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## English Studies from Global to Nepali Context: Critical Debates, Challenges and Possibilities

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### Abstract

This paper aims to present an analysis of the critical debates in the area of English Studies emerged from the time of its initiation and still going on, various challenges that this discipline has undergone, and its future prospects. Based on library research method, the analysis of the relevant online and physical library materials related to English Studies has been conducted. The findings show how English Studies has undergone the critical debates like whether English is the subject of colonial domination or socially progressive project, whether it has to give privileges to literary studies or creative writing, and whether it has to adopt a single standardised form of English or world Englishes. In addition to it, it shows that despite undergoing a number of critical debates and challenges due to either the ongoing process of departmentalisation or the African abolitionist movements, English Studies has become

refined, updated and interdisciplinary area of study. Proper redesign and reformulation of English courses, incorporation of local art, culture and literature, adoption of new technology and vocational aspects etcetera could make it more relevant, effective and impactful in the days to come.

**Keywords:** colonial domination, creative writing, departmentalisation, digital humanities, interdisciplinary, world Englishes

### Introduction

English Studies as an interdisciplinary area of study consists of the study of language, literature, culture, creative writing, rhetoric, media, theatre, art, film, multi-media, information and communication technology, history and many more (Pope, 2016). As it can incorporate the complex patterning of varied subjects like “Classics, Theology, Rhetoric, Composition

and History (Literary and Linguistic) and a wide range of ‘Studies’ (Theatre, Film, Literary, Cultural, Communication and Media) as well as a wide range of critical theories and cultural practices (from New Critical and Formalist to Feminist, Poststructuralist and Postcolonial)” (Pope, 2002, p. 48), it is regarded as an established field of study with broader range. As a subject, however, it is characterized by critical debates, discourses and contrasting views such as either English is a subject of colonial domination or a socially progressive project (Ellis, 2014), either it should give privileges to literary studies or creative writing (Cowan, 2016), and either it should bring forth a single standardized form of English or allow space to world Englishes (Kirkpatrick, 2016).

The existing critical debates on different dimensions of English Studies replicate different challenges it is undergoing although they often indicate its dynamic and evolving nature. It is just like the way the ongoing process of separation of many sections and subsections of English Studies with distinct departments can be observed both as a disciplinary challenge and an expansion of its area of study. The challenge is basically due to their conflicting claims of different departments under English Studies and confusion among the students particularly in terms of selecting the departments for higher study. Likewise, the expansion is the result of the establishment of new and new departments with distinct curriculums that offer the possibility of the incorporation of varied subjects and issues of study. Some departments, for example, are integrating digital humanities and the application of innovative teaching and research approaches to address the need of changing time and circumstances. Addressing the global need of vocational dimension and the demand of the English language classes, some departments are becoming popular either in the area of developing students’ language proficiency or teaching literature courses. Despite the increasing flow of students in some departments, some other departments have decreasing flow of students and are in the direction of closure. In this context, this study has significantly analysed different dimensions of English Studies including critical debates, discourses and challenges it has undergone. The analysis has been conducted for exploring what future prospects English Studies has and how it could be made more effective in the days to come. This study was conducted to analyse the critical debates, discourses and challenges in relation to English Studies, and synthesise the way this discipline could have better future.

### **Methods**

Adopting library research method, this study was carried out with the analysis of few relevant journal articles, research papers and related books conveniently selected from both the physical and the online libraries in relation to English Studies basically the debates on its nature and various challenges it has undergone. Collecting different documents consisting information, description and analysis related to how English Studies began in India and Britain, how it was opposed such as in African universities and what various internal conflicts that this discipline has been undergoing, I analysed and described regarding how

this discipline has undergone different modifications along with the changing circumstances. Besides analysing the data obtained from relevant library documents, my personal observation of the ongoing academic activities in English departments such as under Humanities and Education faculties in Nepal has also been employed for the analysis. Finally, the analysis has been synthesised for exploring what future prospects English Studies has and how it could be developed more effectively in future.

### **History of English Studies: Colonial Domination or Social Progress?**

English Studies as an academic practice commenced in the British colonial era in India particularly the nineteenth century. Khadka (2022) states that the institutionalisation of this subject underwent a long debate and power exercise concerning whether it would become a part of colonial domination or socially progressive project. Such debates either in the support of English Studies or against not only created challenge but also caused it to adopt new modifications, changes and reformations, thereby accelerating this discipline itself.

