

## Navigating New Idiom and Sensibilities in Contemporary Indian Poetry

**Dr. Pooja Joshi**

Assistant Professor, Department of English  
University of Rajasthan, Jaipur

### Abstract

In the recent times the native Indian literature including the Bhasha literatures has seen an unforeseen growth of its own. Indian English poetry is an attempt to give a generic cover to the Indian imagination seeking creative outlet in and through English language. Since the last decades of twentieth century Indian English verse has gained Indian sensibility and an Indian context of its own. It seems to be rooted in and nurtured from the Indian environment and reflects its ethos and essence. Contemporary Indian English poetry offers a conspicuous world in which the response to Indian reality, the underlying sensibility, the use of imagery, diction, etc. are strikingly different, particularly in the new poets. The present paper is an attempt to study this new generation of poets beginning from Ramanujan, Parthasarathy, Jayanta Mahapatra, to K. N. Daruwalla, Dilip Chitre, Pritish Nandy, Eunice De Souza, Meena Alexander- the younger generation poets who talk about their experience of Indian milieu and culture without losing their national identity. Gouri Deshpande, Meera Pillai and several other eminent poets from writers' workshop brought to light how the new writers take pride in their Indian background and focus on the shaping of a national consciousness within the environment of the country, the climate, the vibrant traditions and so on.

**Keywords:** Indian English Literature, Contemporary Poets, Indian sensibility, Culture, Identity.

Poetry is universally believed to be the expression of human life in its myriad forms and subtleties. India is a land rich in age-old tradition of arts and poetry from ages. With the arrival of British in India and as a result of colonial rule, English became the new language of expression for the Indians. A survey of the Indian poetic tradition in English language reveals that the poetry written by the Indians in English in the last 150 years can be explored under three stages: firstly the imitative, second the transitional and the third as experimental. The first period from 1850 to 1900 is the phase of imitation where the Indian poets wrote in

romantic strain adhering blindly to the poetry of the Romantics. The chief sources of inspiration were the British romantic poets: Wordsworth, Scott, Shelley, Keats and Byron. From the years ranging 1900 to 1947, a transition followed when the Indian poets continued their romantic spirit yet made endeavours towards a fusion of the romanticism of the early nineteenth century English poets and the "new" romantic bards of the decadent period. It led to an urge for expressing the renaissance spirit of Indian literati that emerged due to rise in nationalism and political changes that finally led to the freedom of India in 1947.

Indian poetry, in the first phase can be attributed as the period of literary renaissance in India. The poetry of Henry Derozio, Kasiprasad Ghose's *The Shair or Minstrel* and other poems, *The Captive Lady* by Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Manmohan Ghose's Love Songs and Elegies are the true fruits of the creative upsurge fuelled by the literary renaissance. Among the romantic poets of this early phase, Toru Dutt stands out prominently as one exquisite voice who sings of India and her rich heritage by narrating into verse a large number of Indian legends and mythological tales. The second phase poets carried the romantic strain in same vein for instance Tagore, Sarojini Naidu, Aurobindo Ghose and Harindranth Chattopadhyaya. Their rich corpus of poetic activity by these poets enriched the Indian English verse to great heights. Their romantic creed was fraught with nationalism, spirituality and mysticism. It was therefore different from the typical English romanticism. Indian romanticism widened the poet's vision. Aurobindo set out for the search of the 'Divine in Man' and Tagore explored the 'Beautiful' in Man and Nature philosophizing poetry to a great extent. Sarojini Naidu's romantic muse captured the charm and frame of traditional Indian life and Indian scene. Her fine sense for lyrical felicity and verbal melody was remarkable as she was deeply influenced by English poetry as well as the Persian and Urdu poetry. Later she was widely addressed and recognised as true nightingale of India.

The ethos of the post-independence phase of Indian English literature is radically different from the first two phases. When the question of political independence was resolved in 1947 with the partition of India, the tensions of the Indian psyche suddenly transformed. The post - independence era of hope and aspiration was replaced by an era of questioning and ironic undertones. The national identity achieved after independence enabled Indian authors to analyse the present, the past and themselves. This new vigour and confidence brought the Indian poets in line with modern English and American poets giving them a new edge of exposure. Hence, once again there was borrowing up to some extent as in the first two phases

of Indian poetry. While the pre-1947 poets borrowed from the romantics, Victorians and "new" Romantics of the decadent period, the post-1947 poets borrowed from the modernist poets like Yeats, Eliot, Pound and Auden.

