



MECHANICAL TEACHING OF ENGLISH: "KEATS WAS A TUBER"

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ABSTRACT

The current paper makes an attempt to highlight the prejudiced approach of Indians towards English language. The Play under analysis is *Keats Was A Tuber* by Poile Sengupta and the play gives voice to Indian mentality, their approach and comprehension of English, their perception of the English language and literature and all such flavors fume out of the kitchen of the English Department where the play has its focus. Anything and everything that is "ENGLISH" or has something to do with English has been and is considered superior, especially by we Indians, this is like what, somehow our Brains have been conditioned. We fought with the Britishers and forced them out of our country because they had enslaved us, they were imposing, they had taken away our individuality, our identity and many more resources. But if we deeply analyze the situation then we will see that they took our language also along with them.

KEY WORDS: language teaching, art for art sake, Laccan's concept of the other, Identity crisis,

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Different people have different perspectives to it. Some see it as a loss where we Indians feel inferior if our hold on this foreign language is not strong, whereas others see it as a positive thing. We can see it as a binding force that binds a multi lingual country like India into one, English helps people of different states, regions, cultures and communities to communicate with each other, to connect, to understand and to see the world and be with it at par.

But unfortunately our perspective and approach towards English is not right always. Instead of seeing it as a mode of communication that is functional in almost all parts of the world, we have made it something which is beyond the reach of many. We have associated status and class with it. Having respect for a language is one thing but

getting enchanted with it so much so as to forget one's own roots is something else and is surely not a good sign.

Most of the children know nothing about English Language until they go to schools and that too if they are lucky enough to join a private school because in Government schools elementary English is also introduced very late. It is because English is not our mother tongue. Our parents do not speak in English the way they speak in Hindi and hence when we are introduced to English in schools as a subject it sounds very heavy, very perplexing and something for which we have to invest lots of efforts to acquire. It doesn't come to us as naturally as our mother tongue Hindi.

Our history stands witness to the fact that English is a legacy gifted to us by Lord Macaulay,

when in his famous Minute on Indian Education, on 2nd February he declared, "we must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern --- a class of persons Indian in blood and color, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect .To that class may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich

Those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the western nomenclature and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population." These lines speak out very clearly about the evaluation and value of English and Hindi in the minds of Britishers and this is how it entered the sub conscious of the Indians too. And from here started the never ending race of an Indian to upgrade himself, to change and reform his lifestyle, to be considered a rational and a respectable entity.

The Play under analysis is "Keats Was A Tuber" by Poile Sengupta and the play gives voice to such Indian mentality, their approach and comprehension of English, their perception of the English language and literature and all such flavors fume out of the kitchen of the English Department where the play has its focus.

".....or have we inherited an entire civilization, an alien sensibility
That has seduced us from the culture to which we were born? Have we
Enchanted so as to wander forever homeless? (145)

Now this is a big question that we encounter when we look at English language in context of India .English has become more than a language, it is a lifestyle, it is a way of thinking, it adds to our class, it is a barometer of our knowledge, it automatically infuses a sense of pride in the one who is an adept in this language and even the ones who feel that they are the experts in this language.

The play opens in the staffroom of a degree college where we hear a conversation between two English teachers and come to know about how the staff of other departments treats the English Department.

NATHAN: I have got sick and tired of this nonsense. First they spray ink

On it, then they draw obscene pictures, now.....fling it in their faces
We do not need it.

IYER: Perhaps we should not admit defeat that easily. (149)

This conversation shows the attitude of the students and perhaps even the staff members of other departments towards the English department. By spraying ink or writing and making obscene pictures over the board indicating English Department they are either trying to crush the supremacy that the faculty members of English department tend to assume or they they are trying to pacify their own internal struggle to feel at par with the ones who are eloquent in English. This can also be compared to "The Swadeshi movement" where Indians burnt everything that was Non – Indian or of Britishers .This was done in order to promote the Indian or The Swadeshi products and boycott everything that was Foreign. So here incase of the English Department the sign board of the department was at times broken, sometimes knocked down, sometimes ink was sprayed and other such insulting things were done in order to degrade and shatter its supremacy which is not done with the positive aim of promoting the swadeshi product ie Hindi language in this case. So this is not a constructive activity, the purpose here is not to encourage Hindi but just a means of tackling one's own inferiority.