The initial debate was “about the East India Company’s colonist education policy, between Orientalist . . . and Anglicists” (Gupta, 2016, p. 104). Orientalists were the non-Western scholars such as Indians who were in favour of a traditional Sanskrit education for the natives particularly to promote indigenous language, local culture and Indian civilization. Unlike this, the Anglicists or the Westerners wanted Westernized education in the English language to begin in India. They advocated the knowledge in English and English literature to be far better than the knowledge in Sanskrit or other indigenous languages. The long standing power exercise for and against the initiation of English Studies finally paved way for the initiation during the mid-nineteenth century making India, as Gupta (2016) writes, “the first Asian country, and amongst the first in the world, where English Studies was established as an academic discipline in higher education” (p. 99). Although English Studies got established in the higher education in India making it the first nation to formally begin English Studies in the world followed by England, the voices from the side of Indians in this or that way went on. In 1990s, for example, people demanded for reducing British and American literary portions to give more space for Indian literature in English. Indian resistance became dominant that ultimately compelled University of Delhi to revise its BA and MA English syllabi with reduction in British and American literature and the incorporation of Indian literature in the English language.

Taking participation in the debate on different aspects of English Studies, Ellis (2014) states that the most powerful, contrasting and contradictory stories of English Studies include how it has become the instrument of colonial and class domination besides achieving the identity of socially progressive project. Drawing upon Macaulay’s *Minute of Indian Education 1835* and Newbolt’s proposal *The Teaching of English in England 1921*, he shows how they claimed the knowledge in English and English literature far better than the knowledge in Sanskrit or Arabic, and argued teaching English in schools and universities as a subject necessary for forming well-designed arguments. However, such claims and arguments

are analysed as the product of colonial mindset by the postcolonial scholars like Viswanathan, Walsh, Sampson, Sinfield, Garber and many others. They have extensively portrayed English as the instrument of colonial domination and criticised Macaulay's assertion, stated in his *Minutes 1835*, "I have conversed both here and at home with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues . . . I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" (Macaulay, 1835, p.1). They critiqued the way Macaulay attempted to suppress the educational activities as well as the publications in the indigenous languages prevalent in Indian subcontinent. Macaulay's claim replicates his colonial mindset where he seems claiming to have complete understanding of the colonized people, their literature and also the weight of value. It is quite similar to what Achebe (1995) states:

To the colonialist mind it was always of the utmost importance to be able to say: 'I know my natives', a claim which implied two things at once: (a) that the native was really quite simple and (b) that understanding him and controlling him went hand in hand—understanding being a precondition for control and control constituting adequate proof of understanding. (p. 58)

Achebe means to say that the colonialists' attempt to understand the natives is to get control over them. This is what Macaulay tried to do by initiating English Studies in India. In his text *Orientalism*, the post-colonial critic Edward Said argues that "The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degree of a complex hegemony" (p. 5). Like Said, other post-colonial thinkers believe that westerners tried to expand their domination over non-westerners through different means, and the politics behind the initiation of English Studies in non-western countries is a part of their hegemony over non-westerners.

Narrating about Viswanathan's observation on English Studies, Ellis (2014) further writes, "she traces the rise of English as a subject in schools and universities in India from the beginning of the nineteenth century and also in the examinations for the Indian Civil Service: examinations specifically designed to create an indigenous administrative elite" (p. 5). Viswanathan's response to English as a colonial project of creating British government's colonial administration in India is quite similar to the observation of Walsh in the context of British colonialism in Ireland.

The contrasting view takes English Studies as a socially progressive project that connotes progress, enlightenment, justice and democracy. Regarding the progressive aspect of university extension movement that incorporated the courses for women and marginalized group of people and linking it to the emergence of English Studies, Ellis (2014) further states, "Set against the background of an elite higher education in Oxford and Cambridge . . . the university extension movement sought to extend the opportunities for higher education to women and to students from a wider range of social classes, especially in industrial towns and cities" (p. 8). As the extract indicates, the opportunities for the previously marginalized

groups of people came in existence and in that run Oxford University in the UK “established its own English degree suitable for women and those third rate men” (Ellis, 2014, p. 8, in 1895). Likewise, vernacular language and literature became the subject of study. Walworth School was notable as a place where English had been developed by several scholars like Alex McLeod, John Dixon and Harold Rosen. They examined English Studies as progressive and supported the university exchanging programmes.

