

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

ISSN-2321-7065



Editor-in-Chief

Volume V, Issue IV April 2017

www.ijellh.com

[About Us](#) | [Editorial Board](#) | [Submission Guidelines](#) | [Call for Paper](#) | [Paper](#)

[Submission](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Terms & Condition](#) | [More.....](#)

ISSN :2455-0108

[IJO-Science](#)

(INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL ONLINE OF SCIENCE)

**TANGLED: A CRITIQUE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN INDIAN
CLASSROOMS THROUGH POILE SENGUPTA'S *KEATS WAS A
TUBER***

DR. KOMIL TYAGI

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR

**MCMDAV COLLEGE FOR WOMEN, CHANDIGARH
INDIA**

“In 1835, Lord Macaulay, in his ‘Minute on Education’ wrote: We have to educate a people who cannot at present, be educated by means of their mother tongue. We must teach them some foreign language...Thus was born in Macaulay’s words: a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect. And thus I was formed, wearing Macaulay motley, my skin brown, my mind English pale” (KWT 181-82).

The legacy gifted to us by the British East India Company in the form of English Language has been accepted graciously by Indians but is adapted every now and then, to suit the demands of our ever evolving school and college classrooms in India. The teachers of English language execute a mammoth task as they teach not only a language but also an ideology. In the early part of the twentieth century, the English language was considered as a potential tool to unite our country that was fragmented by a thousand socio-cultural identities. Contrariwise, it has become a tool of hegemony and has burnt the bridges between many cultures. It was firmly believed that learning of this language will transform the life of many, even though Indian sensibilities have always seen a clash with the imperialism imposed by this Language. Despite vacillating between the contrasting forces of accepting and negating the language, the love for it still continues to escalate. The teachers and students of English language and literature live in an unfamiliar world that plays tug of war with their identities as they belong to a country that was once a colony to the empire that brought the language along. The paper attempts to study similar issues through Poile Sengupta’s play *Keats was a Tuber*. Written in 1996, the play discusses the complex structure and convoluted relationship of English Language and Literature, its teachers and students in an Indian Classroom.

The play opens with the narrator, a woman of thirty five years who believes that it is a privilege to speak to the audience as a teacher of English from India. She rips her sensibilities and knowledge to make the listeners aware of the oscillatory position of the average Indian that chooses 'to be or not to be' English. She tries to refocus the Eurocentric lenses that the receivers and teachers of the English language wear, and how it has affected the overall vision over a century. The narrator therefore becomes the mouthpiece of almost every Indian whose mother tongue is not English.

WOMAN: English is not my language. It is not the language that my grandparents and parents speak at home. In fact I do not think I knew anything of English before I went to school. But my grandparents, born when India was still a British colony, attributed the glory of the British to the power of their language and sent me when I was five to a school run by Franciscan nuns...English is now the language of my thoughts, it is the language of my reason, the language I use for loving. My perceptions are finer, my judgments more subtle, the range and depth of my emotions seem to be much greater in this language than in any other. What is it then that I and all those like me have inherited? A mode of communication that is functional in many, perhaps in most, parts of the world? Or have we inherited an entire civilization, an alien sensibility that has seduced us from the culture to which we were born? Have we been enchanted so as to wander forever homeless? (*KWT*, 145)

The opening piece of narration brings forth the predicament of all Indians who do not have English as a medium of dialogue at home but have it as a mandatory medium of instruction at school and college. After years of schooling in the language, it seeps in gradually and because of its global usability, it is used more frequently by the receiver than any other native language. With time, the process of thinking is affected as well. The mind responds more readily to this medium of communication and the reliance on mother tongue is slowly reduced. Resultantly, a rift is created between the two languages which are off springs of two different ideologies. This fissure is more evident in countries that were once the colonies of the British and that is evident through the play.