Another striking feature of the English and English syllabi taught in our schools and colleges is its purpose and objective .with the same set of chapters in literature, the same set of novels year after year, the same questions asked in the evaluative exams, somewhere the teachers teaching English also tend to lose the zeal and they are also confined to the the same age old content without a stream of fresh air. English literature and Language both have inherent creativity, intellect and it is infused with ideas which need to be dealt with zeal and enthusiasm. but in the absence of change and revival the content becomes static and stagnant.hence the teachers of this subject also are not able to deliver anything new , innovative and interesting.The same thing comes to light when we hear Mrs.Nathan say the following words to Mr.Iyer:

NATHAN : Then let me tell you something Mr. Iyer.

He is capable of teaching even us,.....He has read the latest English Literature books.He will be like the new wind that sweeps Us clean.

Poile Sengupta has very beautifully and rationally painted the picture of contemporary English departments in our country and its inmates ice the teachers. Unfortunately the pain doesn't end here. The students who opt for English as their Subject are rarely the ones who are in love with this beautiful language but are mostly the ones who find themselves failing to handle the other available options. Hence the students in most of the Bachelor's and Master's degrees in English are the ones who take up English because they are not eligible for other subjects like Science and Commerce. This adds to the darkness and makes it a vicious circle, where lack of inquisition and zeal from the students makes the teachers also inactive and teaching Shakespeare and Browning becomes a tuition Class where students are made to mug up answers and donot learn to appreciate such literary classics. This is brought out by Sengupta through the symbolic words of Mr. Dennis:

DENNIS : Mrs Nathan you wound me.....and talk instead of the death of the English Department...the....(pg152)

DENNIS : "Ah Yes. class. Fifty empty vessels to be filled with Immortal longings.....(p.152)

These words of Dr.Dennis not only point at the symbolic death of the English Department which should otherwise be brimming with life but also satirizes

The mental state and approach towards the subject of the contemporary students.

Similar flavor can be tasted in the words of Sarla and Raghu , (relatively new and young teachers of English)where it comes to light that being a teacher no more means a continuous Endeavour of enhancing one's knowledge and updating with the latest facts and figures .If as a teacher one is teaching selected works of Chaucer and Shakespeare then he will be restricted to the those few works only throughout his life , there will be no

effort on his part to update himself with the latest literary creations and contemporary dramatists, authors or poets, which is not a healthy sign not only for English literature but also for the entire teaching fraternity.

SARLA : "....He is very senior.He has been a lecturer for twenty, Twenty- one years.

RAGHU: "So he knows all his stuff is it?"

SARLA : "The syllabus is the same ,you know.it has not changed for so many years .Dr Dennis.....he has all the notes from those Days itself.....He is a very good lecturer.(pg 156)

The Dramatist also throws light on the reading and teaching methodology that should be followed for appreciating literature .Here she points towards "THE ART FOR SAKE OF ART" theory which says that a piece of art is meant to entertain and to please the senses and it should be looked at like this only .We should not try to attach unnecessary motives and draw unwanted conclusions from it.

Some students are in a habit of reading the critical notes and help books before they actually read the Novel or Drama or a poem and hence they make a preconceived notion about the author and his work even before they have read the actual text which is again a wrong practice.

DAMINI : ".....You told me not to look at any critical notes....

Before I read the book....read the text, Damini. Read

The text first."(pg161)

Poile Sengupta has also tried to illuminate the concept of literature. What most people and students think about literature is that anything which is written in English language becomes literature. This undermines the real value of literature. whereas literature "goes beyond the question of language". As Damini says:

DAMINI : "....I have realized that literature goes beyond the Question of language. It has to more withthe Experience, I think. With what a poet or somebody With that kind of mind sees or feels. Wordsworth saw Something utterly beautiful and he wrote about it In the only language he knew."(pg164)

So we the readers of English literature and the students of English literature and even the teaching fraternity can very well and easily relate with the drama and certain subconsciously raised questions are both raised and answered well by the dramatist.

