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On Becoming an African-Asian English Academic at Rhodes University

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Brief History of the Department of English

I arrived at Rhodes University English Department with not much more than a passion for literature. During the last fourteen years I have been able to observe the discipline in operation. My perspective has broadened and deepened, taking in the trajectory from Stanley Kidd and the colonial Cambridge practices, and from what might be termed the 'humanist enterprise of English studies',[1] to the white liberalism of Guy Butler in the middle of the twentieth century, then to the present post-apartheid era of humanities cutbacks and increasing commodification of knowledge.

Metropolitan developments and their influence on the colony or how English Studies in South Africa was historically constituted

When the first lesson in English was taught at Rhodes by Stanley Kidd in 1904, English as a discipline was still in its infancy. The first School of English, born out of Philology, was established at Oxford University in 1894 (there were English departments at London University and in the USA), and the first Chair in English Language and Literature at Oxford University was appointed as late as 1903. At Cambridge University, which was to provide most of the original staff at Rhodes, this first appointment was made in 1912. The teaching of English at Rhodes then, as early as 1904, was quite avant-garde, and the main concern of a pioneer like Kidd was the decline in the standard of English spoken in South Africa as compared to England. Kidd, speaking at the Seventh Annual Meeting of the South African Association for the Advancement of Science in 1909, focuses on this divide between metropole and colony:

> It must be realised that while the Home English language is a foreign language to more than half the Europeans in the country, it is, even to the English colonial-born, a semi-foreign language, and therefore in the same way and to a greater extent English literature is a foreign literature in South Africa.[2]

Even though Kidd's concerns were primarily with the education of the 'English colonial-born', his words have somewhat wider significance today. Is English literature indeed a 'foreign literature in South Africa'? If it is, why was Kidd teaching it in 1904, and more to the point, what are we in the Department of English doing one hundred years on?

The early pedagogy of the Department was strongly influenced by two English scholars, I.A. Richards and F.R. Leavis, who were largely responsible for defining the discipline in its early days. Richards invented 'practical criticism' – briefly explained as the psychologising of literary criticism, and which concentrated almost solely on the 'words on the page'. He advocated a focus on the states of mind associated with literature, rather than a focus on literature as an object. 'Richards's tactic is to bring literature into the realm of commentary as human science so that it can be established as an effective material institution to "educate" the minds, bodies, and souls of it students'.[3] Leavis's 'campaign [was] to establish literary criticism as a socially significant discipline'.[4]

Leavis viewed the arts as a vital antidote to the deteriorating human condition. He believed that in a society debased by the mass production of culture, the literary elite held the responsibility of upholding 'the language, the changing idiom, upon which fine living depends, and without which distinction of spirit is thwarted and incoherent'.[5]

Together, Richards and Leavis not only mapped out the discipline, but they also mapped out the canon of literary texts to be taught at English schools and universities, and by extension, at colonial schools and universities. This canon became the bedrock of critical authority. Thus in England, by the middle of the last century, an educated elite held the huge responsibility of preserving the language of certain literary texts and were capable of identifying the texts containing cultural value. Similarly, in South Africa, a small minority of white colonisers determined, mainly through replication of the English system, the course of English studies for the entire country and its diverse population.

At Rhodes, specifically, the tradition of Richards and Leavis arrived in 1939 in the form of Alan Warner who had trained in the methods and philosophy of the Cambridge 'critical revolution', and who was a disciple of Leavis. Small group pedagogy and literary criticism as a practical examination technique were introduced, and so was the limited canon of texts which excluded South African literature and many others.

Guy Butler and White Liberalism

In the 1950s 'practical criticism' was still the chief mode of teaching English in South Africa. In addition, no significant attempts had been made to adapt the syllabi to local conditions. Guy Butler of Rhodes University, a growing voice in English literary circles, celebrated the European heritage. At the same time he also saw the importance of 'the adaptation of ideas and tradition to a new environment'.[6] He argued for the importance of South African literature, saying that the youth needed to develop imaginative roots in South Africa. He also advocated fostering a national literature, but he did not challenge prevailing literary valuations. In fact, he granted English literature a superior place in the hierarchy of artistic achievement. According to Doherty, 'Butler's opinion at this time represents one of the least controversial arguments for the

inclusion of South African literature in the university syllabus: as a remedial response to the backwardness of South African students'.[7]

It is significant to recognise that Butler was preoccupied with the role of the English minority in South Africa. He saw this role in terms of the Nietzschean opposition between Apollo and Dionysus: 'Our role, as I see it, is to play Apollo to Africa's Dionysus'.[8] Butler supported cultural self-consciousness on the part of the English speaking minority in South Africa. For example, he strongly recommended an English South African poetry which used a distinct South African English. He feared for the fate of English in South Africa and he praised those who had adapted the language and tradition of liberal impartiality to South African society. In relation this point he declared that 'as a Christian and a Westerner, I believe [this] to be a most wonderful thing: it is proof that a great tradition has struck root in a new soil'.[9]

So, for Butler '[A]fricanisation then comes to mean the successful introduction of English, along with a few anglicised South African words, into an environment where the purity of the English language is potentially threatened'.[10]

At this point in the Rhodes English Department, the canon was still intact and 'practical criticism' was still thriving. There was no evidence of serious concern about recognising and including South African literature for the sake of relevance or merit. Neither were there considerations about cultural difference and effects of cultural imperialism on the majority of the population. If there was any consideration of 'other' cultures, it took the form of concern about the threat of Afrikaner nationalism, which seemed to always lurk in the background. African nationalism did not feature.

