

Should the subject English Literature be replaced by Global Literature?

The study of English Literature in the Anglocentric education system is composed of analysing British and American texts such as Jane Eyre, Frankenstein and more. It is concerned with the exploration of social contexts intertwined with the understanding of authorial intent and reader responses. In the modern world, I believe that the subject English Literature must expand beyond the traditional Western canon as the globalisation of the English language has meant the very definition of American and British literature can no longer be constricted to its geographical precedent but must include multicultural voices. Therefore, the subject English Literature should not be replaced by Global Literature but should rather diversify. The replacement of English Literature suggests there is an underlying problem in its discourse which cannot simply be resolved through World Literature as both must coincide for a more holistic appreciation of literature especially in today's globalised world. Ergo, to answer this question, it is important to consider why we study English Literature.

As Eagleton suggests in his "Literary Theory: An Introduction", the use of language and words are the very medium through which we move just as the way one breathes in air as an unconscious instinct. Consequently, the study of English Literature allows us to navigate the world through understanding the experiences of others and learning to empathise with them. The process of reading is one of inherent identification and it is when literature is put in conversation with its own cultural epoch that the reader can understand the evolution of identity and beliefs. It is through the opposition and subversion to or the compliance and concurrence with ideologies that we discover the narratives that either spite or empower us. If the very definition of literature is a subjective one and if we are to identify and empathise with or entirely condemn the worlds and characters in texts, the literature we study cannot be constrained to the Western literary canon that is primarily constituted by upper-class white men, thus posing the need for a more diverse study of literature ranging from authors of multifarious identities. However, this predicament cannot be resolved by entirely replacing the English Literature with Global Literature as the intrinsic elucidation of the term is rooted in the unity of cultural identities. Prefaced by the creation of 'West-Ostlicher Divan', Goethe coined the term

‘Weltliteratur’ (World Literature) in 1827 as a means of recognising literature beyond the bounds of European canonical works. Therefore, replacing English Literature with World Literature to address the needs of the UK’s thriving multiculturalism implicates that the latter is superior which paradoxically detracts away from the inherent desire to connect individuals by encouraging the embrace of contrariety in civilizations. Because of this paradox, it is important to consider the evolution of English literature as a culminating product of the globalisation of not only ethnic identity but of the language itself.

In the modern world, the role of politics and governmental figures in the study of English Literature is especially significant as they formulate the British curriculum. As Eagleton proposes, the value given to literature is characterised by “the assumptions by which certain social groups exercise and maintain power over others” which is reciprocated in the control of figures such as Michael Gove over the subject English Literature, suggesting they define literature that is worthy of attention and judgement. In 2014, under the pretext of creating a more “nationally centred syllabus”, Gove constricted the English Literature curriculum to the sole analysis of British texts originally written in English in the British Isles to foster a more national focus. If the study of literature is based upon the approval and dismissal of ideas embedded in empathy or the lack thereof, promoting the study of British literature is justified because it is through intrinsic identification that literary works are given life as students interpret and shape its meaning through their own perceptions. As a Conservative, Gove uses the British curriculum as a mechanism to cultivate nationalistic pride by focusing on ‘great literature’, thus dismissing the proposition that literature is not objective but is rather given definition through the imposition of power and authority. Even if one were to entertain the imposition of power as a way of defining literature, with Rishi Sunak as prime minister, the very face of nationalism is of cultural hybridity. Gove fails to consider that the British identity is no longer entirely rooted in its traditional ancestry but is rather a culmination of a multitude of nationalities. Therefore, fostering a national focus cannot be restricted to the examination of British text but must expand to include postcolonial literature. Eagleton portrays the literary canon “as a construct, fashioned by particular people...at a certain time”, indicating the fluid nature of the literary canon that should change and adapt itself as an

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evolutionary organism in line with metamorphosing identities and societies. Accordingly, allowing that English Literature remains, its study must become more globalised and if the inherent political motive behind the English curriculum is to foster national pride, one must equally reconsider the British identity as the amalgamation of multiple races and ethnicities.