The action of the play begins in the staff room of a department of English of a reputed provincial college. Mr. Iyer, an old professor and a staunch custodian of English language and literature is seen putting the departmental room in order. He is a mentor to many young fellow colleagues and deserving students. He strikes a conversation with Ms. Sarala, a young

recruit who is yet to find her roots. They discuss detailed and non-detailed texts, Elizabeth Barret Browning and in a brief conversation Mr Iyer's expertise over the subject is established. The scene moves forward as Mrs. Nathan, the head of the department bombards the room with her commanding presence. She is a strict disciplinarian and keeps an account of everyone's classes and time table. She shares her concern about a new teacher. There was a vacancy against a temporary post which she fills up with her nephew, Mr. Raghu Krishnan. She promotes his case, not only because he is a relative but also because he has applied for a Ph. D. in English at a Canadian University. She advocates her case, "He is capable of teaching even us. He has read latest English literature books. He will be like a new wind that sweeps us clean" (*KWT* 151). And, he lives up to all that Mrs. Nathan promotes about him, as he is adored by one and all. Mr. Raghu, an apprentice in the field of teaching, believes that language should be respected for its functionality rather than its grandeur, and he is a happy mean between the archaic English language and the lucid communication model. He strikes a literary chord with Dr. Dennis, an old professor who endorses English mannerisms in every way.

The student or in this play; the epicenter, is a third year student of Elective English Honours course, Damini, a young girl with vivid dreams like the narrator's. She is trying to bridge the gap between the Indian roots beneath her feet and the English wings she wishes to acquire. She is often spotted in the departmental staff room as she is made to believe that it is the quietest place for any kind of intellectual discussion. She often discusses questions about justifying the title of a text and is repeatedly reprimanded by Mr Iyer, "...do not look at critical notes or comments before you read a book. Read the text, Damini, read the text first" (*KWT* 161). This is one statement that all teachers of English at various colleges and universities would identify with, as this is what they often have to say to their pupils. The play takes many unexpected twists and turns as Ms. Sarala commits suicide because she is unable to marry Mr. Raghu. The audience is made to believe that the narrator is none other than Damini, years after her graduation. She presents the audience or the reader the chaos of choosing between the English language (and whatever baggage it brings along) and the native language, something what almost all Indians have experienced.

Initially, Indians learnt the language to facilitate the communication between the ruler and the ruled but somewhere down the ages, it percolated as a symbol of imperialism for many and a medium of being 'one of them' for others. And since then, the inconclusiveness has continued. The bitter attitude regarding this language could be felt when the first speech of

independent India was delivered by its then prime minister in a language that majority of Indian population could not understand then. However, 'Tryst with Destiny' is considered a popular document as it came from a freedom fighter born in India (but bred in English culture) and the words were silver-tongued in a way that they fascinated every Indian that could comprehend English. It is a cherished text and is considered a masterpiece, irrespective of the fact that it could not be understood by the ordinary Indian then. This could lead to an understanding that Indians have not just been taught English language by Received Pronunciation Method but also through the means of a 'Received Culture process' by thousands of teachers who have never been to the roots of this language. They receive a half-baked knowledge of its origins but establish its magnificence among students. The narrator feels the same, "When I think of myself then, as a student of English Literature, I am filled with amazement at how much insight I was given into a foreign culture by teachers who had never seen England, who had never known a snowbound winter and who could never have understood the triumphant joy of English springtime" (KWT 213).

In fact, the Indians were fairly mesmerized by the English language for so long that they were unwilling to change the syllabus for years. Sarala underlines this problem by pointing out that the syllabus has been the same for many years and the same antiquated English classics continue as texts in classrooms for years. This brings us to the center of another debate; whether we should only study authors from English countries as they are the authentic fountainheads of the language or should we study the contemporary Indian authors writing in English. Many universities are still probing it and some have made need-based modifications in the syllabi. In Asian countries, another challenge is to make a balance in the syllabus between the functionality of the language and the literature offered to the students. If the average Indian student is to learn English language to facilitate communiqué then a greater emphasis should be laid on communication skills rather than teaching representative authors. Once a language is learnt, then its classic literature can be enjoyed. However, in Indian classrooms the focus is on literature first and the functional part of language remains either largely ignored or comes at a much later stage. This is apparent in the play as well:

RAGHU: First of all, this non-detailed text. It should be avoided. We put together small prose pieces which allow our students to learn language skills that they can use in their immediate environment.