If there were advocates of a South African component to syllabi at this time, theystruggled to reconcile this with their acknowledgement of the superior humanising values of the great English texts.[11] After the declaration of Republic in 1961, there seems to be a slight shift, indicated by the establishment of the English Academy in the same year. The main brief of the Academy was to uphold standards of written and spoken English and the promotion of South African literature.

But in 1965, the earlier sentiments about the English minority were reiterated by Butler who was now the leader of the English Academy. At the second conference of the English Academy held at Rhodes University in 1969, and entitled 'South African Writing in English and its Place in School and University', the political imperative underlying the study of South African English literature was articulated. Butler made it clear that his primary concern was with the definition and survival of the English minority in South Africa:

> The predicament of many English-speaking South Africans is acute. They feel a lack of purpose of [sic] direction; they want to feel they belong; and they are afraid of belonging: they don't know what they belong to.[12]

It is only in the 1970s that new voices emerged. These voices concerned themselves with apartheid, and a critique of 'Butlerism', mainly for its neglect of black writers and black literature. It is also in the 1970s that the first bibliography of South African literature in English was published in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. Ursula Laredo's classification created a great South African tradition along Leavisite principles and by the end of the decade South African literature had found its way into the syllabi of South African English departments. At Rhodes, as one alumnus recalls, in 1975 Butler taught an English III paper on white South African fiction which included works by Thomas Pringle, Pauline Smith and Sydney Clouts.

The emergency of the 1980s

In the highly politically charged 1980s what developments occurred in the Rhodes English Department? A member of the department at the time, Nick Visser, observed that 'practical criticism' was giving way to a 'sociology of literature generally and Marxist literary criticism in particular'.[13] As far as the Department was concerned this appears to be wishful thinking on Visser's part. From informal enquiries I have made, I have ascertained that Visser was the most radical member of staff in the 1980s, one of the few really committed to the project of recovery of the culturally oppressed or marginalised. His passionate support of a historical, diagnostic approach to literature was no doubt a sore point for the die-hard supporters of 'practical criticism'.

Another 'radical' member of staff, it seems, was Don Maclennan (current Professor Emeritus), who in the late 1970s introduced a course which was to be known as *English in Africa*. Together with Guy Butler's successor, Malvern van Wyk Smith, Maclennan introduced works by Achebe, Soyinka and Ngugi into the department syllabus. In about 1983 *English in Africa* became a separate, one-year course. This course, open to students who were in second year or above, covered the growing body of postcolonial (in terms of chronology) African literature written in English. The introduction of *English in Africa*, no doubt revolutionary in the Department, allowed for the canon-based core course to continue largely untampered with, whilst at the same time acceding to the demands of so-called leftist radicals.

As the violent decade drew to a close we find that national political imperatives were being felt in the Department. Big names on the South African literary scene, such as Nadine Gordimer and Athol Fugard, were already in the syllabus. The issue of our immediate socio-political context could no longer be ignored, it seems. Under the headship of Van Wyk Smith, an 'Options' system for English III was devised. This allowed the dissenting members of staff to pursue their own areas of interest, be it traditional, canonical or new, emerging material. But it was to take a decade before a *Postcolonial Literature* paper was to appear as part of the English II syllabus. Now I'm proud to say that I teach Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in this course, and we have also, at third year level,

a *New Literatures* paper, and at Honours level, a *South African Literature* paper. A few years ago, when still a Masters student, I was invited to teach postcolonial theory as part of the Honours *Literary Theory* paper. This is an interesting paper because it begins with Aristotle and Plato and ends with Gayatri Spivak!

When I arrived in 1990, I received a sound literary education, a solid grounding in the canon, with a smattering of South African literature in the form of Fugard's plays and Gordimer's *The Late Bourgeois World.* The pedagogy was eclectic, with some members still focussing on a close reading of the, usually canonical, text, and others attempting to contextualise the texts in an increasingly volatile South Africa.

My Experiences

I arrived at Rhodes in February 1990, a singularly joyous time in the history of our nation. Coupled with the euphoria of Orientation Week, was the extreme elation I felt at the release of Nelson Mandela. The country and the university were entering a new phase.

During my undergraduate years I discovered that Rhodes University was a conservative and peaceful campus. Political demonstrations were, more often than not, well-coordinated affairs, with controlled singing and toyi-toying. This struck me as a contrast to what was or had been going on elsewhere at other campuses (my brothers had attended UDW and UWC respectively).