However, to reject the past and escape tradition can never be an ideal road for a poet. The past is always buried deep in the poet's consciousness which psychologist Carl Jung has termed as "the blocked off radical unconscious". Also a poet can never escape the present because he is in it and whatever he is, because of it. The best a writer can choose is to relate the immediate present to the living past and if possible to a future that is in the process of rendering a chain of creativity. Now, to move forward to the later phase of Indian English poetry is the modern and postmodern phases. This experimental zone includes urbanization, industrialization, mobility, independence, social change, increased communication (in the form of cinema, television, radio, journals and newspapers) national and international transportation networks, mass education and the resulting paradox that as an independent culture emerges, it also participates in the international, modern usually westernized world. Let us analyse at this juncture some of the causes responsible for the emergence of the various shades of Indian English poetry: 'new', 'modern', and 'experimental'.

Prof. Srinivasa Iyengar rightly observed that Indian writing in English is a novel experiment in creative mutation when he stated: "To be Indian in thought and feeling and emotion and experience, yet also to court the graces and submit to the discipline of English for expression is something that the present writers aim at" (8). Contemporary Indian English verse has gained Indian sensibility and an Indian context of its own. The roots of Indian poetry can be traced to Indian environment and setting which clearly reflects this multi-layered cultural ethos. The major post - independence Indian English poets include Kamala Das, Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, Adil Jussawalla, A. K. Ramanujan, R. Parthasarathy, Arvind Mehrotra, Jayanta Mahapatra, K. N. Daruwalla, Shiv Kumar, Gieve Patel, Dilip Chitre, Pritish Nandy, Eunice De Souza, Meena Alexander, Agha Shahid Ali to name the prominent ones. The new generation modernist poets sought as their role models cosmopolitan poets from Europe, Africa, America, Australia, Canada and Asia absorbing all as a part of our cultural consciousness that offer impetus and stimulation.

For M. K. Naik, to be truly an Indian of modern times is "to constitute a synthesis of the age-old ethos of India and the culture of the west which English literature and ideas brought to India; it is to live and breathe the culture of India as it exists today, a complex

product which has changed, matured over millenia, losing and gaining much in the process; it is to write with Indian in one's bones" (37). Contemporary Indian English poetry is the expression of certain attitudes and values believed in by certain sections of today's Indian society, wholly urban, middle class. The poets are realistic and intellectually critical in the expression of their individualized experience. Modern Indian poems are by the poet turned psychologist, psychoanalyst, existentialist, surrealist etc. They are purely an expression of first hand experiences and thought processes.

There is a lot of experimentation in the modern Indian poetry with a view to achieving a modern idiom and style. Rhyme and stanza forms were replaced by free verse. The tone was one of intellectualized irony and sarcasm. The stance of the poets was one of complete detachment and objectivity. The other innovation of the modern Indian poets is the use of symbolism. The poets use modern techniques used by the film industry and advertising industry, besides the stream of consciousness and free association of ideas. There is much "word-hunting" and "image-hunting" which reflects the medium of consciousness on the part of the poet. The Indian poets therefore borrow words from their regional languages. To be Indian, poets have to be rooted somewhere in India - geographically, historically, socially or psychologically. There is no doubt that during the 1950's the dominant tone in Indian poetry in English shifted. The impact was swift and sweeping. What had been a minority voice suddenly became that of the majority. A readymade aesthetic was available to the new poets - the modernism of Eliot and Pound, of Richards and Leavis and of Picasso and jazz music. This aesthetic found rapid acceptance in the disillusionment of the post - independence era. Instead of ushering in the promised golden age, independent India became a typical third world country, backward, corrupt and hypocritical. The new generation which had come of age in the 1950's and 1960's found itself betrayed by its elders. It was impatient for change and fed up with the platitudes of the past.

