

RESEARCH ARTICLE

**MODERN INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY: AN OVERVIEW****MIR LIYAQAT NAZIR**

PhD Research Scholar, Department of English, University of Pune



Article Info:

Article Received:14/03/2014

Revised on:29/3/2014

Accepted for Publication:30/03/2014

ABSTRACT

This research paper attempts to present an overview on the modern Indian English poetry though it's not possible to cover the whole genre in a single paper. However, I have tried my best to explicitly analyze some of the main poets like Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das A. K. Ramanujan and Jayanta Mahapatra exclusively. As we know after the fall of colonial empire the Indian English modern poetry had a paradigm shift from the traditional notions of poetry into new ideals. Modern Indian English poetry too surfaced with great passion and fervor though, it faced lot of hurdles and criticism from the nationalists by eschewing the pre- colonial culture of India and by writing in a language which is a remnant of British occupation. Despite all the hiccups the modern Indian poetry holds a significant place in the modern Indian culture. Today the galaxy of Indian English is much larger and more varied than it was ever before. The new poets have found appropriate techniques for their perception of reality.

@ Copyright KY Publications

Poetry has always been the most popular genre in the literature and it's said that the language of poetry exists when there was no language. The language of poetry delves deep into the sensation that's why it's defined as the spontaneous overflow of emotion and actions recollected in tranquility. Modern Indian poetry in English can be defined as poetry written/published from 1947 onwards (the year India gained Independence from British rule), by poets of Indian origin, born or settled outside India writing in the English language. After, the fall of colonial empire new literature from the colonized countries emerged depicting the local sensitivity and adding the local spices and color in terms of native cultural discourse on the world literature map. Historically if we see English language is not still having any regional base in India except some North

East states and Southern states where it's used as link language but slowly and surely it's becoming the synonym to the vernacular. Despite its huge growth in education and economic sectors it still remains one of the minority languages in India spoken by just the 4% of the population. Despite the continuous pressure from the nationalist, English language remain at the heart of Indian society. Today English language has achieved the status, the language of governance, communication and therefore continues to play very important role in national decision making. It was the Macaulay's "Minute on Indian Education" which exerted a fundamental and formative influence on the academic atmosphere in India. Although his intention of making people "Indian in blood and colour, but in English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" proved to be

partially true, the decision to introduce English education certainly had a huge impact on the academic level. Moreover Indian proved to be extremely receptive and assimilative to English education and English language.

In this backdrop Modern Indian English poetry too surfaced with great passion and fervor though, it faced lot of hurdles and criticism from the nationalists by eschewing the pre-colonial culture of India and by writing in a language which is a remnant of British occupation. Despite all the hiccups the modern Indian poetry holds a significant place in the modern Indian culture. It was the Henry Louis V. Derozio (1809-1831), a Eurasian by descent, born of an Indian mother and a Portuguese father considered to be the first noteworthy creative writer in English in India. He published only a couple of poetry collections: *Poems* (1827) and *The Fakeer of Jungheera* A Metrical tale and other poems (1828). His sonnets are quite bold and explicit. In "The Harp of India" is a patriotic poem that pays a glorious tribute to the rich tradition of the art of Indian poetry which conveys the poet's deep anguish at the decline of the age of old art under the slavish shackles of British supremacy.

The Indian English modern poetry began its real journey in the early 1960's and the avant-garde were Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan, R. Parthasarthy, K. N. Daruwalla, O. P. Bhatnagar, Jayanta Mahapatra, Kamala Das, Shiva K. Kumar, Monika Verma, Gauri Deshpande, Arun Kolatkar and many others. Kamala Das (Kamala Suriya) and Nissim Ezekiel, focused on the actuality of personal and family life; on the other hand, the experimental poetry of Mehrotra, Kolatkar, Nandy, Chitre and Mahapatra began to appear in the late 60's and early 70's. It started with little bit satirical and yet compassionate and mainly it focuses on the communal harmony and family heritage which latter become an important trend in the modern English poetry on India. Modern poets have revealed tension in their respective poems and have inborn Indianans because with the passage of time English language in India got more localized and explored. As Bruce King remarks: "If at first modern Indian English verse appeared to be indebted to British and a few European models, it now reveals an awareness of most of world literature, including

contemporary American, recent South American, and older devotional verse in the regional languages"

