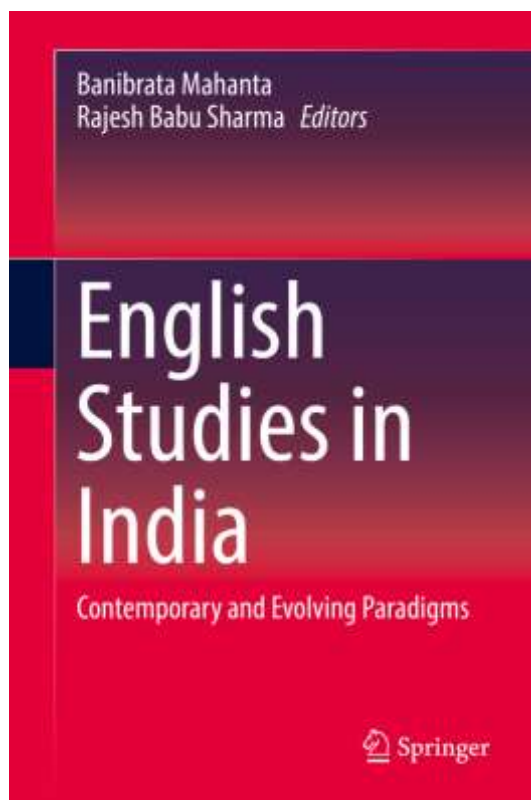


Banibrata Mahanta and Rajesh Babu Sharma, eds. *English Studies in India: Contemporary and Evolving Paradigms*. Singapore: Springer, 2019. 223+xx pp. ISBN 978-981-13-1524-4; ISBN 978-981-13-1525-1 (e-Book).



“There is a budding morrow in midnight,” wrote Keats in his Sonnet “To Homer.” English Studies in India today is looking forward to a bright morrow. However, it is still midnight, and the thaw in the frost has not set in. So observe Banibrata Mahanta and Rajesh Babu Sharma in the first chapter of their jointly edited volume on the teaching of English literature in the Indian classroom, *English Studies in India: Contemporary and Evolving Paradigms*: “In case of English Literature though, the British literary canon which was introduced in the colonial era has by and large remained frozen except for a few additions and alterations and still forms the core’ of most university syllabus in the subject” (6). The frost has not only perpetuated the notion of a “core content” comprising British literary works in the courses prescribed in the syllabus for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes across the country today; the frigid stance of the

syllabus framers has also ensured the immanence of the same works in the syllabus of optional elective “English” for applicants appearing for the civil service examinations across the country. We really do not know to what extent would the reading of an *As You Like It* or a *Macbeth* have a bearing on an Agastya Sen’s bureaucratic eligibility, having been sent on a mission to develop infrastructure at a “block” in the rural heartland of India – the Madna of Upamanyu Chatterjee’s *English August!*

Mahanta and Sharma’s new book interrogates these anomalies and opens up new vistas for a critical re-evaluation of English Studies in contemporary India today – the India of the new millennium – steadily moving towards its third decade. We have come a long way from where it all first began under the auspices of the Macaulay project, feel the editors in their introductory essay “English Studies in India: Reviewing Borders, Remapping the Terrain.” The essay exposes the malaise of eulogistic appreciations of British authors like Shakespeare in the English classrooms, affecting teachers of English in their rapturous deifications of the bard in superlative terms: “The corpus of literature that talks of Shakespeare in superlative terms has been unambiguously accepted as true” (2). The authors highlight the need to shun such pedantic pedagogic practices in English studies in our classrooms today. Moreover, the authors of the essay earnestly appeal to the English studies academia that a new pedagogy be devised involving a parallel study of the growth of English studies in England and the origin of the same in our country, which, unfortunately, is not practised in the literature classrooms across India. This perhaps is what C.D. Narasimhaiah had called the lack of “Indianness” in our response to English literature, as the authors of this essay rightly point out.