The play deals with another very important issue and that is the relationship amongst teachers ie people of the same fraternity. This topic was very beautifully taken up by Terrence Rattigan in his work "The Browning Version" which is an excerpt from "The Browning Version" a translation of Browning of the Greek tragedy, "Agamemnon." In this play the equation between teachers is brought out by the behavior of a teacher namely Frank towards another senior teacher namely Crocker Harris, and it is one of jealousy and hatred. Frank enjoys when a young student Taplow in his ignorance makes fun of his otherwise knowledgeable and senior teacher Crocker Harris, and wishes deep within that the student should continue to mock at him. Similar cases of unhealthy competition, jealousy, superiority complex, bullying of fresher's or junior teachers by the senior ones can be seen in education institutions around us. Sengupta has also shown this attitude of the teaching fraternity through her characters. For instance in the following conversation between the teachers it is very much evident:

RAGHU: I did not like the tone of voice you used with me

Mr Iyer....front of a student.I am a member of this department .

A colleague.

IYER: You are no colleague of mine till you have proved yourself.

RAGHU: Is that a threat?

IYER: If you choose to think so.(166)

We also find certain arrows pointing towards the changed portfolios of the contemporary teachers these days where their task is not confined to mere teaching and their students rather they are expected to do a dozen other jobs that affects their productivity as a teacher.the statement by Nathan reflects upon this:

NATHAN: seventy grammar books....staff meeting in the afternoon.I am Going mad.(167)

Sengupta also satirises the teaching methodology for English.The kind of texts that have been prescribed have no relevance and hence students find it hard to follow.the playwright also raises an important point here and that is our failure to relate and accept English language as our own. We see English as the culture of the invaders and this comes to the fore when the narrator says "Their voice echo in the languages I hear, I taste their seasoning in the food I eat. I claim them as my own. Why is it that the English Legacy divides my being so unbearably?"(169)

The focus of teachers has shifted from real teaching to just completing the syllabus.

NATHAN: And I beg of you ,Don't give them grand lectures on communism and Karl Marx and what not.

RAGHU: why shouldn't I do that?I am expanding their minds,helping them grow That's what teaching is about.Real Teaching.Not this cramming.....

By heart ! mug up!....Keats was a tuber.....is that all you can tell them About Keats?....(168)

A pinch of humour comes up when the dramatist brings to the fore the various connotations of the English words and how they are misunderstood. The depth, intensity and dimensions of the English words like "Sweet heart", "Darling" are questioned, wherein the use of words like sweetheart and darling are light hearted affections for Raghu but for Nathan and his sister these words signify Love. It is really weird to see that Nathan who is a lecturer in English himself ridicules English education by saying "...This is what comes of your so called English education.....girls running behind boys and boys running behind girls."(171)

Ego,Pride and prejudice of teachers towards students who are not under them is brought out by the conversation between Raghu and Nathan.

NATHAN: Why are you giving books to Damini? She is Mr,Iyers student.

RAGHU:She seems to be very intelligent girl and sensitive to literature Unlike the kind of students that I have.(172)

The point of view of Indian Parents and their perception towards English language is brought out through the play, when Nathan tells Raghu:

“.....their parents are educating them with great difficulty.

they think if these children learn English they stand a better Chance of getting jobs.”(173)

The playwright not only raises questions and problems concerned with teaching and learning English rather she sounds suggestive too, for she offers productive strategy of dealing with it. The purpose of teaching English in classes is not jst making the students Mug up a set of questions and then expecting them to vomit it out on the examination sheet,rather our purpose it to teach them how to communicate effectively in this language and make them able so that they can appreciate English literature. sengupta suggests in the play through the words of her characters:

RAGHU:we put small pieces of prose pieces which allow our students

To learn language skills that they can use in their immediate Environment(174)

SARLA: giggles.....

RAGHU: and we simulate real life situations in the classroom.....weave together their knowledge of English vocabulary, sentence structure....on(174)

Through Iyer’s words Sengupta tells us how weak students are made to undertake tough projects in English with a purpose to help them learn whereas the fact is that this strategy further weakens and discourages the students.hence it is very important to propound an effective strategy to help weak students have a better command over the language. Poile Sengupta directs the teachers that they should always encourage curiosity, inquisition and thinking and questioning among their students.

NATHAN: why are you wasting so much of time on this Sarla? Are you teaching History or English?

