



Status of Indian English Poetry after Independence

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Abstract:

Indian English poetry is nearly 200yrs old. Indian English Poetry after Independence' known as 'Post-Independence Indian English poetry' is a new genre and has witnessed the most crucial developments. It marks a decisive break or departure from the imitative or the derivative 'tradition' of pre-independence Indian English poetry and is engaged in technical and thematic innovativeness. The conflict between tradition and modernity at different spheres---social, cultural, familiar, national and cosmopolitan---is evident in the works of the poets of this era. Having freed themselves from the clutches of 'Englishness', the poets of this age have started writing a verse more in tune with age, its general temper and its literary ethos.

The rise of female poetic-voice is the most significant event in the post-independence Indian English poetry which depicts the changing position of a woman in the modern Indian society. A complex blend of aestheticism and activism, the poetry of these poets, produces a kind of bold, ruthless honesty tearing passionately at conventional attitudes to reveal the quintessential woman within.

Key-Words: Post-independence, Tradition, Conflict, Englishness, Female-voice.

Introduction:

Poetry is the oldest form of literature. It is a creative and aesthetic activity having three major components- experience, beauty and emotion. Poetry is an art of communication experience. As such, the communication must be in a language that is close to the poet and the experience must be genuine.

India is a vast subcontinent. Many languages found in India has its own literature, some very rich. Each writer wishes his creation to be reached all the corners of the globe. That is why, a writer writing in his mother tongue wants his creation to be translated into English as English is nationally understood and appreciated. Lotaika Basu rightly remarks: "*English, after the days of Macaulay formed the main subject of the curriculum of Indian universities. English was not only the language of the ruling class but a language understood by half the world. Every ambitious verifier, therefore, hoping to acquire world fame, wrote in English.*"(Basu, 1933) Though English was introduced by the Britishers mainly for administrative purpose, "many

educated Indians have adopted English as their efficient mode of intellectual expression, as a result of which there has evolved not only a special Indian English but a very respectable body of Indian-English literature.” (Raman, 1989)

Background:

The journey of Indian English poetry is nearly 200yrs old. The earlier book of verse by an Indian (though a translation) came into light in 1825 when Arasanipala Venkatadvarin’s ‘Viswagunadarsana’ was translated into English by Cavelly Venkata Ramaswami. The first ever Indian English poet was Henry Louis Vivian Derozio(1809-1831), the son of an Indo-Portuguese father and an English mother. His two volumes of poetry *Poems* (1827) and *The Fakir of Jungheera: A Metrical Tale and Other Poems*(1828) shows a strong influence of British romantic poets in theme.

A three-phase development can be seen in Indian English poetry. The first phase (upto 1900) has a number of co-development responsible for generating Indian English poetry. The poets of this phase followed the British Romantics and Victorian poets. Henry Derozio (1809-1831), Kashiprasad Ghose (1809-1873), Rajnarain Dutt (1824-1889), Soshi Chunder Dutt (1815-1865), Hur Chunder Dutt (1831-1901), Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873), Romesh Chunder Dutt (1848-1909), Toru Dutt (1856-1877) were some of the pioneers of this phase. These trend-setters began to poetize the Indian echoes in a foreign language by writing on Indian history, myths and legends.

The second phase (1900-1947) comprising of saint poets like Swami Vivekananda, Swami Ramtirtha, Swami Yogananda and Rabindranath Tagore, Manmohan Ghose, Sri Aurobindo, Sarojini Naidu and others is the phase of assimilation. The poets of this phase were compulsive nationalist caught in the historical conflict and turmoil of Indian, culminating in the attainment of political freedom in 1947. In their poetry one may find the glorious summation of India’s hoary culture, spiritual and methodological heritage. They endeavoured to nativize English language in order to make it a means suited for the expression of Indian sensibility.

The third phase which begins after the Indian Independence is the experimental phase. After independence, Indian English poetry took a fresh turn. “*The era of hope, aspiration and certitude was gone; an urge of merciless self-scrutiny, questioning and ironic exposure commenced.*” (Naik,1984). The post-independence poets writing in English have greater self-confidence and found themselves in line with modern British and American poets.

