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Research Paper

The Politics of English Literary Studies in Colonial India: A Critical Reading of Gauri Vishwanathan's "The Beginnings of English Literary Study in British India"

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Abstract
This essay explores Vishwanathan's arguments about the role of Orientalism and Anglicism in shaping colonial education policy, the contradictory interplay between missionary and governmental agendas, and the ways in which English literature functioned as an effective instrument of social regulation. It further considers how her thesis resonates with and diverges from other postcolonial frameworks, notably Edward Said's Orientalism (1978), Homi Bhabha's theorization of ambivalence, and Partha Chatterjee's critique of colonial modernity. Finally, it reaffirms the significance of Vishwanathan's intervention in reimagining postcolonial literary studies, situating her as a foundational thinker who revealed the entanglement of English studies with the politics of empire.

Keywords: *colonial, Orientalism, Anglicanism, English, postcolonial, literature, power*

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In her seminal essay "The Beginnings of English Literary Study in British India" (1987), Gauri Vishwanathan locates the historical moment when English literary studies were introduced in India and explores the political, cultural, and ideological conditions that enabled their institutionalization. Drawing on the Gramscian notion of hegemony, which emphasizes domination through consent rather than coercion, Vishwanathan demonstrates how English literature became a crucial tool for colonial governance. Rather than emerging organically as a neutral academic discipline, English literary study was imported to India as part of Britain's imperial project. It worked to naturalize British authority by representing the colonizer as rational, humane, and just, while simultaneously legitimizing colonial domination through cultural persuasion. As she later elaborates in her book *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (1989), the discipline of English literature was forged not in the universities of England but in the colonial encounter, where it served as an apparatus of control.

This essay explores Vishwanathan's arguments about the role of Orientalism and Anglicism in shaping colonial education policy, the contradictory interplay between missionary and governmental agendas, and the ways in which English literature functioned as an effective instrument of social regulation. It further considers how her thesis resonates with and diverges from other postcolonial frameworks, notably Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), Homi Bhabha's theorization of ambivalence, and Partha Chatterjee's critique of colonial modernity. Finally, it reaffirms the significance of Vishwanathan's intervention in reimagining postcolonial literary studies, situating her as a foundational thinker who revealed the entanglement of English studies with the politics of empire.

Colonial Education and the Charter Act of 1813

The institutionalization of English literary studies in India cannot be separated from the political shifts of the early nineteenth century. The Charter Act of 1813 marks an important turning point. It proposed greater responsibility for Britain in the education of its Indian subjects and loosened restrictions on missionary activity.

However, as Vishwanathan points out, the "real thrust of British commitment towards its Indian subjects remained practical not moral" ("Beginnings" 429). Parliament's intervention was less about uplifting the natives than about tightening control over the East India Company, which had grown corrupt and autonomous. What was presented as benevolence towards Indians was, in fact, a means to regulate "nabobs" and assert parliamentary oversight. This reveals how discourses of reform were always intertwined with the imperatives of political control.

During Warren Hastings' governorship (1774–1785), the prevailing orientation was Orientalist. Hastings promoted the revitalization of native culture and the study of Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic. His policies exemplified what Vishwanathan, citing Bernard Cohn, calls "the dialectic of information and control" (430). Knowledge of native traditions was acquired for administrative advantage, yet re-presented as objective humanistic scholarship. Hastings rationalized Orientalism by framing it as both useful to the state and beneficial to humanity. As Thomas Metcalf notes, this policy reflected "a paternalist desire to rule India through its own traditions" while subtly reorganizing them under British supervision (Metcalf 34).

The Rise of Anglicism and Macaulay's Minute

By the 1830s, however, Orientalism gave way to Anglicism. Dissatisfaction with the policy of promoting Oriental languages grew, and figures like Governor-General Cornwallis associated Orientalism with corruption and degeneration. In his view, British officials immersed in Indian customs lost their moral fiber. Thus, Anglicism emerged as a corrective, emphasizing the superiority of English language and literature as carriers of "sound British principles of government and justice" (Vishwanathan, "Beginnings" 432). The shift also had concrete consequences such as Indians being excluded from higher posts thereby entrenching a rigid master-subject relationship.

This orientation culminated in Thomas Babington Macaulay's infamous "Minute on Indian Education" (1835). Macaulay dismissed Oriental learning as inferior and argued that English should be the medium of instruction. He envisioned the creation of a class of Indians who were "English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (Macaulay 249). The English Education Act of 1835 formally required the study of English literature, giving it official sanction. For Vishwanathan, this moment crystallized the imperial strategy of cultural hegemony. Literature was mobilized not merely to teach language but to inculcate values aligned with British authority.

The Dialectic of Orientalism and Anglicism

Although Orientalism and Anglicism are often treated as antithetical policies, Vishwanathan demonstrates that they must be understood dialectically, as complementary strategies within a single imperial logic. Both were directed toward the same ultimate goal i.e. the administration and control of Indian society. The apparent oscillation between them—first Hastings's Orientalist paternalism, then Cornwallis's Anglicist rigor, then Wellesley's feudal paternalism again—was not evidence of indecision but of pragmatic adaptation to political needs.

