EMBRACING MULTIDISCIPLINARITY AND INNOVATION: EMERGING TRENDS IN ENGLISH LITERATURE RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

It is a misconception that Multidisciplinary research is new and is only applicable to the disciplines of science and technology. Recent trends have witnessed a sea change, and new innovations and multidisciplinary research are being practiced by the subjects of Humanities too. Research in English Literature is no longer confined only to studies based on themes, characters, and rhetoric. Recent research practices in English Literature have not only embraced multidisciplinary collaborations with other disciplines of humanities and social sciences, but also with disciplines of Science and Technology. In the present time people have witnessed how literary texts are being treated not only as stories but as alternative histories, subaltern narratives- providing voices to the economically weaker and the socially downtrodden people, whose stories are generally ignored in the state sponsored documents. Even popular genres like the Fairy Tales, comics and graphic novels are being reinterpreted in multidisciplinary research, through the lens of Gender and Culture Studies, to show how culture and or behavioral patterns were being codified and propagated for women and children. Also, the concept of the "text" in English Literature, which traditionally meant a book has now broadened to include street signs, advertisements, movies, paintings, songs, styles of clothing, or even body language, or anything that has meaning, and people can draw information from. It will be the endeavor of this paper to analyze how this evolved concept of the "text" and use of research methodologies from other disciplines have helped research in English Literature become multidisciplinary and innovative. It analyzed the changed "text-methodology" relationship with respect to the use of philosophy in Calvin and Hobbes, cultural studies and postcolonialism in Tintin and feminist studies in popular Fairy Tales, to see how research in English Literary has embraced multidisciplinarity and innovation.

Keywords: English Literature, multidisciplinarity, gender studies, postcolonialism, feminism

INTRODUCTION

Contrary to popular perception, multidisciplinary is not an invention but a discovery. It was in existence long before the term was coined, or the theory was formulated. For instance, *The Mahabharata*, one of the longest epics of the world, is a compendium of literature, religion, philosophy, political science, economics, environmental studies, and moral codes of conduct. This exemplifies that in ancient times; knowledge was not classified into different streams and disciplines but was thought of as a comprehensive whole. Later, as knowledge gathered volume, it was compartmentalized into different disciplines and the concept of specialization emerged. Then again beginning from the last quarter of the twentieth century, natural and social scientists-initiated research to address practical problems

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related to the environment in a manner that involved more than one discipline.

Research, in very simple terms, refers to scientific quest for certain information on a specific topic. It can be defined as "... inquiry for truth or solution to a problem. Research is journey of exploration- going beyond the obvious or personal experience/feelings/opinions in search of an idea/cause/solution" (Hans, 2015). People generally use terms like "multidisciplinarity", "interdisciplinarity" or "trans-disciplinarity" very loosely and interchangeably. Definitions of terms such as "multidisciplinarity", "interdisciplinarity" or "trans-disciplinarity" research are also quite vague and not well differentiated. There is not too much clarity on the characteristics of research collaboration involving different disciplines.

Yet people can say that multidisciplinary research is a quest for facts, and formulation of deduction with the involvement of more than one branch of learning or discipline that endeavours at achieving a common aim with the aid of knowledge of other disciplines. Multidsciplinary research may be defined as "... study or research ... combining specialised branches of learning or fields of expertise" (Hans, 2015). Further, it can be characterized as a search for knowledge through objective methods involving a combination of several disciplines and methods. In the words of Molteberg and Bergstrom "Multidisciplinary Studies addresses current, actual problems, focusing on solving them – it tends to be applied and action or policy-orientated".

The crux of the multidisciplinary research approach is that knowledge of several disciplines is combined for a given problem and is supplemented to one another in such a manner that it becomes possible to infer clear and unbiased conclusions. In multidisciplinary research, several disciplines are involved in a certain line of inquiry specific to a problem, and then the individual findings of the disciplines utilized are brought together in a cumulative manner to give a comprehensive solution. Thus, modern research has tended to become more and more multidisciplinary.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

In this paper, the researcher investigated the field of English Literature and see how multidisciplinary research is implemented there. They considered two aspects of research in literature to find out how multidisciplinarity works there- namely research methodology and the objects of research, the "text". One of the conservatives, important and most widely used research methodologies in the field of literature is textual analysis. In very simple terms textual analysis is an umbrella term that is used for a range of research methods to illustrate, interpret, and comprehend texts. "When people perform textual analysis on a text, people make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text.... (and) Textual analysis is a methodology: a way of gathering and analysing information in academic research" (McKee, 2001). Using such a methodology a variety of knowledge can be gleaned from a text – including its literal meaning, its symbolism, its subtext, its postulations, and the worth it reveals. Now the method, not to be confused with methodology, would depend on the field and objective of the research. Another important term to focus here is the definition of the "text". A text can conservatively mean something that is traditionally a piece of writing, either a book of fiction or poetry or philosophical deliberations on some social issue. It is in these two parameters - the text and the methodology- the researcher aimed to analyze the paper regarding change and innovation in multidisciplinary research in English Literature.