### **Internal Debates on English Studies: Privileges to Literary Studies or Creative Writing?**

English Studies also has undergone the internal debates and contradictory views on whether it needs to give privileges to literary studies or creative writing. The scholars of literary studies and the scholars of creative writing have their own specific claims on the significance of teaching literary courses and creative writing courses respectively. Literary Studies basically focuses on the study of the western and non-western literary texts either written in English or translated into it. Creative writing courses, on the other, primarily deal with imparting creative writing skills on the students. Cowan (2016) states that for “Literary Studies . . . literature is what has been written; for Creative Writing, it is what is being written” (p. 48). Literary studies puts emphasis on the product while the focus of creative writing is on the process. Although both the process and the product are the significant wings of English Studies, they do have certain degree of clashes and debates with their own specific claims. There is clash or debate regarding what focus English Studies should have in its courses.

The scholars have talked about different aspects of creative writing attempting to defend university writing courses in the academia. For example, Myers (2006) states that the courses of creative writing significantly imparted students’ writing skills in higher education after getting its full growth in late 1960s and early 1970s. Likewise, Cowan (2016) argues that creative writing has been taught everywhere particularly because it enables the students in writing and composition. The contribution of creative writing and writing courses for writing, editing, proofreading, publishing, public affairs, public relations, business activities, literary creations, media writing etcetera has been making it more prominent in many university English departments in the world. Green (2012) states:

From publishing to copywriting, editing, journalism, proofreading, public affairs, public relations, teaching, in-house business, communications, information technology, market research, community work, from working in a literary agency, to working in a library or various branches of the media or many aspects of the cultural industries - in all these professional areas and more, training and experience in creative writing can give a significant advantage. (pp. 326-327)

Green clarifies on the contribution of creative writing in different professional areas and fields with increasing significance. Relying on such multi-dimensional advantages and growing significance of creative writing, the university English departments in the USA have given

major focus on practical kind of writing courses over the last 40 years (Russell, 2016). Some faculty members of English departments particularly those who were interested in composition founded Conference on College Composition and Communication popularly known as CCCC in 1949 in the USA that published a newsletter (later a journal) that ultimately established a foundation to make writing a recognized field.

Despite the increasing popularity of writing courses like creative writing, many opposing arguments and contrasting views are raised particularly from the scholars of literary studies although both the scholars of creative writing and literary studies belong to the English departments. The scholars of literary studies, as Cowan (2016) further writes, argue that “Creative Writing programmes dupe their students with false claims about future publication, that the literary marketplace is saturated with the products of such programmes, that institutions shield their students from real experience, and that literary endeavour is necessarily solitary” (p. 40). The professors of literary studies say that creative writing is not the matter of teaching and learning but it is the part of individual talent learnt in isolation and thus they have tried to neglect and often exclude it from English departments. Against this position, the professors of creative writing argue studying literature as unnecessary and worthless.

### **Teaching English Language: Single Standardised form of English or World Englishes?**

One of the aims of teaching English subject particularly in non-Anglophone countries is teaching the English language. Thus, majority of English classes either in the university or the school levels can be observed giving focus on both content and linguistic aspects. The students of English are supposed not only to master over the subject matter but also the linguistic skills. However, still many debates and discourses can be observed in this domain regarding whether teaching and learning English should follow British English as a standard form or it should allow local varieties of English.

Taking participation in the debate, Kirkpatrick (2014) states, “Although many different varieties of English have been spoken for several centuries, it is only surprisingly recently that the field of study that has become to be known as World Englishes has been established” (p. 33). Taking the initiation of World Englishes after several centuries of the presence of many varieties of English, he goes on engaging in this debate drawing up on the British linguist Randolph Quirk and Indian-American linguist Braj Kachru. Quirk (1985) argued that teaching English subject should give emphasis on a single standardized form of English (cited in Kirkpatrick, 2014). He stressed on the British model of English for all the non-native learners. However, Quirk’s claim contradicted with another linguist Kachru. Kachru (1976), for example, stated:

It is obvious that in the Third World countries the choice of functions, uses and models of English has to be determined on a pragmatic basis, keeping in view the local conditions and needs. It will, therefore, be appropriate that the native speakers of English abandon the attitude of linguistic chauvinism and replace it with an attitude of linguistic tolerance. (p. 236)

Kachru's emphasis gives space to the regional varieties of the English language rather than forcing the non-native learners to learn a single variety. He believed that the ability of the English language to preserve 'Americanness' in American variety and 'Englishness' in British variety is its strength. Thus, he proposed to let the preservation of 'Indianness' in Indian variety of English language. His "position of the plurality of Englishes led to the establishment of the World Englishes field of discipline" (Kirkpatrick, 2014, p. 33).