SARLA:my students want to know, Mrs Nathan.....they ask me so many questions, my head goes round and round.(183)

RAGHU: Telling them to think.Telling them to use those heads .IS that wrong?(184)

The playwright sends across another very important message and that is “Authority comes with responsibility and accountability” and hence headship and the medal being a Senior does not mean exhibiting superiority over the others rather as “the head of the department you should be the one who helps.Seniority and experience should bring along responsibility and a lot of enlightenment for the others and not superiority ,rigidness and class barriers.as Raghu says:

RAGHU:As head of the department I think it’s your duty to

Help a junior colleague.....(185)

Since English is not generally taught the way we are introduced to our own mother tongue ie Hindi it always sounds cumbersome and tiresome project to learn this foreign language, and unfortunately we can see that in the pursuit of running behind this language half heartedly we land up into a situation wherw we see us failing in learning or acquiring any of the two languages be completely be it English or hindi for that matter.As the narrator has aptly said in the play”My English upbringing failed to cope up with my Indian Experience”(195)

Learning new language other than your own mother tongue is an accomplishment an achievement but learning it and forgetting one’s roots is not a trait that shall ever be appreciated by the civilized and sensible lot, Evaluatng One’s self and others, or determining one’s social class or standing on the basis of one’s expertise or hold on the foreign language is a huge error , it is almost likr losing one’s identity. English was introduced as already discussed in the paper by Lord Macaulay or the British Government In India to carry out their own administration smoothly but majority of us mistook it as a status symbol and started differentiating between the Haves And Have nots..to specify here the Haves are the ones who are fluent and adept n English and Have nots are those who can hardly put two words together properly and this led to an unending race of proving one’s self as

efficient by trying to prove as a better speaker and writer in English which is unfortunately a wrong Parameter of judging Ones efficiency. So loss of Identity is another branch which emerges from the English tree.

Miranda:“....I pitied thee,took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each one thing or the other.when thou didst not,savage, know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like a thing most brutish, I endow’d thy purposes with words that made them known.....”

Caliban:“You Taught Me language,and my profit on’t is, I know how to curse. The red Plague rid you for learning me your language. (The Tempes,Act I, Sceneii)

Now these words can be looked at in a different light..Mirandas teaching of language to the Savage Caliban was to make the affairs smoother but Caliban used it only to curse similarly we have or are using this foreign language as a curse for those poor Indians who donot have access to acquire this language,by demeaning them,embarrassing them,not respecting them not treating them as equals. So lets not do this ..which reminds us of the Wordsworthisn remorse-----“And much it grieves my heart to think that what man has made of man”

And have we ever realized in this process of running breathlessly after this foreign language what are we doing to our own mother tongue. I wonder but it should not come to you dear readers as a surprise .Ask your little children who go to play schools to recite the letters of the Alphabet and they will do it with great ease and now ask them to recite the Hindi Phonetic sounds or letters and I am sure they will be startled and perplexed at your very question. So what are we doing to our Mother Land? In pursuit of running behind foreign allurements we are snatching away her own offshoots and this is really painful for our motherland. This can be compared to the play Macbeth wherein lady Macbeth experiences a similar pain when she says:

I have given Suck,and know
How tender’tis to love the babe that milks me—
.....
.....

Have Plucked my nipple from his boneless
Gums And Dashed the brains
out.....

If we compare the suckling mother as our motherland and the baby as the mother tongue then the language losing its importance, its roots and its identity because of the overshadowing or overpowering of another language would cause the same pain to mother land as it would cause to a suckling mother whose child is taken away from her.

This deep desire to learn and acquire English by hook or crook can also be seen in the lacanian light .Lacan’s three concepts of Need, demand and desire which correspond to three phases in which humans develop. Now this desire for otherness is like a hole in the self. Lacan says that these ideas of other and lack and absences, of Misidentification of self with other are all worked out on an individual level. We Indians have a deep desire to be like the whites to ape them , to be like them like Biju In “The Inheritance Of loss” by Anita Desai had a deep desire to be like the “Angrez Biju Flies to America to overcome his His Lack, to fill the holes in the self, to make up for the absences in the Self.. Fanon Has also made it clear that “ the white Man is not only the other but also the the master,whether real or imaginary” (Fanon,1967:138). Whiteness gets equated with power and he aspires to be angrez ki tarah.” (Desai,2006:105)similarly we Indians are running behind this other, and for us this other is the English language , English accent and Pronunciation and vocabulary.But let not this Mad race for the other pull out our roots and make us rootless. With this word of caution lets enjoy the different languages by learning them only to unite with others, to appreciate their literatures and not just to prove others that we are superiors.

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