PERSPECTIVE AND METHODS

When Bob Dylan was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 2016 "for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition" (Dylan, 2021), it was met with mixed reactions. With that he became the first singer to have been awarded the prestigious award for his songs and found himself in the august company of people like

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T.S. Eliot, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Toni Morrison, and Samuel Beckett. And by choosing a popular performing singer for this literary award, the Swedish Academy radically redefined the boundaries of literature, setting off a debate whether song lyrics have the same artistic value as poetry or novels. While on the one hand many people hailed this decision and said that Bob Dylan inherited the bardic tradition, on the other hand some called the decision misguided and cast aspersions if songs, no matter how great, should be elevated to the level of literature. Some others also pointed out that Dylan was not the first person to be awarded the prize for literature, but Rabindranath Tagore (the first Nobel Laureate from Asia) had also been awarded the prize for literature in 1913 for his book of verse, *Gitanjali,* which means song offerings. But this comparison is not entirely true, as unlike Mr. Dylan, Tagore had vast, varied, and versatile contribution to literature as exemplified by his voluminous books. Yet the crux of the matter is that in awarding the Nobel Prize for Literature to Mr. Dylan, the Swedish Academy may have, knowingly or unknowingly, acknowledged the fact that the boundary between high literature and creative and commercial forms of writing was blurring.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

So, the very first change in the multidisciplinary research in English Literature is the innovation in terms of the text, per se. With the adoption of multidisciplinary research in English Literature, the text has assumed a broader meaning than what it referred to earlier. Now a "text" refers to a book, an article, or even a transcript of an interview or a conversation or an email. And it does not stop even there. In literary theory now, a text is treated as anything that can be "read", this might be a book, like magazines, newspapers, the captions of the billboards, a street sign, advertisements, movies paintings, television shows, songs, political cartoons, styles of clothing, or even body language, or anything that has meaning and can draw information from. Thus, it is said that…

Texts can no longer be thought of as relatively fixed and stable. They are more fluid with the changing affordances of new media. In addition, they are becoming increasingly multimodal and interactive. Links between texts are complex online, and intertextuality is common in online texts as people draw upon and play with other texts available on the web. (Barton and Lee, 2013)

From this perspective, the research in English Literature was undertaken on innovative topics which could not have even been thought of in the past. For instance, the English Dept. of Punjab University accepted PhD proposals on *Tintin*, *Calvin and Hobbes* and even on Barbie Dolls (Jalali, 2010). And it is not only the selection of "texts" for PhDs in English Literature that is interesting, but even the tools that are being used for analyzing these "texts" are innovative and multidisciplinary. Even people accept that comics have some written words and pictures to work upon, the Barbie dolls are even one step ahead, for they have nothing written. People would have to "read" into the skin colour, the hair colour and type, the body shape and size of the dolls to draw any kind of substantial conclusion. So, to understand what the innovations of multidisciplinary research are in English Literature, the researcher considered four kinds of text-methodology relations in this paper.

1. This is when the text and the methodology are both traditional and conservative. For instance, a research on the war metaphors in Shakespeare's plays, or the theme of sensuousness in the poems of John Keats.
2. This is when the concept of the "text" changes, but the methodology remains traditional and conservative. For instance, the use of textual analysis in the case of advertisements, brochures comic strips etc. Under this, it examined

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the comic strips of *Calvin and Hobbes* by Bill Watterson.

3. This is when the concept of "text" changes and the methodology used to research the text is something that is generally used for some other discipline. Here the researcher examined the comic strip of *Tintin* from the perspective cultural studies, ethnology, and post colonialism.

4. This is when the concept of the "text" remains traditional and conservative and even the methodology used to research the text is something that is borrowed for some other discipline. Discussion of feminist studies of Fairy Tales will follow.