Orientalism, in its late eighteenth-century form, sought to rule through conciliation. By preserving and revitalizing Sanskrit and Persian learning, it won the loyalty of native elites and created a buffer class through which the British could exercise indirect control. Hastings argued that such knowledge was essential both to train British administrators and to gain the trust of Indians. In practice, this meant relying on existing structures of authority—Brahmins, Persian scribes, and local rulers—through which British officials could filter their power. As Metcalf explains, Orientalism provided "a strategy of governance that minimized conflict by presenting colonial rule as a continuation of Indian traditions" (Metcalf 36).

By the early nineteenth century, however, the limitations of this strategy became evident. Anglicists criticized Orientalism for encouraging the degeneration of British officials and for perpetuating what they considered the despotic traditions of the East. Cornwallis and later Macaulay believed that only a thorough reorientation of Indian education towards English language and literature could instill proper values. Anglicism thus sought to impose cultural transformation more directly, creating a class of intermediaries who would absorb British principles and transmit them downward. Macaulay's call to create Indians "English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (Macaulay 249) was the logical culmination of this project.

This dialectic also reveals the adaptive flexibility of empire. When resistance threatened, the British could revert to Orientalist paternalism, as Wellesley did, to conciliate traditional elites. When a firmer assertion of authority was required, they shifted toward Anglicism, emphasizing rational discipline and Western superiority. The two approaches were not opposites but rather "different inflections of the same governing impulse" (Vishwanathan, "Beginnings" 436).

Partha Chatterjee's analysis of colonial modernity helps illuminate this interplay. He argues that colonial rule was characterized by a division between the "outer domain" of material progress and the "inner domain" of cultural identity (Chatterjee 26). Orientalism sought to manage the inner domain by preserving Indian traditions, while Anglicism sought to penetrate and reconfigure it. The oscillation between the two reflects the empire's constant negotiation between coercion and consent, preservation and transformation.

The dialectic of Orientalism and Anglicism thus underscores the central insight of Vishwanathan's work viz. English literary studies in India emerged not as a neutral intellectual pursuit but as a product of calculated colonial strategies. Both Orientalist and Anglicist policies converged on the recognition that culture, whether native or imported, was indispensable for governance. Literature became the hinge through which this dialectic operated, first as an object of preservation, then as a tool of transformation, always in service of imperial power.

Missionaries and the Contradictions of Secularism

A further dimension of colonial education policy was the uneasy relationship between the state and Christian missionaries. The government sought to maintain a posture of religious non-interference, yet missionaries pushed for evangelization. This contradiction was resolved, Vishwanathan argues, "through the introduction of English literature" ("Beginnings" 439). Literature provided a medium that could smuggle Christian values under the guise of secular humanism.

Missionaries like Reverend William Keane warned that European education without biblical instruction would lead to "unmixed evil" (qtd. in Vishwanathan, "Beginnings" 440). Military officers, too, feared that secular education would sharpen Indian intellect without moral restraint. English literature appeared as the perfect compromise. Parliamentary debates in 1852–53 reveal that literature was perceived as "animated, vivified, hallowed, and baptized" by the Word of God (Vishwanathan, *Masks* 42). Texts by Shakespeare, Addison, Bacon, Locke, and Smith were chosen not only for their literary merit but also for their perceived Christian ethos. As Charles Trevelyan put it, these works embodied the "diffusive benevolence of Christianity" (Trevelyan 58). The result was that literature functioned as a surrogate for religious education, gently encouraging voluntary Bible reading while maintaining the veneer of secularism.

Literature as Social Control

By positioning English literature as universal, rational, and objective, colonial administrators fashioned it into one of the most effective tools of social control in nineteenth-century India. What made literature particularly powerful was its apparent neutrality. Unlike Sanskrit, which was tied to Hindu religion, or Arabic, associated with Islam, English literature could be presented as detached from theology and thus as secular and universal. Yet, this supposed secularity was deeply misleading. As Vishwanathan demonstrates, English literature was "strongly imbued with the Christian ideals" even while being presented as above sectarian doctrine (*Masks* 42). Its authority lay in its ability to straddle both domains, offering the moral undertones of Christian humanism while claiming the impartiality of rational, scientific inquiry.

This double stance enabled English literature to function as what Antonio Gramsci might call a hegemonic apparatus. It worked through consent, not coercion, and inclined students towards viewing British authority as naturally just and reasonable. The cultivation of literary taste was simultaneously the cultivation of political docility. Reading Shakespeare or Bacon did not only offer aesthetic pleasure but also reinforced the image of the Englishman as judicious, humane, and rational. Such portrayals were not merely incidental but central to the imperial mission of legitimizing colonial governance. As Vishwanathan memorably phrases it, literature served as "a surrogate Englishman in his most perfect state" (*Masks* 85).