The book comprises three parts. Part I of the volume begins with Mahasweta Sengupta’s nostalgic trip through the enforced and regimented disciplinarian boundaries of canonical English studies in the school classrooms of India, followed by Santanu Niyogi’s critiquing of Shakespeare lessons and pedagogic practices which he refers to as no less than “epistemic violence.” Amritjit Singh’s essay “Contemporary Indian English Literature: An Approach” only obliquely touches upon possible pedagogical approaches to English studies in contemporary Indian classrooms today and ends up historicising the arrival and permeation of Indian English literature in the canon. Sonjoy Dutta-Roy’s essay “Negotiating Between Languages and Cultures: English Studies Today” firmly restores the thrust of the volume to the critical assessment of Indian English studies now and exposes the linguistic and cultural negotiations which all English teachers in modern India have been making to make English studies accessible to Indian students.

Santanu Biswas’s essay “Comparative Literature as an Academic Discipline in India” appropriately carries Dutta-Roy’s arguments forward in pointing out how the Indian academia today has been responding to the rise of comparative

literature as an academic discipline and how, in the process, the subject offered at the postgraduate level has been gradually paving the way for a sharp bend in the course of the flow of English studies in contemporary India. Prabhat K. Singh's essay, the last in Part I of the volume, addresses a pressing academic concern on the direction that English Studies may veer itself towards in the near future, and the role that the university shall play as we stare at a fast-changing digital era. The essay tolls a bell for all teachers of English in India. They will be compelled to acknowledge the fact that humanities would necessarily have to conform to scientific and technological models for dissemination of ideas. However, the signs of a "thaw" in the frost-bitten English syllabi across India are gradually becoming evident as syllabus framers are waking up to the need of implementing technology-assisted learning and an interdisciplinary approach to English studies, with the incorporation of various dimensions of humanities in the syllabus like, among others, spatiality studies, cinema and media studies, ecology studies, translation studies and affect theory.

The essays in Part II of the volume address issues concerning the specific application of the New Humanities approach as introduced by Prabhat K. Singh in the previous part of the volume. Singh's essay may be read as a methodological bridge which organically links the second part of the volume with the former. Kamalakar Bhat's essay "Provincialising Europe Through English Literary Studies in India" impresses upon the English teachers' need to effectively displace the English text from its hallowed ivory tower and situate it into the Indian readers' immediate cultural context. The veracity of Bhat's claim is further strengthened in the later essays by Bharati Arora ("Democratising the Language of Feminist Expression: English and Bhasa Contexts of Indian Women's Writing") and Richa ("The Journey of English in India: Experiments, Contradictions and the Tribal/Dalit Question"), both of whom take up strategies of discussing Indian English texts in the classroom from the vantage points of gender, caste and ethnicity. Prabhat Jha's essay may open up debates on the inclusion of folk literature of oral traditions in translation in the university syllabus. However, articles by both Parthasarathi Nandi ("United by a 'Foreign' Language: The Evolution of English in Multilingual India"), which takes up the lingua franca question in English studies today, and by Pinak Sankar Bhattacharya ("Spiritual Preaching in India: English as a Tool for Religious Propagation"), which deals with yet another important aspect of the history of the English studies in India might have well been included in the first part, as they take us back where we began reading this volume.

Part III opens up new vistas for further studies in this highly contested domain. As English Studies gradually flowers out into a new Rhodora, leaving behind memories of the native English rose, teachers confront new challenges in the classroom every day. Somdev Banik's essay, with which this section opens, offers a non-metropolitan perspective to English Studies in the classrooms of

India's North-East. However, the USP of this volume on English Studies in India is its focus on policy issues, which happens to inform much of the final part of this academic enterprise. Ravindra B. Taslidar's essay "Vocationalisation of English Studies in India: A Critique" pursues a detailed critiquing of policy reports on vocational education published by the University Grants Commission (UGC) since the Eighth Five-Year Plan period (1992-1997), and advocates the refurbishing of courses on Functional English, according to specific needs of a particular vocation. Nandini Sahu and Srideep Mukherjee in their essay critique the UGC Model Curriculum for English and other Western Languages – the last of its kind published in 2001 – and address the crisis in institutional practices of equating English Studies with canonical literature studies. Moreover, in this essay, they offer fresh perspectives on the implementation of new policies in English Studies on the ODL (Open and Distance Learning) mode.

It has been almost three decades since Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest* (1990) and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (ed) *The Lie of the Land: English Literary Studies in India* (1992) were published. The great digital divide separating the present decade from the two former volumes on the subject left us with many unanswered questions. It is expected that the present volume will raise many questions on the subject and help to make English studies more relevant to the needs of the nation.

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