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Decolonizing the Critical Imagination: Contemporary Indian Literary Criticism in English at a Crossroads

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Abstract: This paper examines the position of literary criticism written in English in India and argues that, despite its long history and considerable volume, it has rarely been studied as an autonomous and evolving critical tradition. Histories of Indian writing in English have generally privileged poetry, fiction and drama, while the work of Indian critics and the changing forms of critical practice have received comparatively limited attention. The paper identifies a persistent dependence on Anglo-American and, later, Euro-American critical models as one of the central problems of the field. It also considers the consequences of applying imported theoretical frameworks to Indian literary and cultural materials without sufficient modification. At the same time, the paper recognizes important attempts to recover Indian classical poetics, develop nativist and folk aesthetics, articulate Dalit poetics, and create productive conversations between Indian and Western traditions. Contemporary Indian literary criticism in English, therefore, may be understood not simply as a derivative discourse but as a field at a crossroads: one that must negotiate the pressures of global theory while developing culturally responsive modes of reading. The paper concludes that decolonizing criticism does not require the rejection of Western theory; rather, it calls for critical self-awareness, contextual adaptation, and the recovery and creation of intellectual resources capable of speaking from Indian locations.

This paper addresses three related questions:

- Why has Indian critical practice in English often appeared derivative?
- Why has it remained substantially Anglo-centric or Euro-American in orientation?
- And why have successive Western critical trends frequently been adopted without adequate transformation in relation to Indian literary, linguistic and cultural contexts?

Keywords: Critical tradition, Western academia, Indian critical practice.

Introduction

Literary criticism in English has been practised in India for well over a century, yet it has not received the kind of sustained historical and meta-critical attention accorded to other forms of Indian writing in English. Surveys of Indian English literature commonly devote substantial space to poetry, fiction and drama, but the contribution of critics is often treated only incidentally. Consequently, it remains difficult to trace, in a systematic manner, the major phases, debates, schools and methodological shifts that have shaped Indian literary criticism in English. This absence is significant because criticism is not merely secondary commentary on literature; it is also a form of knowledge that determines what is read, how it is valued, and which intellectual traditions are authorized within the academy.

The problem becomes more complex when one examines the institutional history of English studies in India. Critical practice in Indian universities has developed within structures deeply influenced by colonial education and by continuing intellectual exchanges with British and American academia. Aijaz Ahmad describes this relationship as one of profound institutional dependence, arguing that knowledge produced in metropolitan universities often becomes immediately authoritative within the Indian university, especially in the teaching of English (Ahmad [1992] 1994, 44). The question, therefore, is not whether Indian criticism has engaged with Western thought—it inevitably has—but whether that engagement has produced independent critical thinking or merely reproduced frameworks generated elsewhere.

This paper addresses three related questions: Why has Indian critical practice in English often appeared derivative? Why has it remained substantially Anglo-centric or Euro-American in orientation? And why have successive Western critical trends frequently been adopted without adequate transformation in relation to Indian literary, linguistic and cultural contexts? These questions lead to a larger concern: what might constitute a more self-reflexive, plural and decolonized critical practice in India?

From Anglo-Centrism to Euro-American theory

A striking feature of the history of Indian literary criticism in English is the degree to which its dominant methods have followed developments in British and American criticism. Before the widespread institutional arrival of literary theory, Indian criticism frequently adopted biographical, moral, historical and textual approaches associated with British literary studies. With the expansion of theory from the 1980s onward, the centre of influence widened from Britain to a broader Euro-American intellectual world.

Structuralism, poststructuralism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism, postcolonialism and other theoretical formations entered Indian classrooms largely through English-language translations, commentaries, anthologies and academic publishing networks.

Borrowing, of course, is not in itself an intellectual weakness. No critical tradition develops in isolation. The problem arises when borrowing becomes substitution—when concepts created within one historical and cultural location are transferred to another without examining their assumptions, limits or relevance. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan notes the predominance of borrowed frameworks, concepts and methodologies in the critical apparatus of Indian English studies (Rajan 2004, xii). Such dependence can turn theory into a ready-made vocabulary rather than a method of inquiry.