The pedagogical strategy of using literature to discipline Indian minds was reinforced by the principle of "filtration." Education was first directed at a small elite, who would then transmit British values downward. As Charles Trevelyan argued, English texts possessed a "diffusive benevolence" that would spread Western

rationality across Indian society (Trevelyan 58). The literary canon thus became a medium for indirect rule, operating through cultural assimilation rather than overt domination. Literature inculcated habits of judgment, discrimination, and moderation, namely traits aligned with the ideals of British civil governance.

At the same time, English literature provided a way of circumventing the volatile question of religion. Missionary zeal risked provoking resistance among India's elites, but literature smuggled Christian values in a form that was less confrontational. Parliamentary debates in the 1850s describe literature as "animated, vivified, hallowed, and baptized" by the Word of God, yet at the same time it could be defended as secular education (Vishwanathan, "Beginnings" 443). This ambivalence gave literature extraordinary flexibility as an ideological instrument. It encouraged voluntary Bible reading without the taint of coercion, allowing colonizers to maintain their official stance of religious neutrality while advancing cultural assimilation.

The social control achieved through English literature was not only ideological but also psychological. By aligning virtue, reason, and justice with British authority, literature made colonial power appear natural and inevitable. It suggested that to be educated, rational, and moral was to think in English and to internalize the values embedded in its literary canon. Literature, thus, masked the material exploitation of empire behind the veneer of cultural refinement. It substituted the brutality of conquest with the civility of Shakespeare's verse or Locke's rational prose, camouflaging domination with humanism. As scholars like Leela Gandhi observe, this disciplinary function of literature transformed the subject's very capacity for self-perception as "The colonial subject was trained to imagine herself through the literary categories of a foreign culture" (Gandhi 92).

Seen in this light, literature was not a supplement to colonial power but one of its central mechanisms. It produced colonial subjects who were not merely coerced but persuaded, who internalized the superiority of Western reason as natural law. This explains why Vishwanathan insists that the development of English literary studies must be seen not as a benign academic endeavor but as an imperial strategy designed to stabilize colonial rule.

Critical Perspectives and Comparative Frameworks

While Vishwanathan's analysis is foundational, critics like Bruce King have pointed out its limitations. King argues that her focus on India risks being overly insular, neglecting comparative perspectives. The rise of English studies should also be read alongside its introduction in other colonies, such as the West Indies, where similar strategies were employed (King 112). A broader comparative lens might reveal patterns of cultural domination and resistance that transcend the Indian context.

Edward Said's Orientalism provides another useful framework. Said traced how Western representations of the East created a discourse of domination, portraying the Orient as irrational and despotic in contrast to the rational, moral West. Vishwanathan extends this argument by showing how literature itself rather than Orientalist scholarship alone functioned as a discourse of power. Her intervention thus moves beyond Said by examining not only representations but also pedagogical practices.

Homi Bhabha's notion of ambivalence further complicates Vishwanathan's thesis. Bhabha argues that colonial authority was never total. Rather, it was undermined by the mimicry of the colonized, which both affirmed and subverted British dominance (Bhabha 86). In this light, the creation of Anglicized elites through literary study may have produced unexpected consequences. Figures like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and later nationalist leaders appropriated English education to challenge colonial rule. Thus, literature became a double-edged tool, a means of control but also a resource for resistance.

Partha Chatterjee's analysis of colonial modernity likewise nuances Vishwanathan's argument. He distinguishes between the "outer domain" of material advancement, which colonialism controlled, and the "inner domain" of cultural identity, which became the site of nationalist assertion (Chatterjee 26). English literature occupied an ambiguous position here, simultaneously a colonial imposition and a field where Indians began to negotiate new forms of cultural agency.

Conclusion: Vishwanathan's Contribution to Postcolonial Studies

Despite these critiques and extensions, Vishwanathan's contribution remains monumental. By demonstrating that English literary study in India was not a benign academic development but a calculated imperial strategy, she radically redefined the field of English studies. Her work exposed the discipline's

complicity in colonial domination and forced scholars to rethink the politics of the canon. As she put it, English literature functioned as "a mask to camouflage the agenda of economic and material exploitation" (*Masks* 97).

In the broader landscape of postcolonial studies, Vishwanathan stands out for shifting attention from the content of literature to its institutional and pedagogical role. Whereas Said highlighted the discursive power of Orientalism, and Bhabha emphasized ambivalence and hybridity, Vishwanathan illuminated the ways literature was taught, institutionalized, and used to produce colonial subjects. This institutional focus has had lasting influence, inspiring scholars such as Gayatri Spivak and Dipesh Chakrabarty to interrogate the colonial legacies embedded in academic disciplines themselves.

Ultimately, Vishwanathan's intervention reveals the paradox at the heart of English studies—a discipline that claims universal humanistic values but that emerged from the specific historical context of colonial domination. By tracing this genealogy, she not only unmasked the imperial foundations of literary study in India but also laid the groundwork for a critical postcolonial rethinking of English studies worldwide. Her work remains indispensable for understanding how culture, power, and pedagogy intersect in the history of empire.

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