When considering the study of English Literature, it is important to consider the difference between English Literature and literature in English as the two diverge on the basis of English becoming a multinational language employed by a multitude of ethnic groups. As Matthew Arnold indicates in 'Culture and Anarchy', culture is not defined by the indoctrination of ideologies such as that of Gove's but is rather an ambience of "sweetness and light...nourished and not bound by them" across the "world current everywhere". The universality that Arnold attributes to culture manifests in the fundamental need for intellect and beauty to reach a state of perfection. To achieve this, there must be a dispersion of ideas that are, in today's world, integrated through the cosmopolitan and universal nature of the English language as over 1.5 billion people speak English. Zadie Smith's 'White Teeth' explores identity through layering a traditional, conservative past with the hybrid nature of the future where tensions transcend not only across this gap in time but within one's own identity too due to the discord between the Bangladeshi and Jamaican identity against the British. In the view of the fact that 'English Literature' is defined as literature written from Britain and America, Zadie Smith both conforms to and subverts its definition; 'White Teeth' would be considered as 'English Literature' because of Smith's British identity yet part of its narrative is rooted in the Bangladeshi voice of Samad Iqbal and his sons, resultantly epitomising the transition away from the traditional roots of English Literature into a more globalised vision of it. In the New York Times review, Michiko Kakutani comments on how 'White Teeth' is "reminiscent of books by Dickens", aligning her postcolonial work with that of an esteemed, canonical writer which exemplifies the blurring line between the traditional Western canon and the globalisation of English Literature.

In light of the view that the English language is a global, multinational language, the role of translated literature plays a key role in the extension of the Western canon as it allows for a more holistic

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appreciation of literary themes. Hermann Hesse's 'Steppenwolf' portrays the dual, self-destructive nature of man that bears similarities to 'The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde' and it is through this overlap that we can better understand human nature as an amalgamation of both virtue and vice. Therefore, the universality of English enables the accessibility of translated literature that, once viewed alongside the Western canon, can help us understand the complexities of human nature beyond regional differences, thus fostering empathy which is the underlying reason as to why we study English Literature. It is through this global exposure that the dispersion of ideas occurs as Arnold points out that "great men of culture are those who have had a passion for diffusing, for making prevail, for carrying from one end of society to the other, the best knowledge, the best ideas of their time" which is a process that has occurred for centuries. Global exposure of literature does not only stimulate intercultural dialogue between the reader and the text but between writers, too as the canonical works of the second-generation of Romantic poets were inspired by German and English translations of Persian poetry. Sir William Jones's translation of Hafez's poetry called 'A Persian Song' was read by Lord Byron and inspired his early lyrics where he imitated the novel rhyme schemes. The uncovering of global and oriental influences enables us to understand the wider context in which 'great' pieces of literature are written and by fusing the study of English Literature with Global Literature, innovation and originality is only fostered further as people can identify with concoctions of ideas. If traditional English Literature was inspired by Global Literature, it would be paradoxical and contradictory to assume that we should only study one when the two coexist.

To conclude, English Literature can no longer be restrained to the geographical, regional English identity of writers but must expand to include the voices of multiple cultures as Britain itself is a culmination of multiple ethnic identities. Its study must persist because it gives rise to empathy and judgement that is shaped by one's own perceptions and experiences. However, it must grow outside the bounds of conservative, traditional impositions of power through the inclusion of World Literature to ensure the coexistence of both nationalistic spirit and empathy as a force that drives culture. The globalisation of the English Language creates a distinction between English Literature and literature in English with the latter being a more diverse study of English literature, translated texts and Global

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Literature. To replace English Literature with Global Literature would be to disregard their coexistence in the modern world as well as in the traditional Western canon and it is through this coexistence that ideas can disseminate.

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