Since there is no multidisplinarity involved in the first category mentioned above, the researcher did not discuss in detail. Under the second category, the researcher found out that *Calvin and Hobbes* is a popular comic strip created by the American cartoonist Bill Watterson and was syndicated from November 18, 1985 to December 31, 1995. It was tremendously popular in the American society and even beyond it. The story follows the antics of a mischievous six-year-old boy, Calvin and his cynically humourous stuffed tiger, Hobbes. The comic is set in the late twentieth century American suburb and follows Calvin's fanciful thoughts, his friendship with Hobbes and his love-hate relationship with his classmate, Sussie Derkins. Hobbes' dual nature, being a living entity to Calvin and a stuffed toy to the rest of the world, is a very important aspect of this comic. Although the comic strips take us to new planets, to the Cretaceous period and even has encounters with aliens in the American suburbs, its protagonists ponder of deeply philosophical things like whether life and art have any meaning. It must be remembered here that both the disciplines of Literature and Philosophy developed at the same time and philosophical inquiry as a research methodology is a very traditional way of analyzing a literary text. Th researcher found that one of the most astonishing features of *Calvin and Hobbes* comics is its combination of simple and complex philosophical concepts. So, during a walk with Hobbes, Calvin very causally remarks that for him the ends justify the means, and he doesn't believe in ethics anymore. This very plainly evokes the moral philosophy, or should we say the lack of moral philosophy of Niccolo Machiavelli, who is famous for saying that rulers should not consider traditional ethical concerns, and instead focus on the maintenance of their power (Machiavelli, 1998). Even one of the contemporary commentators has praised *Calvin and Hobbes* as "our only popular explication of the moral philosophy of Aristotle" (Wilson, 1995). When his father tries to put some sense and manners into the generally self-indulgent Calvin to build his character, it is very much in keeping with Aristotle's definition of virtuous character in *Nicomachean Ethics* II.6:

> Excellence [of character], then, is a state concerned with choice, lying in a mean relative to us, this being determined by reason and in the way in which the man of practical wisdom (*phronimos*) would determine it. Now it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect. (Aristotle, 1984)

The researcher found that though the *Calvin and Hobbes* series does not make any specific reference to philosophers, they are replete with philosophical references. And in answer to the question if one should invoke deep philosophy in comics for young children, they can say that Watterson's *Calvin and Hobbes* strips are such that philosophical questions can be discussed with the young readers through the medium of the comics. In fact, when Calvin had been named after John Calvin, the founder of Calvanism (which believes in justification by faith alone, and centres on the doctrine of predestination), it is expected that philosophy will be ingrained in his stories. Since the text itself is different, with its pictures, panels, gutters, and speech balloons in place of lines and paragraphs, it becomes easy to enjoy

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reading through the comics without the necessity to understand the significance of their philosophical messages. Yet at the same time for the initiated it packs a lot of serious philosophical allusions and themes throughout the stories. So, the researcher found put that when using traditional research methodology to a "text" that is different from the traditional ones, such mutidisciplinary research in English Literature can help bring out things of profound philosophical importance even in so-called non-serious texts.

Under the third category we discuss the *Tintin* comic series, where both the text and the methodologies are different from the traditional ones used in English Literature research. Georges Prosper Remi, alias Herge, created the boy reporter, Tintin for the first time on January the 10th, 1929, in the pages of the newspaper *Le Petit Vingtieme*. Since then, *The Adventures of Tintin* has remained arguably the best-known Belgian comic series till date, with the stories published over more than fifty years and translated into around a hundred languages. On his first assignment as a reporter, he was sent to Russia.

Thereafter this young journalist, his somewhat rowdy friend Captain Haddock, and his dog Snowy, travel to many countries, solve mysteries left and right, and prevail over the evil characters or situations. In the twenty-four comics, Tintin has travelled to Iceland, Switzerland, UK, Italy, Russia, China, Tibet, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, (erstwhile) Congo, Morocco, USA, Peru and a few other fictional countries in Latin America, the Arabian Peninsula and the among the Balkan countries. He is a globe trotter in the true sense of the word and has been exposed to different languages, customs, and cultures. A conservative textual analysis of such texts would have dealt with the development of the characters, the themes of friendship and so on and so forth. But beneath the surface of the stories there are layers and layers of other issues that cannot be fathomed only by textual analysis and the need for tools/methodologies from different disciplines become important.

The researcher found that amongst the books of the series, only *Tintin in the Land of the Soviets* is overtly anti-communist in its blunt and pictorial depiction of the dirty tricks of burning bundles of straw inside empty factories by the Bolsheviks, so that the smoke could fool visitors about the country's industrial development and a poll held at gunpoint to elect the pro-regime list with 100 per cent votes. But the other texts of the Tintin series, though not so explicit, expose different layers when analyzed from the postcolonialism perspective. Postcolonialism is "… theory (that) represents a complex field of study, encompassing an array of matters that include issues such as identity, gender, race, racism, and ethnicity … focuses on exploding knowledge systems underpinning colonialism, neocolonialism, and various forms of oppression and exploitation present today" (Lunga, 2008).