Post-Independence Indian English Poetry:

Post-independence Indian English poetry has witnessed the most crucial developments. It is a new genre to which even the English readers look with curiosity. It marks a decisive break with the ‘tradition’ established so far by the pre-independence poets through the thematic and technical innovations.

Three major characteristics can be found in it. Firstly, a past-oriented vision---associated with a sense of loss and hopelessness, a sort of cultural pessimism. Secondly, a future-oriented vision---associated with a desire to remake the world, and thirdly, a present-oriented attitude---ahistorical, amoral, neutral, stoic, ironic, ambivalent, absurdist.

The post-independence poets have freed themselves from the clutches of 'Englishness' and have started writing in a very Indian manner. They have evolved an idiom of their own---a kind of poetic language in which the Indian mind can be best expressed. Bruce King rightly says:

English is no longer the language of colonial rulers, it is a language of modern India in which words and expressions have recognized national rather than imported significances, alluding to local realities, traditions and ways of feeling. Such Indianisation has been proceeding for several generations." (King, 1987).

Writers' Workshop, founded by Purushottam Lal in Calcutta in 1958, has played a vital and creative role in popularizing post-independence Indian English poetry by giving preference to experimental works by young and unpublished writers. Poets like Shiv K Kumar (1921), Nissim Ezekiel (1924), Jayant Mahapatra (1928), A K Ramanujan (1929), Purushottam Lal (1929), Arun Kolatkar (1932), R Parthasarathy (1934), Kamala Das (1934), K N Daruwala (1937), Dom Moraes (1938), Adil Jussawalla (1940), Gieve Patel (1940), Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (1947), Pritish Nandy (1947) and others emerged on the scene.

Nissim Ezekiel, one of the most notable among the new post-independence Indian English poets, is the first to publish a collection. His *A Time to Change* appeared in 1952. Hailing from a Bene-Israel family migrated to India generations ago, the theme of alienation is central to Ezekiel's work and colours his entire poetic universe. His poetry reveals a gradual evolution of his art and genius and describes love, loneliness, lust, creativity and political pomposity, human foibles and the 'kindred clamour' of urban dissonance. Some of his collections are *Sixty Poems* (1952), *The Third* (1959), *The Unfinished Man* (1960), *The Exact Name* (1965) and *Hymns in Darkness* (1976).

Dominic Francis Moraes, popularly known as Dom Moraes, a Goan Christian, is the first of the new poets to win recognition in England. His poetry is persistently confessional in tone and obsessed with loneliness and insecurity. His verse has the strong imaginary quality as well as easy, refined and controlled flow of language. *A Beginning* (1957), *Poems* (1960) and *John Nobody* (1968) are some of his noted collections.

In nineteen sixties, several new poets emerged. Purushottam Lal is the earliest of them. His successful translation of Mahabharata has given him a new idiom, the charm of a 'sloka' or a 'mantra'. Economy of language, depth of symbolism, awareness of social realities and life's sorrows make Lal

remarkable in this field. *They said* (19660, *Draupadi and Jayadratha and Other Poems* (1967) etc. are some of his noted collections.

Adil Jussavala, one of the leading Parsi poets, views the contemporary Indian scene through the compassionate eyes of exile returning to India after a sojourn of more than dozens years in England, His *Land's End* (1962) contains poems 'written in England and some parts of Europe. His foreign experience, his reaction to his native scene and his continued quest for self-knowledge are the major themes of *Missing persons* (1974).

The most outstanding of the sixties is A.K Ramanujan. Some of his remarkable collections are *The Striders*(1966), *The Interior Landscape*(1967), *No Lotus in the Navel*(1972), *Relations*(1971), *Speaking of Siva*(1972) etc. are some of his praiseworthy collections. The poetry of Ramanujan draws its sustenance from his intense awareness of his social burden---his Hindu heritage. At the same time, the poet is equally aware to both the strength and the deficiencies of his racial ethos. He tries to juxtapose ironically the ancient Hindu ethos with the situation of the modern Hindu and contrasts the Hindu and the western world-views. The surest touch of romantic cliché, quiet but deep emotion, fineness of perception and sense of rhythm make him indisputable among all his contemporaries M.K Naik says:

“His unfailing sense of rhythm gives a fitting answer to those who hold that complete inwardness with language is possible only to a poet writing in his mother-tongue. Though he writes in open forms, his verse is extremely tightly constructed.” (Naik, 2002)

R. Parthasarathy, a poet and an artist is equally obsessed with his native heritage. His *Rough Passage* (1977) is an attempt to deal with the theme of identity exposed to two cultures---the Indian and the western. Precision, economy and the use of domestic imagery are the chief qualities of Parthasarathy's poetic technique.