There are still debates and discussions regarding the focus of the English language courses particularly in the third world countries. Some people prefer either British or American variety of English to be the model of learning the English language through English subjects while others argue for promoting regional variety of Englishes. British Council, for example, could be observed acting to promote the English language. Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOFEL) and International English Language Testing System (IELTS) are two internationally accepted standardised tests designed to measure the English language proficiency. The students from non-native countries of the English language face either TOFEL or IELTS examinations before getting enrolled in the English-speaking universities in the world. The classes of TOFEL and IELTS are conducted in different parts of the world.

### **Specialisation and Departmentalisation: An Ongoing Process**

The process of specialisation and departmentalisation under English Studies has been going on. Specialisation process stands for the shift of attention from broader area of study to specific courses and areas of expertise. This process has developed the concept of departmentalisation, the process of separating different departments with their own specific courses of study. In the USA, for example, a rebellion began within English departments in 1910s and 1920s that resulted into the subjects like pedagogy leaving English departments in 1912, journalism in 1917, theatre in 1920s, language and linguistics in 1924, and creative writing in 1940s (Russell, 2016). The separated subjects developed into their own departments. The separation of Applied Linguistics as an independent department is an example in this case. Talking in this concern, Gupta (2016) states that "Applied Linguistics (focused on ELT as an instrumental programme) seems set to grow within the existing institutional spaces of English Studies-within English departments-in the near future" (p. 116). Gupta's claim is for the possibility of the beginning of new departments under English Studies. Analysing such a possible challenge for the mainstream of English Studies, he further writes:

If Applied Linguistics subsection broke away from English Studies and became separate institutional entities (departments), and formed independent professional bodies, the remnant English Studies would still have to find ways to survive in an environment where resources are allocated according to vocational/professional measures and market demand. (p. 116)

Gupta clarifies that the creation of cleft between the sections and subsections of English Studies is creating challenge for some departments under this discipline. The growing

attraction to Linguistic departments with separate identities and the decreasing attention towards the department of literary studies, for instance, could make the departments of literary studies vanish at some point of time if they do not act rigorously.

From the high priority to English courses at Tribhuvan University right after its establishment in 1959 (Bista, 2011) to the establishment of English departments at different other universities in Nepal, English has occupied an important space. It has been taught as a major subject primarily under Education and Humanities faculties. English departments under these faculties have their own claims regarding the significance of curriculum, teaching methodologies and priorities. The faculty of Education primarily focuses on language, linguistics and teaching methods while the faculty of Humanities gives privileges to literary analysis, literary theories, creative writing, critical and philosophical discourses and such others. If teaching and learning the English language is the major focus of research and studies under Education departments, the study on literature and literary analysis is the major focus of studies under Humanities and Social Sciences. Despite having some courses in common and a common process of modifying the courses along with integrating digital technologies in teaching-learning and examination practices particularly in the latter days (Acharya et al., 2022; Khadka & Acharya, 2023), a kind of tussle in terms of the significance of courses can be observed going on between these faculties.

### **Preferences to Local Art, Culture and Literature: An African Context**

The voices raised against English Studies particularly against the study of English literature and the demand for replacing it by the study of local art, culture and literature can also be the challenge for the sustenance of this discipline in some parts of the world. For example, some universities in Africa argued for replacing English Studies by African Studies. Justifying the argument for the abolition of the existing departments of English in the African university colleges, Thiong'o (1995) writes, "We want to establish the centrality of Africa in the department. This, we have argued, is justifiable on various grounds, the most important one being that education is a means of knowledge about ourselves" (p. 441). Thiong'o's argument clarifies the growing consciousness of African scholars for the need of developing national art, literature, culture and identity by studying them in the national universities instead of studying foreign literature and culture. It replicates African consciousness regarding the importance of putting African literature at the center of analysis along with employing African perspective for the analysis instead of relying on foreign literature and perspective for analysis. Although the voices for abolishing English departments and establishing the departments of African literature and culture in the African universities can promote the African identity, language, culture and literature, it has direct impact on the sustenance of the English Studies.