Thus, when this methodology, which generally used for social science disciplines, is apllied to Tintin, we find issues of race, class, and ethnicity open, some of them intentional on the part of Herge and the others without even his knowledge. In the former category we have the pre-war King Ottakar's Sceptre, which takes a dig at fascism, and its villain named Musstler, seems to be a combination of Mussolini and Hitler. Again, Tintin in America, The Broken Ear and Land of Black Gold criticizes capitalism and satirizes and the war-mongering multinational oil companies. The Blue Lotus raises the issue of racism by pointing out the ridiculous racist stereotypes ascribed to the Chinese people. Prisoners of the Sun reveals a great sympathy towards Indigenous culture of the Incas that was threatened by the Westerners plundering their treasures, although it is difficult to fathom why Herge would assume that Sun worshipers would have no idea about a Solar Eclipse. *The Castafiore Emerald* brings out the cultural bias against the gypsies, who are forced to live on refuse and can be accused of being thieves as a community without any material evidence.

In the latter category, the cultural studies methodology brings out the biases of Herge himself. Tintin is shown to be friends with two dictators, Emir Ben Kalish Ezab and General Alcazar. In *Tintin and the Picaros,* we

find Tintin go to a place called San Theodoros, where people are living in poverty under heavy policing in the totalitarian reign of General Tapioca. He helps his old friend, General Alcazar, topple General Tapioca in a blood less coup and free his falsely accused European friends. But as Tintin leaves the country the researcher saw that the condition of the people has not changed though the regime has. It may be Herge's tongue in cheek critique of totalitarian regimes, or his complete apathy to the condition of the people of the third world if the white people are safe. But there is also clear evidence of Herge reinforcing racist stereotypes in *Tintin in the Congo.*

Here Tintin comes across as an arrogant person mistreating the natives and supporting big game hunting. This can only be exposed by "... postcolonial theory (that) focuses on ... colonialism, neocolonialism, and various forms of oppression and exploitation present today" (Lunga p. 193). Further a cultural studies analysis of *Tintin in the Congo* not only exposes the colonial attitude but also the racial superiority of the Belgians towards the Africans. It is interesting that Cultural studies which examines cultural practices related to wider systems of power and race and is used mostly in the disciplines of Sociology, Anthropology and Historiography can reveal so much about graphic stories. Another disturbing fact is that some libraries and booksellers in a few countries have removed this book from children's sections, not because it promoted racism, but because it might cause inferiority among the children of African origin.

In the fourth and final category we discuss what happens when the text remains the same, but methodologies from other disciplines are applied to research it. The application of postcolonialism to analyse Shakespeare's *Tempest* or the use of Freudian psychoanalysis of a play like *Oedipus Rex* are all prime examples of such analysis. But our focus in this paper will be on the Fairy Tales. To begin with, the most common belief about the evolution and purpose of Fairy Tales is that they evolved entirely from oral folk story tellers, the so called "Mother Goose" nurse, purely for entertaining

children with imaginative stories at bedtimes. But New Historicism (that looks at literature in a wider socio-political context) has proved this to be a blatant lie and propaganda.

They have established that the creators of the original fairytales were a small group of French female writers in the seventeenth century known as the conteuses or storytellers. These Fairy Tales evolved during a time when women were highly repressed, and Marie Catherine d'Alunoy- the woman credited with coining the term 'fairytale' used these tales to critique the existing patriarchal norms by giving the women of her tales liberty to choose her lover and lead a life of her choice. But in the nineteenth century the Grimm Brothers tampered with these tales discredited the conteuses in the so-called attempt to have re-framed them as children's tales.

The application of Feminist Studies to Fairy Tales revealed the overt and covert imposition of patriarchal rules in such texts. These studies contend that these impositions were necessary to subdue the female voices and subjugate women to obliviate the original women's stories. So, the women started to be depicted in such stories as being weak, helpless, and only beautiful. They were mostly depicted mostly as damsels in distress- waiting to be rescued by their Prince Charming. Again, they were treated somewhat like commodities, to be given away to their saviours or the saviours of their kingdoms, as part of the prize along with half the kingdom.