SARALA: Oh Raghu. You are sounding so much like sir.

RAGHU: And we simulate real life situations in the classroom where they have to weave together their knowledge of English vocabulary, sentence structure, the question form and so on.

NATHAN: Raghu, you are again talking of big issues. We are a small department in a small college. How can we...

DENNIS: Sigh no more, syllabus, sigh no more, men were deceivers ever. (KWT, 174)

Due to this flawed approach of education boards and universities regarding the pattern of the syllabus, a divide has been created among learners. There is a vast majority of population in India that still struggles with the language in the English classroom where as there are others who have been possessed by it. Several initiate their thought process in it, some are lost in it, some others strain to learn it and some become completely averse to it, but there is none that is not affected. The narrator seems to second the fact, "The history of my land, of all lands that have been colonized, is uncannily like the progress of a sexual conquest. Desire. Advance. Invasion. Possession... The act of possession is an imperial talent, the mark of the conqueror, Tenzing's foot on the highest summit, the English alphabet in Indian classrooms" (KWT, 213). This language brought with it more than what was expected of it. It brought along endeavor and as the narrator puts it, 'desire' was its appendage. It is the most sought after language in India and it gradually led to an 'advance'. As the language is highly practical, it advanced to cast an 'invasion'. It invaded the average Indian middle class as it entered the Indian education system as a compulsory language. It is a mandatory subject at primary, senior and undergraduate levels of education and it leads to 'possession'. The students of all grades are possessed by it in various ways; some are torn apart from their native language in a Caesarian fashion, some strike a balance while some are either completely drowned in it or because of it. The students of English language and literature have always found themselves oscillating between acceptance of the language as their own which also entails the imbibing of its Eurocentric culture and, negation of it as something that takes them away from their roots of Indian-ness. Damini, the most meritorious scholar of the college shares a similar perplexity with her teacher:

DAMINI: Sir... sometimes I feel so divided in myself. As if I was two people. I read Jane Austen and Wordsworth and everything they say is like a jewel. And then my family talks to me and they seem to be using words that don't have any meaning anymore.

IYER: I have felt that too.

DAMINI: And what did you do, sir?

IYER: I made a choice, a difficult one...I chose my books and spurned the family.

DAMINI: Oh sir!...Why...why were we born in India? (*KWT*, 180)

The way the language has created fissures is evident from the conversation. The teachers of English feel that they are transported into another world, a world better than their own, and therefore, always lead a divided life, which in turn sometimes causes familial discord, as in the case of Mr. Iyer. His wife could never understand the English world he lived in which led to a difference of opinion and ultimately, separation. The narrator, who is a teacher of English herself, seconds the fact, "Why is it then that the English legacy divides my being so unbearably? How can I transport myself among the darling buds of May when the sun scorches brown my country and my people? No woman in India would like to be compared to a summer's day" (*KWT*, 169).

Though thousands of lessons are delivered every year in the teaching of English classrooms across India but it is yet to be internalized. It has progressed in India, from a foreign language to a global language but it is yet to become 'our' language. Writers from India writing in English language are often asked as to why they choose English as a medium of expression. However, no such questions are put to writers writing in their native languages which clearly puts a question mark on the acceptance of the language. Damini becomes the voice of many such questions as she asks her teacher as to why she should study something written by an Englishman about some bridge in England that she has never seen. She questions that if she writes a poem in English titled 'Upon Howrah Bridge' would that be included in the syllabus. However, with guidance from Mr. Iyer, she learns that literature goes beyond the question of language and has to do more with experience. She realizes that Wordsworth saw something utterly beautiful and he wrote about it in the only language he knew. She learns from Prof. Iyer that one, who has opted for the study of English literature, must read the works that English minds have produced. If only all students could learn that, the prejudice against the language would condense, but that would require many more mentors like Mr. Iyer.