The Modern Indian English poetry is full of ironical styles and the new poets have used it as a great weapon in their poetry against the socio political religious dogmas. New poets like Shiva K. Kumar, Ramanujan, Daruwalla, Grieve Patel, Arun Kolatkar, Kamala Das, and I. H. Rizvi etc. excel in the use of the ironic mode. As far as their style is concerned the modern Indian English poets neither followed the English poets nor the British English. However the impact of great English poets can be seen in the early modern English poets. They have evolved a distinct idiom to express their voice and have succeeded to indianize English in order to reveal typical Indian situations. Let's take a look at some of the main modern English Indian poets who have contributed a lot in shaping and making modern English Indian poetry a legitimate and a radiant jewel in the casket of world literature.

Nissim Ezekiel

Nissim Ezekiel is considered the father of modern Indian English poetry because it was after his appearance in Indian English poetry that other modern poets started their carrier in poetry. He belonged to the metropolitan India born and brought up in the Bene Isriell Jewish family in Mumbai. He had deep impact of T.S.Eliot, W.B.Yeats and Ezra Pound right from his childhood. When he started his writing carrier in the 1940's his style of English became controversial in an atmosphere where traditionalists and nativists were in the pursuit to revive the great Indian culture which they believe has lost its sheen and importance due to the colonialism. Yet he "naturalized the language to the Indian situation, and breathed life into the Indian English poetic tradition. Ezekiel's poetry described love, loneliness, lust, creativity, political pomposity and human foibles. Bruce King in his book *Modern Indian Poetry* describes Ezekiel's poetry as:

"If Indian poets often saw poetry as the hobby of an amateur who wrote occasional pieces in spare time, Ezekiel viewed poetry as a way of life; a poem was part of an evolving body of work, an expression of life as a poet."

In the words of Shakuntala Bharvani, “unlike the earlier poets, Ezekiel displays no needless nationalistic fervor or long windedness. Instead, he expresses his skepticism, his restlessness and the desire to dedicate himself to his poetic impulses.” Alienation and discrimination are the most dominating theme in his poetry apart from other because Ezekiel suffered a lot in his childhood which he has described clearly in many of his poems. In his autobiographical poem, “Background, Casually,” the poet speaks about his school days:

I went to Roman Catholic School
A mugging Jew among the wolves
They told me I had killed the Christ
That year I won the scripture prize
A Muslim sportsman boxed my ears
I grew in terror of the strong
But undernourished Hindu lads
Their prepositions always wrong
Repelled me by passivity
One noisy day I used a knife.
(Ezekiel, *Collected Poems* 179)

Ezekiel delineates the picture of both the extremes of the stratification of society, the lower middle class as well as the elitist lifestyle. In both classes and hidden dark side become the major contents for his poems. The “Night of the Scorpion” is one of Ezekiel’s poems in which he dramatizes a battle of ideas fought at night in lamplight between good and evil; between darkness and light; between rationalism and blind faith. R. Parthasarathy points out that in “Night of the Scorpion,” “the scorpion is identified with the Evil one, and hence an impressive ritual is enacted to exercise this Evil one (qtd. In Chindhade 36).

C.D.Narasimhaiah compliments Nissim Ezekiel in the following words “But to the extent he has availed himself of the composite culture of India to which he belongs he must be said to be an important poet not merely in the Indian context, but in a consideration of those that are writing poetry anywhere in English”.

Thus Ezekiel’s ‘Very Indian Poems in Indian English’ are a good document to look into the Indian ethos of the poet. They are simply not for the purpose of creating humor through caricature of Indian people and Indian scenes. In a reply to a query that he was

“making fun of the Indian English speaker in these poems”, Ezekiel mentioned that he was just catching the ‘idiom’ of the people. He said, “I hear a person talking in a certain way. I catch the idiom, his attitudes in a poem. Should this be interpreted as lack of respect, a colonial snobbishness? I take the risk. With the passage of time, the emphasis will change.” (In an interview with Imtiaz and Anil Dharker, *Nissim Ezekiel Remembered*. Ed.)