The result is often an applicational model of criticism. A theoretical framework is first selected and a literary text is then made to illustrate it. In such work, the critic's task risks becoming the demonstration of a theory already assumed to be valid. The literary text, instead of challenging or modifying the theoretical model, becomes evidence for it. This reverses one of the most productive possibilities of criticism: that the encounter with a text or cultural experience may compel theory itself to change.

The problem of intellectual lag and repetitive importation

A second difficulty concerns the temporal gap between theoretical developments in Euro-American universities and their institutional adoption in India. Critical movements often reach syllabi, dissertations and academic discussions after they have already undergone substantial debate or revision in the contexts from which they emerged. C. D. Narasimhaiah's dismissive reference to Indian critics as 'carbon copies' of figures such as Matthiessen, Blackmur and Leavis, quoted by Kapil Kapoor, sharply captures the anxiety surrounding imitation in Indian English studies (Kapoor 2001, 5).

The problem, however, is not simply that a theory arrives 'late.' Intellectual traditions need not move according to a single metropolitan timetable. The more serious issue is the manner of reception. When the newest theoretical fashion is treated as intrinsically superior to earlier approaches, the Indian academy can become trapped in a repetitive cycle of replacement: one imported vocabulary is displaced by another before either has been sufficiently tested against local literary realities. Kapoor similarly observes that successive Anglo-American schools have repeatedly been fitted to Indian literary material with little modification or adaptation (2001, 5).

This tendency has consequences for curriculum design, research methodology and evaluation. It may encourage scholars to ask questions that arise primarily from metropolitan academic debates rather than from the linguistic, social and aesthetic complexities of Indian texts. It can also create a hierarchy in which theoretical sophistication is measured by familiarity with the latest imported terminology. Under such conditions, criticism risks becoming a performance of theoretical currency rather than a sustained engagement with literature.

The question of cultural relevance

The uncritical application of imported frameworks is especially problematic in a multilingual and culturally heterogeneous society such as India. Much English-language academic criticism circulates within metropolitan institutions and is shaped by texts accessible to an English-educated readership. Oral traditions, folk forms, regional literatures and culturally specific aesthetic practices can therefore remain marginal to theoretical discussion or appear only after being translated into categories recognized by global academic discourse.

This is not an argument for cultural isolation or for the claim that Western theories are incapable of illuminating Indian texts. Feminism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism and postcolonial theory, among others, have opened important questions within Indian literary studies. Yet their usefulness depends upon critical mediation. Concepts must be placed in conversation with caste, community, language, region, oral tradition, religious practice, indigenous knowledge and other historically specific structures. A framework becomes intellectually productive when the object of study is allowed to resist it. The rhetoric of the 'global' also requires scrutiny. What is described as international theory can sometimes refer primarily to ideas that have acquired institutional authority in Euro-American universities and publishing networks. When this limited geography of knowledge is mistaken for universality, other intellectual traditions become supplementary rather than constitutive. Decolonizing criticism therefore requires attention not only to what theories say but also to the routes through which theories acquire prestige and become academically normative.

Recovering Indian critical resources

The critique of Eurocentrism becomes meaningful only when it is accompanied by serious engagement with India's own traditions of literary thought. Indian poetics possesses a long and sophisticated history concerned with language, aesthetic experience, suggestion, emotion, style, propriety and the relation between literature and human response. Concepts associated with *rasa* and *dhvani*, among others, demonstrate that reflection on literary form and meaning did not begin in India with the institutional arrival of English studies.

The earlier tradition also understood critical competence as demanding wide learning. The source paper invokes the idea of *Vyutpatti* to suggest the critic's cultivated knowledge and intellectual discipline. Such a conception is valuable because it refuses to reduce criticism to the mechanical use of a single method. The critic must possess linguistic sensitivity, historical understanding, cultural knowledge and the capacity for judgment.

At the same time, the recovery of Indian poetics should not become a simple reversal of Eurocentrism. Classical theories cannot automatically be treated as timeless or universally applicable to every modern text. To replace the unquestioned authority of Western theory with the unquestioned authority of Sanskrit poetics would reproduce the same methodological problem in another form. Recovery must therefore involve reinterpretation: older concepts should be studied historically, tested critically and reworked where necessary for contemporary literary materials.