Gieve Patel, another leading Parsi poet, though an outsider, prevents his alienation freezing into indifference and producing a feeling of rootlessness. Being a medical practitioner by profession, he is familiar with pain, disease and death and is able to establish a kind of bond between himself and under-privileged. His poetry mostly 'situational' begins with a concrete real life situation. He has little use for image and metaphor and generally expresses himself in a bare, spare and colloquial style. His *Poems* (1966) and *How Do you Withstand, Body* (1976) are notable.

In Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, the image is all dominant and he experiments in Surrealism. By mixing images in his poetry, the poet tries to express his response to the modern man's predicament in a world of debased values. In a reply to a questionnaire the poet describes himself as “*not an Indian poet, but a poet writing a universal language of poetry, of felling, of hate and sex*”. (P Lal,1971) His works include *Bharatmata: A Prayer* (1966), *Woodcuts on Paper* (1967), *Pomes/ poems/ poemas* (1971), *Three* (1973), *Nine Enclosures* (1976),

The Absent Traveller: Prakrit Love poetry from the Gathasaptasati of Satavahava Hala (1991).

Another significant poet of post-independence India is Pritish Nandy. He has more than a dozen collections including *Gods and Olives* (1967), *The Poetry of Pritish Nandy* (1973) and *Tonight, This Savage Rite* (1977) to his credit. His verse gives the impression of wild energy and verbal belligerence and his imagination seems to be obsessed with urban violence and horror, death and sex. Prose-poetry is the most characteristic forms of Nandy.

One of the most substantial post independence poets of nineteen seventies is Keki N Daruwalla. *Undern Orion* (1970), *Apparition in April* (1971), *Crossing of Rivers* (1976), *Winter Poems* (1980), *The keeper of the Dead* (1982), *Landscape* (1987), *A Summer of Tigers* (1995), *Night River* (2000) and *The Map-maker* (2002) are some of his major works. A police officer by profession, Daruwalla is not without significance in understanding his response to men and matters. With a trained eye he observes the Indian scene, but cannot, in spite of his training, remain absolutely detached. Deprivation and misery, disease and death move him acutely. His view of both Zoroastrianism and Hinduism is marked by scepticism tempered by a lively human curiosity.

Articulate Silences (1970), *Cobwebs in the Sun* (1974), *Subterfuges* (1976) and *Woodpeckers* (1979) are some of the works of a senior academic Shiv K Kumar which reveals his mastery of both the confessional mode and ironic comment. Kumar is full of witty sallies and his verse always moves with a seemingly casual but assured gait.

Jayant Mahapatra, another academic, needs no introduction. He has the distinction of being the first Indian English poet to have received the Sahitya Academy Award (1981). In his poetry---*Close the Sky, Ten by Ten* (1971), *Swayamvara and Other Poems* (1971), *A Rain of Rites* (1976), *Waiting* (1979), *Relationship* (1980)--- one may find him singing of the hearts and minds of many things of nature on the basis of his sincere love for all creation, poverty, deprivation and social injustice. He has an admirable colloquial style punctuated by thrusts of striking images.

Arun Kolatkar, who won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize for his long poem *Jejuri* (1976), discloses the surrealistic similarities between an ossified Hindu religious tradition and an equally rigid scientific civilization. He is generally skeptical and ironic, though moments of sympathy do break in. Kolatkar has a real mastery of the language and there is the stir of uneasy life in his works. Praising his work *Jejuri*, Homi Bhabha finds that “with *Jejuri* Indo-Anglian poetry has finally established itself, ceased to commune solely with its strange, unrepresentative urban existence and has confronted the strange gods which sustain a forsaken people.”(Bhabha, 1978)

Post-independence Indian English poetry has witnessed so many female voices. Kamala Das is the most outstanding among post-independence women poets---“a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts, it has received in an insensitive largely man-made world.”