The reward is generally half the kingdom and the whole Princess. Nobody asked her consent; it was as if it was the duty of these princesses to get married and remain in "happily ever after". Marriage was thought to be the goal of their lives, and it was assumed that a princess could not ask for anything more than a marriage to a handsome prince. Nobody thought that this "happily ever after" made the woman become docile and subservient to her male counterpart- and even the prized possession of the saviour-heroes. Not only were the daughter's 'expendable', even the wives were easily replaceable. In many a story, including in *Cinderella, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,*

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Rapunzel etc, the researcher found that the king or the husband search for a new wife immediately after the death of the first one. Women in these tales like *Snow White, Cinderella,* and *Rapunzel*, are shown to die during childbirth- and nobody is too bothered, reiterating that the ultimate purpose in a woman's life was to bear a child. The researcher found out that it was "generally made known that the daughter was the product of a good, heterosexual woman that died in the role of 'innocent victim', a theme that is found throughout the Grimm's fairytales" (Bacchilega, 1993).

If the researcher tried and analysed a few of the popular Fairy Tales by applying the feminist lens a little more deeply, we find that these become "not so fairy tales". In *Little Red Riding Hood*, the female protagonist falls in trouble because of "crossing the line" defined by society and again gets saved by a man, the woodcutter- projecting men as the ultimate saviours of women, reinforcing a pre-defined gender role in the society. Here "The 'virgin and the whore' dichotomy is common, with the female stepping away from the traditional feminine characteristics often being met with violence or victimization" (Escholz, 2021). The kissing of the sleeping Aurora by the Prince in *Sleeping Beauty* undermines the concept of consent on the part of the Princess. For surely no one can consent to be kissed by a stranger when she is asleep.

Rather this act of violation is glorified as the "true love's kiss" that saved her life. But the bottom line is it is outraging the modesty of a woman in her sleep. The Queen in *Snow White* propagates the stereotypical imagery of ideal and socially approved concept of beauty- being fair. The effects of such depiction penetrate children's psyche and shape the realities of life. Tales like *Beauty and the Beast* idolizes the abduction and imprisonment of a woman who finally falls in love with her captor- a classic example of Stockholm syndrome. The Feminist theories exposes the fact that rather than being simple bed time stories, Fairy Tales such as these are a kind of handbook to instill notions of biased gender and stereotypes. It can be said that "Fairytales are being used as a source and a vehicle of powerful self-mirroring images affirming the existing value system" (Desczc, 2002). And since they are told to very young children, these wrong concepts are engraved in the *tabula rasa* (clean slate) of the mind of these impressionable kids, and they grow up with biased gender concepts.

These biased representations of femininity and gender stereotyping in Fairy Tales, that condition young minds into recognizing the oppressive, demanding man as the saviour-hero and the beautiful, self-sacrificing maiden as the ideal woman, could not have been possibly deciphered through using standard research methodologies of English Literature. It is only after the second wave feminism evolved that feminist studies Fairy Tales were undertaken as multidisciplinary research and were able to expose women's victimization in them. Such studies reveal that these tales are responsible (to a large extent) for the real suffering of the women of the last few generations. And such studies proved beyond doubt that it is necessary to reclaim the Fairy Tales as stories of strong women who declined to conform to patriarchy. That is perhaps why Alison Lurie in her article "Fairy Tale Liberation" affirms that "folktales and fairy tales can advance the cause of women's liberation, because they depict strong females" (Haase, 2004).

CONCLUSION

In an age when the concept of the text has broadened and literary texts are viewed as more than just literature, multidisciplinary research in English Literature is the need of the hour and is here to stay. From the things discussed in this paper, the researcher conclusively shown that multidisciplinary research considers all the aspects of the problem/text for deep and successful study and facilitates research studies in its totality minimizing the shortcomings. It promotes

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reconciliation among various disciplines. It is beyond doubt that problem/text can have many interpretations and dimensions, and all these can be accomplished comprehensively only with the help of multidisciplinary research. But it must also be remembered that all disciplines have their own features and multidisciplinary research should be used very carefully to preserve the prime characteristic of the disciplines.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It should also be kept in mind that multidisciplinary research, though indispensable in the present era, must be careful about overcoming its deficiencies. Not only in English Literature, but in all fields, the first and foremost thing to remember is that multidisciplinary research should not be undertaken just because it is in vogue. Again, it must be remembered that when it is undertaken, conclusions from either of the disciplines should not be forced upon the other to suit the researcher's convenience. That is exactly why the same English Dept. of Punjab University, that allowed research on *Calvin and Hobbes* and *Tintin,* rejected a proposal on porn movies. This reiterates the point that not anything and everything can be allowed in the name of multidisciplinary research, for it to lead to a meaningful conclusion. Maybe, one day research methodology for undertaking such projects in the Dept of English Literature will be developed (if at all). Till then people must not overdo things and allow multidisciplinary research to develop in its natural course and use it in the educational and research institutes to address the complicated problems of the complex modern world.

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