At this point the leftist student bodies were divided along racial lines: NUSAS and SANSCO. But shortly after my arrival they merged at national level to form SASCO. Our 'enemy' at the time was MSO (Moderate Students' Organisation) and RAG was the epitome of the white, bourgeois ethos. As a member and then the Chairperson of the Rhodes University Student Organisation (RUSCO), I was personally involved in the struggle to dissociate student community work from the 'decadence' of RAG.

Such were my forays into political activism.

As a postgraduate in the Journalism Department and then in the English Department, I was able to engage with the politics of race and gender on a theoretical level. I became aware of the quagmire known as the 'politics of identity', of discourse and language, and the role of academia in the waves of change around us.

During my M.A. research I became more aware of what was perceived as one of the biggest dangers facing the discipline: the contamination and dilution posed by multi-disciplinary approaches to literature. In 1998 I embarked on a research project not wholly in line with mainstream Departmental interests. This was a study of English transcriptions of Xhosa oral folktales in the Eastern Cape during the colonial era. As my interest in postcolonial studies increased, I became more aware that I was straddling disciplinary boundaries, and I took my cue from Leon de Kock, author of *Civilising Barbarians,* who termed such

work 'literary-cultural analysis'.[14] For me, there is no way to separate the personal and the social, the political and the aesthetic within English Studies. Thus, an approach which is informed by other humanities disciplines, but which retains as its central focus the literary text, seems to make the most sense in our context. In terms of pedagogy, the skills and knowledge specific to the analysis of a literary text need not be jettisoned because of the added perspectives of other disciplines. This view applies both to research and teaching.

At present I am busy with my Ph.D research which explores postcolonial feminist literary aesthetics with a view to elucidating how literature can contributes to the creation of new subjectivities within diasporic communities. The interconnectedness and constructedness of categories such as race, gender, ethnicity and class are scrutinised by an analysis of the literature which aesthetically depicts these categories. But herein lies a catch. As an academic who is questioning these categories, is it necessary for me to engage with them at this level? But am I perpetuating them or decontstructing them? Can I ignore what is 'real' in the literature, and by extension, real in the world? And, finally I have to ask, how much are my research interests driven by my own subject position as a South African female academic of Asian descent?

Since my appointment as a full time lecturer in 2002, I have become increasingly aware of the many challenges faced by university lecturers, in general, and at Rhodes specifically. As a lecturer at the Department of English, Rhodes University, 2004, these are some of the challenges I face:

- The diversity of the student body due to inequalities or lack of standardisation in the secondary education system;
- The pending decision to 'Africanise' the syllabus or preserve the canon – this is the same debate which arose in the 1970s and gave rise to certain factions;
- Being postcolonial (researching literature of the South Asian diaspora) yet being passionate about Classical literature (Homer's *Odyssey*), Shakespeare and Modernist texts such James Joyce's *Ulysses* – I see the connections between these literatures and I do not see them as mutually exclusive;
- The positive rearticulation of difference, in particular pedagogical differences, generic differences and disciplinary differences, in order generate collegiality and serve the higher purpose – which is to gain and spread knowledge;
- Introducing students to the discourse of English literary studies and fostering a degree of metacognition as they become members of the 'community of practice'[15] i.e., alerting them to their subject positions in relation to the texts they study, the institution, their social lives and their national global identities;
- The ever-present threat of cut-backs in the humanities, and the awareness that the knowledge that we generate is somehow perceived as second-rate to that of the Science and Commerce faculties which 'subsidise' us;

– Student apathy (say no more).

Critical Comment and Conclusion

The university has, I believe, maintained its air of conservatism (and by that I mean its air of peacefulness, serenity, and orderliness) whilst forging ahead in some areas. The increased student diversity in terms of 'race' is immediately apparent to me when I walk around campus. Yet, in the English Department, we still do not attract many 'black' students. There is no obvious solution to this problem. For example, it would be wrong to assume that the reason for low numbers of 'black' students is that they opt for career-oriented subjects, because it is quite apparent that *most* students today are at university in order to become employable.

The English Department has grown in the same way as the wider institution, since my arrival in 1990. The core is intact whilst on the periphery there have been changes. The *English in Africa* course, so revolutionary in the 1970s and 1980s, has been defunct for a few years due mainly to lack of student interest and staffing constraints. And the current staff still debates about what percentage of the syllabus should be devoted to African literature, and to what extent the canon should be sacrificed. As the demographics of the staff change slowly, I wonder if the issues for debate will change too.

I believe that it is crucial for the Department (and the discipline in South Africa) to consider the vast shifts in local, national and transnational cultural identity formation which have occurred since the millenium. As the brief history of the Department reveals, we have remained conservative, maintaining colonial metropolitan practices until a neo-colonial political expediency necessitated a shift. But since the changes in pedagogy and and syllabus which took place in the 1980s, we appear, at first glance, to be treading water.

We cannot stave off direct engagement with: the challenges of growing diversity in the student body; the evolving nature of the institution and its role in society; and the need for an alternative pedagogy in English studies which marries aesthetic, political and sociological concerns. At the same time we cannot fail to recognise those peripheral changes, for example, the Honours *Literary Theory* paper mentioned before, as indicative of a marriage between the traditional and the new. After all, a healthy tree needs its roots as well as its branches in order to survive.

Notes

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