(Iyengar, 1985). In her poems--- *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), *The Anamalai Poems* (1985), *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* (1996) and *Yaa Allah* (2001)---she has presented the pain and suffering of a woman and the reality of life. Das's is confessional poetry obsessively mulling over love, sex and the body's wisdom. Her own disgust and failures have led her to a frantic search of the mythic Krishna, the ideal lover, to establish eternal bond. There is emotional intensity, mastery of phrase and control over rhythm in her language.

Monika Varma (1916), Gauri Deshpande (1942), Mamata Kalia (1942), Suniti Namjoshi (1941) are a few other female-voice worth-mentioning here.

Monika Varma reveals her acuteness to nature in *Dragonflies Draw Flame* (1962), *Past Imperative* (1972) and *Alakananda* (1976). Gauri Deshpande's *Between Births* (1968), *Lost love* (1970) and *Beyond The Slaughterhouse* (1972) show a similar sensitiveness to the changing moods of nature as well as the drama of man-woman relationship found in Kamala Das. In, *Tribute to Papa* (1970) and *Poems* (1978), Mamata Kalia is found talking about love, marriage, family life and society with irony and will. A similar mood is seen in Suniti Namjoshi's *Poems* (1967), *Cyclone in Pakistan* (1971) and *The Jakass and the Lady* (1980).

Some other women poets of this era are Tilottama Rajan, Sunita Jain, Margaret Chatterjee, Tapati Mookerji, Meena Alexander, Roshan Alkazi, Lila Ray, Ira De, Eunice de Souza and others. Similar is the case with male poets too. Though it is too larger, some of them are Deb Kumar Das, Paul Jacobs, S C Saha, S Mokashi Punekar, K D Katrak, Sukanta Chaudhuri, Suresh Kohli, O P Bhatnagar, Keshav Mallik, K Raghavendra Rao, Dilip Chitre, I K Sharma, Syed Ameeruddin, G S Sharat Chandra, R C Shukla, I H Rizvi, C S Singh, R K Singh, D C Chambial, P Jha and others.

The works of several male and female poets mentioned here demonstrate their poetic talent and aptitude and reveal the great variety of mood, tone and technical strategy that characterize post-independence Indian English poetry in particular and Indian English poetry in general.

Conclusion:

"The vitality and fecundity of post-independence Indian English poetry are certainly remarkable." (Naik, 1984) Though it has not been able to escape completely from tradition, it has a new note and a new urgency of utterance. Being freed from the restraints of metre, rhyme and form, the poetry of this age is a fine coalescence of tradition and modernity. The poets of this age deal with the concrete experiences of men living in this modern world.

With their innovative use of the diction and bold experiments with poetic modes, the post-independence Indian English poets have infused new blood into their poetry. As the poets of this era are mostly concerned with themselves and their surroundings, their poetry *"is in its essence an attempt to*

see man and his world as they really are without veils and pretenses.” (Aurobindo, 1953) Their poetry reveals, as P K J Kurup remarks, “*a tension resulting from their acute self-awareness and the restraint imposed upon them by the hostile environment and becomes a private quest for values and an effort to peer into the dark abysmal contents of the poet’s own mind.*”(Tilak, 2011)

Nissim Ezekiel’s *Night of the Scorpion*, Jayant Mahapatra’s *Relationship*, A K Ramanujan’s *The Striders*, Kamala Das’s *The Invitation*, R Parthasarathy’s *Rough Passage*, K N Daruwalla’s *Boat-Ride along the Ganga* etc. are some of the well-received pieces of quality of post-independence era. It is not surprising if defending the authenticity of the poetry of this era, Bruce King writes :

“The only answer to those who claimed that Indians could not write authentic poetry in the English in which they had been educated, was to write poetry as good as that of British, American and Irish poets but to write it about Indian lives and conditions.”(King, 1987)

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