Beyond a binary: toward plural critical traditions

Contemporary Indian criticism in English already reveals several responses to this challenge. One tendency continues to work primarily through Euro-American critical methods. A second seeks to retrieve and elaborate Indian classical poetics. A third attempts a comparative or synthetic approach, bringing Indian and Western traditions into dialogue in the search for an integrative aesthetics. Nativist criticism, meanwhile, turns toward local, indigenous, popular and folk cultural resources. Dalit poetics and other socially grounded critical formations challenge both elite classical traditions and imported theoretical universals by insisting on the epistemic significance of lived experience, social location and historically silenced voices.

The coexistence of these approaches suggests that Indian literary criticism in English is not a single, homogeneous discourse. It is better understood as a contested field in which different ideas of literature, culture, knowledge and critical authority compete with one another. Eurocentric approaches, East-West syntheses, nativist aesthetics, folk criticism and Dalit poetics do not simply represent alternative 'schools'; they embody different answers to the question of where critical categories should come from and whose experience should authorize them.

This plurality should be treated as a strength rather than as evidence of theoretical confusion. The future of Indian criticism may lie neither in returning to a supposedly pure indigenous past nor in continuing to import theoretical systems unchanged. It may instead emerge from encounters among traditions—encounters in which neither side is exempt from questioning. Such a practice would allow Indian texts and experiences not merely to receive theory but also to produce it.

Decolonization as critical practice

The call for decolonization is sometimes misunderstood as a demand to discard Western thought. Such a response would be both impractical and intellectually restrictive. Indian English studies has been historically constituted through encounters among languages, cultures and intellectual traditions. Decolonization, therefore, is better understood as a transformation of the terms of engagement. It asks who produces concepts, which institutions authorize them, how they travel, what they exclude, and what happens when they encounter different cultural realities.

A decolonized critical practice would consequently require at least three forms of intellectual responsibility. First, it would read imported theories historically rather than treating them as neutral universal tools. Second, it would recover Indian and regional critical traditions without romanticizing them or ignoring their exclusions. Third, it would encourage scholars to generate concepts from the literary and cultural materials they study. In this sense, the goal is not simply to add Indian examples to existing theories but to allow Indian texts, languages and experiences to reshape the theoretical questions themselves. Such an approach also has pedagogic implications. Students of literature in India should encounter Western criticism, but they should encounter it alongside Indian aesthetic traditions, regional critical histories, Dalit thought, folk and oral aesthetics, and contemporary debates on caste, gender, language and cultural location. The classroom can then become a space where theories are compared, tested and revised rather than merely transmitted.

Conclusion

Contemporary Indian literary criticism in English stands at a significant intellectual crossroads. Its history bears the imprint of colonial education and of continuing dependence on British and American academic institutions. This history helps explain the recurrent adoption of Anglo-American and Euro-American critical models and the tendency of criticism to become applicational rather than theoretically generative. Yet to describe the field only as derivative would overlook the important efforts already underway to recover Indian poetics, develop nativist and folk aesthetics, articulate Dalit poetics, and create new forms of dialogue between intellectual traditions.

The task before Indian criticism is therefore not to choose between 'India' and 'the West' as mutually exclusive alternatives. It is to develop the confidence and methodological discipline to engage both critically. Western theories may be borrowed, but borrowing must involve translation, contestation and transformation. Indian traditions may be recovered, but recovery must involve historical scrutiny and contemporary rethinking. The aim is a critical practice in which Indian literary and cultural realities participate in the production of concepts rather than merely serving as material upon which imported concepts are applied.

Makarand Paranjape argues that it is necessary to formulate India's differences from the West and to inhabit those differences as a possible 'uncolonized space' (1994, 72). Such a space need not be imagined as culturally sealed or intellectually pure. More productively, it can be understood as a space of critical autonomy: a space from which scholars can converse with multiple traditions without surrendering the right to question, modify or reject them. The decolonization of Indian literary criticism, in this sense, is not an end point but an ongoing practice of intellectual self-examination, contextual reading and theoretical creation.

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