### **Future Prospects**

Despite having critical debates and challenges, English Studies has been in existence with additional progress as well as better future prospects. Carter (2016) states that by



adopting both qualitative and quantitative research methods in a mixed form, English Studies has become more impactful in the present days particularly by analysing social, political, cultural and different other issues and becoming able to fulfill its social duty. Addressing such issues is important in the sense that “aesthetic values are important but there are, for example, social, political, communal and community values too” (Carter, 2016, p. 16). Addressing these aspects and incorporating diverse fields of study, English Studies has been adopting interdisciplinary nature to integrate distinctive components of multiple (Nissani, 1997). Interdisciplinary aspect has become the strength of English Studies as it can generate fresh configurations of knowledge and become like “a party that all parties want to come and contribute” (Pope, 2016, p. 250). Pope believes that interdisciplinary aspect of English Studies has made it “an intrinsically heterogeneous subject constituted by the complex interplay of Language-Literature-Culture-Creativity (p. 249). The continuous emphasis on the development of interdisciplinary courses at different universities in the world not only replicates how English Studies could modify its courses to address the demand of the changing time and circumstances but also what sort of possibilities the entire discipline does have in the coming days.

English studies particularly literary studies can also be observed in the threshold of great competition along with the advent of different digital devices and tools. There are many digital tools and applications bringing forth the digitised materials and videos. Instead of sitting in an armchair and reading the books, people prefer watching films, YouTube videos, television programmes and getting information from social-media. English Studies has got the challenge to modify itself such as to digitalise the reading materials and draw the attention of the readers. To address ongoing challenge, digital humanities has been taking space as a new dimension under English Studies. The development of digital humanities is bringing forth this discipline as an advanced “field of study, research, teaching, and invention concerned with the intersection of computing and the discipline of the humanities” (Deegan & Hayler, 2016, p. 161). With the advent of this aspect, digital tools and methodologies have been analysing and interpreting literary texts, historical documents as well as cultural artifacts in an interesting way. The combination of computational techniques with traditional humanities research replicates regarding how English Studies could modify its courses particularly to integrate digital technology so as to widen the area of teaching, researching and inventing in this discipline, thereby replicating its future prospects.

There is growing significance of the English language learning, demands of the courses and classes for students’ linguistic development, and the creation of job opportunities for the candidates with English proficiency. English Studies can benefit the students by enhancing their comprehensive power, critical and creative ability, the capability of translation and many more. This is the reason that Pope (2002) suggests the scholars of English not only to reflect on its past but also to articulate its future. Such scholars need to synthesise the ongoing debates within the area of English Studies, analyse its lapses or the external

challenges, and seriously work for redesigning its courses carefully considering the market value of its products. If humble efforts are made, the English Studies is sure to flourish in the coming days.

### Conclusion

The observation on debates and discourses sometimes in favour and sometimes in opposition of English Studies have not only posed challenges for the development as well as sustenance of this discipline but also contributed to bring it ahead with additional modifications and reformations. The perception on English as a colonial product got minimised with the increasing significance of English Studies while the debate on preferences on either literary studies or creative writing has given way to incorporate both the wings. The increasing use of different varieties of English which are pragmatically equal has lessened the overemphasis on a single standardised form of English although the compulsion of TOFEL and IELTS tests for the students pursuing higher studies in English-speaking universities has kept the debate still alive. Likewise, the voices against English Studies in the African universities have opened the way for incorporating local art, culture and literature in the courses, thereby enlarging the area of English Studies itself. In the similar manner, the increasing opportunities of language classes, translation, publication, media production, international relations and tourism for the students of English have given vocational dimensions to this discipline. There are still many debates, conflicting voices and emerging challenges in this domain but they also offer the opportunity to rethink, redesign, update and upgrade the courses of this discipline.

### Author's Bio

Thir Bahadur Khadka has been working as an Assistant Professor of English at Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Mid-West University, Surkhet, Nepal, for over a decade. Along with presenting papers at national and international conferences, Khadka has published research articles and book chapters in various journals and books. Additionally, he has edited several university journals. His areas of interest include literary theory, diaspora, cultural studies, and ICT. He can be reached at thirendrababu@gmail.com. ORCID: 0000-0002-4070-4956.

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