

FIXITY AND CHANGE: CLASS AND CULTURE IN THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, UNIVERSITY OF PERADENIYA

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Introduction

The Department of English of the University of Peradeniya has been widely acknowledged for its high standards of education, the excellence of its students and the rigor of its curriculum. Despite or perhaps because of its long and prestigious history, there is an emergent discourse among alumni and faculty that English studies is in crisis in the university today, because “standards” have to be lowered, changed or broadened to accommodate a “radically different”¹ kind of student. Whereas earlier students were from a middle or upper middle class, Anglicized, urban, professional milieu, now prospective students are much more diverse, and many are even first generation undergraduates. How, then, can these newer categories of students be assimilated/accommodated without doing violence to established norms seems to be a serious concern. Yet, while this anxiety dominates the staff and prominent alumni, less attention is paid to the students who, in many cases, have to reinvent themselves to fit into the English Department norms. This study, therefore, attempts to trace the “evolution”(or transformation) of the English Department students as they try with varying degrees of “success” and varying social and psychological costs to negotiate a more or less “non-conventional” socio-cultural background and ‘value system’ that is ‘compulsory’² for acceptance. Jacques Lacan’s conception of the “self-consolidating other” is a useful theoretical framework to understand the subject formation of the “non-conventional” students of the Department and their conflicting ways of identity formation.

Methodology

This is a qualitative discourse study based on open discussions and unstructured interviews from a cross section of both Special and General

¹The “conventional” and “non-conventional” dichotomy which is given emphasis throughout this study does not refer to ideological positions, but social positions. The “standards” refer to English skills/competence which in turn reflect the access to social, economic privileges.

²‘Class’ is necessary but not a sufficient condition.

Degree students of all four years and the alumni of the Department of English over the last fifty years.³This study also takes a semi-autobiographical tone, since it more or less maps the researcher's assimilation into the Department as a "non-conventional" student. The study is qualitative in which the discourse of the researcher is examined and simple notions of objectivity and subjectivity cannot operate in such terrain, though a crucial element of this study lies in situating the investigated and the researcher.

Results and Discussion

The interviews which have been conducted so far can be summarized into three main categories.

1. Students who fit into the norms of the Department because they have the "right" background and level of competence (and these may be one and the same thing). They tend to be urban, even metropolitan beings; the children of Anglicized professional parents from the Middle Class and above, who are at least second generation University entrants, and whose parents are more or less liberal. Their home language is most often English though there is increasing bilingual fluency. This is a more recent change (post-1980).

2. Students who come from the Middle/Upper Middle class but who are Sinhala or Tamil speakers whose home language is Sinhala or Tamil and whose parents are more monolingual than the first group. They may be *swabhasha* graduates or business persons. They may live in urban areas now, but the shift to an urban lifestyle would have been at most a generation ago. These students would have learnt English fairly early at school, and the need to study English is to ensure that financial upward mobility is matched with social acceptance by the Anglicized elites and their proxies.

3. Students whose parents are lower middle class Sinhala (or Tamil) speakers who have little competence in English and are not conscious of what studying English in the University system involves in terms of social class transformation. Often these students are first generation University entrants and have rural roots though they have studied English in tuition classes or have got scholarships to National schools. These students have acquired some competence in the language through diligence and hard work but continue to make class-marked errors

³ The interviewees were randomly selected.

especially in pronunciation. The Department has taken them in, perhaps reluctantly and there is a constant soul-searching as to whether justice has been done by them or not. These students are characterized by excellent performance in other subjects but their home world and the world of the Department hardly ever meet. One sub group tries to emulate or achieve the “standards” of the Department at some social cost (alienation from family and friends) while the other sub group either finds it difficult (or are not willing) to attempt this transformation, and yet suffers other kinds of costs (uneasy relationship with the department and other students). In both cases, the students in this category fall between two stools.

Certainly, at one point of time, there has been a transition (rupture) in the Department from the old to the new, from the middle/upper middle class to the so-called lower middle class in terms of access. It cannot be simply assumed that this is a transition from rich to the poor. Arguably, it may be the issue of the aspirational home language and the first language. As a consequence, many years later, the streaming of undergraduates with the so-called “natural ability” and “control of English and reading of Literature” (Ludowyk, 6) gradually dropped and currently, the student body of the Department comprises mainly of the Second Language English speakers.

Conclusion

As a response to the changing socio-cultural milieu, hitherto the discussion has been centered on lowering/changing the standards of the Department of English, and therefore, the social and psychological cost of reinventing the “self” of the “non-conventional” student of the Department often goes unheard. The student tries his/her utmost to adapt into the politics of this “exclusive” space in which process he/she would emerge as an unimaginative, superficial and self-hating being. Negotiating different spaces therefore becomes one of paramount importance to the student in which case projecting a certain image (often that of a privileged background) is prioritized over the quality of his/her studies. As Gamini Haththotuwegama points out, “The socio-economic power structures have become over the recent years enormously hospitable to English.” (Haththotuwegama, 14) Therefore, while tracing the evolution of the students of the Department in terms of class and culture, this study attempts to map the ways in which this “non-

conventional” student charts his/her way through this conflicting ways of identity formation.

References

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