The first major characteristic of the modernists was a rejection of the past. This was suggested in the title of Ezekiel's first book of poems, *A Time to Change* (1952). A whole generation turned its back on tradition and found itself alienated in the new India. Secondly, they declared themselves opposed to the idealism and romanticism of their predecessors. They wanted a poetry which was without escapism and flights of fancy, a poetry written in a clear, hard, unsentimental voice and in everyday language. Thirdly, the poets believed in a secular muse. They had little faith in mysticism and other - worldly ideologies. Instead with

relish, they introduced a bold, new frankness into their poetry. Turning away from religion, they sought meaning and order in personal relationships. They wrote about the city and its dirty, poverty-stricken and dehumanizing environs. Finally, the poets increasingly resorted to irony as the best means of representing their love-hate relationship with their surroundings. They believed they were alienated from their society and irony was the only way of expressing their ambivalence towards themselves and their world. Of course, all the poets write about personal relationships, growing up, cityscapes, tradition - modernity conflicts and their identity crisis.

Post-modernism seems to promise a variety of new devices including parody, pastiche, paradox, collage, intertextuality and literary cannibalism of varying degrees. One of the main subjects for poetry is the nature and problematic of poetry itself. There is, at the same time, a return of involvement in the Indian context, celebration of difference and the exploitation of ethnicity. This period has already produced noteworthy talents like Agha Shahid Ali, Saleem Peeradina, Manohar Shetty, Vikram Seth and Imtiaz Dharker.

All literature, as Taine, the French critic said, is the product of the triad, the race, the moment and the milieu and since for the Indians the attainment of independence in 1947 marks a great watershed, in the post - independence poetry underwent a sea change as far as the themes are concerned. The poets are faced with the crisis of identity so their poetry is one of quest, a search of their self, a search for their cultural roots. The reason for such a theme of Indian poetry is not far to seek. The Indian poets who express themselves in English have their cultural roots in their community. Many of these Indian poets have been educated abroad but since they belong to the middle - class, they find themselves alienated within their own immediate circle and even from the westernized ethos. Some of the poets come from different racial backgrounds but are nationals of India for example, Nissim Ezekiel is a Jew, Dom Moraes is an Anglo - Indian, Daruwalla and Jussawalla are Parsees, Eunice De Souza is a Goan Christian. The Indian poet writing in English therefore finds himself alienated. So the poetry of modern Indian poets naturally turns on the theme of identity crisis. Poets like Ramanujan, Parthasarathy and Arun Kolatkar are preoccupied with the problem of roots. Their examination of Hindu ethos has been in several directions. Ramanujan, for example, conjures up his early childhood memories with strong sense impressions. At the same time his mind keeps examining the strong and weak points of his cultural heritage.

Ramanujan's creative work, both as poet and translator, has drawn praise from the English speaking world. Ezekiel is of the opinion that Ramanujan has enriched the Indo-Anglican tradition of poetry to a great extent. Even the titles of some of his poems such as 'A Hindu to His Body' (The Hindu: he does not hurt a fly or a spider either) 'Small Town, South India', 'Old Indian Belief', and 'Prayers to Lord Muruga' suggest Ramanujan's Indianness. In conventions of despair, the poet tells explicitly that he rejects the demands of the modern man such as marrying again and again:

"I must seek and will find  
my particular hell only in my Hindu mind."

Ramanujan's Indianness in his poetry indicates a complex interaction or psychological forces kept under linguistic and formal control. His poetry is essentially Indian with the modern connection vitalising it as in 'A River':

"The new poets still quoted  
the old poets, but no one spoke  
in verse,  
of the pregnant woman drowned...."<sup>1</sup>

Ramanujan finds his objective correlative in a family around him. In the poem, "Obituary" he recalls his father's death, and uses the occasion to comment ironically on ceremonies and rituals associated with the dead. Parthasarathy too is obsessed with his roots in India while leading a westernized life style. His poem 'Rough Passages' is an attempt to deal with the theme of identity exposed to two cultures namely the Indian and the Western. The scrutiny of society is another subject matter of modern poetry. The poets who write in English were born, say in the twenties and thirties of this century and on growing up they have been a part of independent India. They are a witness to and a part of socio economic and political changes. They cannot but be critical of all that happens around. So the socio-political and economic scene as it impinges on the poet's consciousness becomes the subject - matter of modern poetry.

Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri* is an example in point. A mood of disillusionment and despair, cynicism and sarcasm characterizes modern Indian poetry. Alienation and exile, the crisis of personal identity and of cultural identity, childhood memories, familial relations, and love, nostalgia for the past and cultural traditions therefore constitute the themes of Indian poets. In

the case of some poets, the sense of alienation from the family or the community becomes so overwhelming that they turn completely inward. The result of such inwardness is a highly personal poetry, confessional in tone and obsessed with loneliness and insecurity from which the escape is sought either in the erotic fantasies or the self- probing of a tortured soul. Such is the poetry of Kamala Das, Eunice de Souza and Shiv Kumar. The poets of the 80s seem more interested in depicting and evaluating their family background, personal and social landscapes. So do the poets Agha Shahid Ali, Dilip Chitre. Mahapatra portrays the rural Indian landscape of the state of Orissa. The poets thus reveal their awareness of raw Indian identity. The poetic sensibilities are oriented along three distinct avenues: the modes of affirmation in terms of myth and history, quest for the self in and through love, modes of negation in terms of longing for dissolution and death. So the themes of modern Indian poetry are secular and more introspective contemplative.

This synthesis has clear glimpses in the works of modern poets like Ezekiel, Mahapatra, etc. For example, Nissim Ezekiel's "Night of the Scorpion" ably illustrates the Indian synthesis in the work of modernists. The contrast between the two attitudes to scorpion bite; the sceptic, rationalist attitude armed with a little paraffin as a remedy on one hand and the superstitious attitude fortified by prayers and incantations - a contrast typical of the modern Indian situation on the other. Coolness, authentic and objectivity are some of the marks of Ezekiel's harsher notations of Indian life. One of the Indian English poets who have emerged as a major poet only recently is Shiv K. Kumar, Kumar gives in his poetry evidence of genuine poetic inspiration. His poetry has great precision and the image glistens like polished brass though he has often been criticised for his over refinement, a bizarre search for right word, right phrase, right stance. Subterfuges, Cobwebs in the Sunshine are evasions or deceptions that we encounter in our life. The cobweb being swept away, the subterfuges become visible to us. 'A Mango Vendor' is an eloquent metaphor:

"Through the slits  
Of her patched blouse  
One bare shoulder  
Two white moons  
Pull all horses  
Off the track."

Kumar's originality lies in the uniqueness of his imaginative world. He grapples with abstractions and ideas, images of men and women on the social scene, the complex of emotions centring round human varieties like sex, love, companionship and problems relating to art. Through powerfully evoked images the past is relived. 'My Co-respondent' is a fine example of how Kumar achieves an integrative of idea and image, statement and drama to provide a wholly satisfying experience. Deeply involved in his immediate environment, Kumar continues to strike a convincing note of contemporary life. *Trapfalls in the Sky* is his fifth collection of verse which won Sahitya Academic Award for 1987. The poems have flawless attention to detail, for instance, the opening poems 'An Indian Mother's Advice to Her Daughter before Marriage'. Thus, the poetry of these and other modern Indian English poets suggests a case for exploring Indianness in terms of not only the authenticity of their locale and culture, but the medium of the expression.

To sum up, we may envision clearly that Post-independence brought in a dawn of a new era of disillusionment and identity crisis. The promises of a bright future of India and the bitter experience of partition had made life miserable. A new elite middle class had come into existence bringing in a quest for identity as Indians and as humans. Diaspora and culturally rootedness had its own problems. These themes gave birth to new techniques and experimentation in poetry. Confessional mode of poetry explores the trauma of modern life. The new poets regard English language as one of the many Indian languages, and their exploration of it to its fullest possibilities, both in range and depth produces some of the best poetry. Their poetry is lyrical poetry which is unique in that the weight or intellect never overburdens their authentic feelings. The poetry of the modern and the post modern Indian poets reflect the contemporary society and life. It can be called an India in a miniature form.

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