreign acquire a literary status of mythical aesthetic appeal which the ordinary familiar reality around the subject can never match. London, Paris, Oslo, Piccadily, the Brighton Lane, Hertfordshire, Egdon Heath, Hampton Court, the Thames become the ultimate places which are emblematic of a rich history and culture.

This “knowledge” subconsciously accords a spatial significance to space. The process of conceiving, constructing, perceiving and interpreting ‘place,’ Berleant (2004), assumes enhanced significance in this context. Locations do not just offer a passive backdrop to the unfolding of human events. They might even be carriers of human identity and may carry “historical and cultural associations” (p. 43). “Personal memory may also imbue an area with a similar distinction” (p. 43). The factors that lead one to be conscious of the presence of the place are distinguishing physical identity, coherence, and consciousness of significance, which may contribute to a sense of distinctive presence that we associate with the special character of place.

When a subject is not exposed to proximal spaces through texts, s/he may gradually begin to deny any of the above-mentioned attributes to places that s/he may be intimately familiar with. It may lead to a reduced awareness of the aesthetic dimension. The absence may convince the subject of the “bland sterility” of the proximal spaces as opposed to those that are far-off and present in the texts. This negation of any aesthetics to the surrounding areas may leave the subject in a kind of “placelessness.” This interaction at the crucial juncture of a subject’s life pushes one to resist instead of facilitating in entering into a relationship with the places that surround the subject. Now if we analyze it for a moment, we would realize that the subject does not know about any distinguishing physical identity of a place that is proximate. No effort is made at the pedagogic level to enact such an engagement. The curricula, of course, coming from an alien culture, can never enable them to identify such distinguishing traits of places that otherwise are basic to their human activity. Similarly, the requisite perception that is required to discern physical coherence and the knowledge that is required to know about the significance of places seems lacking.

During the process of spatial cognition “one’s own locale is marked as “places of non-thought” marked in the process of mapping. Written for a different context, but aptly valid are Mignolo’s (2009) words which might be read as a manifesto for what has to be done:

“geo- and body-politics of knowledge has been hidden from the self-serving interests of western epistemology and the task of a de-colonial thinking is the unveiling of epistemic silences of Western epistemology and affirming the epistemic rights of the racially devalued, and de-colonial options to allow the silences to build arguments to confront

those who take ‘originality’ as the ultimate criterion for the final judgment”(p. 4)

Pedagogy of Alienation thus condemns the subject to the ‘darkness of negation’ of Place. Using Mignolo’s (2009) words, I would reiterate that there is a “euro-centered epistemology carefully hidden” (p. 2) in the texts that are taught in the university English departments of Pakistan.

Literary Ennoblement

Experiences of human subjects unfolding in spaces and places inevitably make them interested in them as part of pedagogic expediency. This leads them to an epistemic state where they devalue proximities because they find them un-literary, dull, bland incapable of the aesthetic appeal of spaces and places they encounter in English literary texts. The metropolis, the heart of the empire (Anglo-American-European world) occupies the centre space in the realm of their desire.

The apparent diversity of themes of English/European/American literary texts fade out in the wake of classroom teaching practices which do not make the subjects engage with the texts critically to highlight epistemic contestations or the essential differences in which objects of knowledge could be constructed. What is ultimately fleshed out is the similarity and literature is introduced as an ideology, as a religion available to guide the subjects through their lives.

The Episteme of Individualism

In a national space that is already divided along lines of linguistic, provincial, sectarian, caste and class divides, the teaching of English literary texts infuse the episteme of unflinching *individualism*. In a space of endless fault lines fatally dividing the social fabric, instead of finding common grounds to build meaningful human-centric goals, the pedagogic subjects are transformed epistemically to identify their unique attributes and idiosyncracies and celebrate them. That is what they are inevitably persuaded to do when they interact with characters that are at odds with the society. Now that might be so in their own locale, but instead of engaging with such conflicts, there is a celebration of that state. Intertextual references of similar characters at odds with themselves or with their societies, mired in the quest for their selves, fetishizing exhibits of life’s absurdities do their best to bring out shades of self that denigrate connecting to the outside world—a world much larger and much more significant than the internecine, inexplicably complicated and never to be fully mastered maze of one’s self. Critically informed, emancipatory thought and action focusing on the mass of misery prevalent in the national domain is thus infinitely suspended and a shallow, superficial, asocial, acontextual, affectatious, insipid self-reflexivity is firmly entrenched in the mental space.