Teaching of a language is always a complicated task as there is more than meets the eye. The semantics, the syntax and the culture are all interwoven together. It being a second language to many, and third especially to north Indians, it does not come naturally to all, even after

years of learning and teaching. After a round of poetic rhetoric between Mr. Iyer and Mr. Raghu where they quote classic English writers, Sarala mentions, “It is so funny. I only remember poetry quotations in my language, not in English. So many years I have learnt English Literature and now, even though I can teach also, I still can’t remember” (*KWT*, 195). Though majority of Indians are in the process of learning the language since two centuries, the readership is swelling day by day and the acceptance of it in functional terms is rising likewise, but it is yet to become the language of expression of the average Indian student. The narrator seconds it, “In the harsh, clear light of logic, of the rules of law, of morality, I was fenced in, safe with my skills in English language. But when I wanted to express the wildness of the monsoon, when I needed more urgent endearments, when I looked for words as pulsating as passion itself, I found Macaulay had done me wrong. My English upbringing could not cope with my Indian experience” (*KWT*, 195).

Teaching English Language and Literature has always been a challenge in Indian classrooms, in varying forms and degrees, and learning it, isn’t a lesser devil either. The play evokes relevant questions regarding teaching and learning of English language in India. It is unlike any other subject as it is the only language enforced on Indians and is learnt compulsorily in thousands of schools across India. It is the medium of instruction for all professional courses in India and their texts books are available only in English. It is important to pass in the examination of English language, as without it, passing the main course becomes impossible. English language teaching centres set up by Indian or foreign academic bodies are flourishing throughout India by leaps and bounds, as the significance rendered to this language is higher than any other. Indian students are forced to mug up the language and feel that it is compellingly driven into them. They are told that it would ‘improve their prospects’. Prof. Natahan reprimands Mr. Raghu as he ridicules the translation exercise attempted by students. She snubs, “Enough, Quite enough! Don’t you have some shame? These students have come from poor families. Their parents are educating them with great difficulty. They think if these children learn English they stand a better chance of getting jobs” (*KWT* 173). Indian sensibility approaches the English language as supreme, one that has all the potency to fetch jobs and therefore it meets a different fate. The play tries to fill up the gap between those who despise the baggage of this language and those who hold a high regard and deep love for it.

Indian population has used the language and exploited it accordingly to suffice its technological and commercial requirements. There are still many who consider the English

language a Trojan horse and wish to cast revenge on it but it must be realized that it is no more a foreign tongue meant for division of cultures but yet another language meant for dialogue. The users remodel the language for comprehension purposes but to imbibe it completely is impossible, as language is a flowing stream and it can never 'arrive'. The narrator says it all.

WOMAN: I have taken from the English what was his. I have smoothed it and dented it, given it shape, polished it, fashioned it the way I want. And I know I possess it now... My life trembles with meaning and yet whatever I say, the words I use are inadequate, an approximation, But that I realize the inadequacy is my victory too, the wealth that sustains me. Macaulay, I have my revenge after all. Across land and water, over hills and desert, language is travelling. It can never arrive. (*KWT*, 213-214)

It is time that it is accepted that the classrooms of English language and literature are not laboratories of experiment, where subjects are made into hybrid varieties of Indians who are torn apart from their roots to create a new generation that is neither quintessentially English nor Indian. Let the language be learnt, enjoyed and executed as any other subject, so that the desired results are achieved. Let the English language not be a tool to answer back and etch boundaries, but be a bond to disband disparities. Let us not accept the language as a repercussion of imperialism but a medium to comprehend a rainbow of world cultures.

References:

Sengupta, Poile. *Keats Was A Tuber*. 1996. *Women Centre Stage: The Dramatist and the Play*. London: Routledge, 2010. 142- 214. Print.

Abbreviation:

KWT

Keats Was A Tuber