“This colonialism colonizes minds in addition to bodies and it releases forces within the colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once for all” (Nandy,

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1983). This hegemonizing of the mental space, may at best, lead to creation of “secular hierarchies” (p. 9) economically and morally supplanted by the source region of these texts which are never able to genuinely alter the quotient of human misery.

The idea that institutionalized engagement with English literature in a postcolony is not innocuous has been amply covered by the scholarship on the discipline. Vishwanathan (2000), in the preface to a journal that was devoted to this particular issue stated: “the curricular study of English can no longer be studied innocently or inattentively to the deeper contexts of imperialism, transnationalism and globalisation”(p. 13). However, the practice of the discipline, in particular in Pakistan, has remained insular to the spread of such an engagement with literature, which takes into account these deeper contexts. What is emphasized here is that the present state of the discipline in Pakistan does not take into account these deeper contexts of literary study. Moreover, Spivak (1993) uses the metaphor of “poison” for an engagement with English literature alone and which does not take into account familiarity with the vernacular literatures.

Some might say literature offers a broad range of possibilities and that it would be unfair to say it represents western epistemic biases. One might respond by highlighting how even controversies and interpretations remain within the same rules of the game (terms of conversation), the control of knowledge is not called into question.

“modern epistemology (the hubris of the zero point) managed to conceal both and created the figure of a detached observer, a neutral seeker of truth and objectivity who at the same time controls the disciplinary rules and puts himself or herself in a privileged position to evaluate and dictate.”(Mignolo, 2009, p. 4)

Offering solutions to this mental hegemonic enterprise is beyond the scope of this paper. The beginning point however would be “contesting the hegemony of zero-point epistemology.” Consider, for instance, the course on the history of English Literature with a section on “The Age of Reason.” This would strengthen the geography of reason and would place reason in a geo-political locale which is definitely not anywhere near the location of the subject.

Such an engagement compels the subject to classify himself as someone belonging to a history of mental underdevelopment. (Mignolo, 2009, p. 3). Just by changing the content/curriculum, this may not happen. “In order to call into question the modern/colonial foundation of the control of knowledge, it is necessary to focus on the knower rather than on the known. It means to go to the very assumptions that sustain locus enunciations.” (p. 4)

Chatterjee (1998) has highlighted the need for this very task as he says:

“Somehow from the very beginning, we have made a shrewd guess that given the close complicity between modern knowledge and modern regimes of power,

we would for ever remain consumers of universal modernity; never would we be taken serious producers. It is for this reason that we have tried, for over a hundred years, to take our eyes away from this chimera of universal modernity and clear up a space where we might become the creators of our own modernity” (p. 275)

Mignolo (2009) asserts that there is a need to practice "De-colonial thinking" which "presupposes de-linking (epistemically and politically) from the web of imperial knowledge (theo-and ego-politically grounded) from disciplinary management" (p.20). One suggestion which comes to us is from Spivak (1993). She has an antidote to offer whose efficacy has yet to be tested in the Pakistani context. She suggests that in the postcolonial context:

“the teaching of English literature can become critical only if it is intimately yoked to the teaching of the literary or cultural production in the mother tongue(s). In that persistently asymmetrical intimacy, the topos of language learning, in its various forms, can become a particularly productive site. (Spivak, 1993, p. 151)

She thus advocates “the disturbing of the classroom arrangement of material as well as our approach to it” (p. 136).

The discussion logically leads to the conclusion that uncritical continuation of English literary curricula and pedagogy would inevitably lead to cognitive constructions that will not be conducive to our national space. Critical questioning of pedagogic practices of the discipline will lead to a paradigm shift in the pragmatic imaginings of it. The discipline has the potential to strongly impact the minds of those who engage with it and it ought to be used wisely. Such a utility would entail a charting of the fault lines that plague the national sphere and then constructing a curriculum that addresses those concerns in a profound manner. Without tying literature’s role to certain human objectives, the teaching of it by simply following an outdated system would confound the mentalscapes of those who would engage with it and would render them useless in resolving the problems of our national space, which in turn would only result in perpetuation of human misery. How then would English literature, categorized as a discipline in the domain of humanities, would justify its existence if it does not play its part in mitigating human plight?

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