Kamla Das (Kamla Suriya)

Kamala Das belonged to the great trinity of the modern Indian English poets who not only took the new genre onto new heights but Indianized as well as romanticized its content. Her poetry has been both praised and criticized on account of her frank and uninhibited expression of sexual desires of a woman, and her satisfaction and frustration on this account. It was the impact of Women’s liberation movement which began in 1960s in the west though reached slightly late in India. It was this period in which Indian writings in English became more vibrant and effective in theme and style. Bijay Kumar Das rightly observes:

“It is only in the 1960s that Indian English poetry began to exist independently with a stamp of originality and authenticity”.

In this period the real metamorphosis started in the Indian writings in English. The female writers came forward as the women’s liberation movement in the west was in full swing but in the typical patriarchal society they were still not free from the old sexual taboos of Indian society. It was the Kamala Das who fought like a crusader against this internal conflict of morality and female sexuality irrespective of her traditional background and treated sex explicitly in her poetry. “Call her Kamla Das, Madhavikutti or Suriya, but the women by any name” whose introduction is given by herself in the poem “An Introduction”:

“I am Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar, speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one”.

In the poem “The Dance of the Eunuchs” she portrays this theme of suppressed desire within as she is torn between social taboos and sexual urge. The dance of the eunuchs is a dance of the sterile, and therefore, the unfulfilled and unquenchable love of the woman in the poet. Her poetry is also

called the poetry of protest which is largely delineating her personal ordeal. Kamla Das's important poetic works are "Summer in Calcutta," „The Descendants", "The old Playhouse" and other poems most of her poems deal with the theme of unfulfilled love and yearning for love. The Dance of the Eunuchs" is a good example of a poem dealing with the theme:

It was hot so hot before the eunuchs came
To dance, wide skirts going round and round,
cymbals

Richy, Dashing, and anklets jingling, jingling
Jingling beneath the fiery gulmohur, with
Long braids flying, dark eyes flashing, they danced
and

They dance; oh they danced till they bled

Some critics think that Kamala Das is an obscene poet and had extramarital affairs to find her true love but it is not so she has presented in her poems the reality of life. She says that:

"Love is beautiful whatever four lettered name
the puritans call it by. It is the foretaste of
paradise. It is the only pastime that involves
the soul."

However it is true that Kamala's own disgust and failures led her to a frantic search for the mythic Krishna, the ideal lover, in whom she could establish eternal bond. This search made her aware of the need to study all men: "all at once the plot thickened with a researcher's hunger for knowledge, I studied all men." Since the quest has, by and large failed in her case, sex is no more than a "mindless surrender" or a heartless participation not a "humming fiesta". The absurdities of a male's body and 'Skins lazy hungers' are depicted nicely in the following lines of Freaks,

"He talks, turning a sun – stained
Check to me, his mouth a dark
Cavern, where stalacitites of
Uneven teeth gleam, his right
Hand on my knee, while our minds
Are willed to race towards love." (2)

Throughout her multifarious relationships she was in quest for her spiritual lover, the eternal companion of her soul, the divine myth Krishna and we can witness this quest in the poems based on Radha-Krishna imagery namely: A Man is a Season, Radha, Radha-Krishna, A Phantom Lotus,

Ghanshyam, Vrindavan and Krishna. These poems are representative of her faith in the spiritual evolution of man. Thus Kamala Das alias Kamala Suriya is a first Indian confessional women poet who pours her heart into her poetry which is largely subjective and autobiographical, anguished and tortured, letting us peep into her suffering and tortured psyche. Kamala Das has never declared herself a feminist writer, but judged from the subversive way in which she highlights woman-centered issues, most pertinent to the Indian context, her poetry is undeniably a feminist confessional text. For Kamla Das confession symbolizes a private assertion of freedom that challenges rather than simply conforms to existing social norms.

A.K. Ramanujan

Bruce King introduces Ramanujan as deeply rooted Indian and yet fully cosmopolitan. He says, "And then there is Ramanujan, a Brahmin, yes, and perhaps the world's greatest scholar of the languages and literatures of southern India, but married to a Syrian Christian and for most of his life a professor in an American university. When he cooked for himself he was a vegetarian; when invited to a conference in Paris he ate all kinds of gourmet food as he felt he should experience the world." (King, Bruce. Three Indian Poets) But even, as Ramanujan once said, "When you are cosmopolitan, you ultimately have to know something quite deeply." (As quoted by King, Bruce. Modern Indian Poetry in English) Ramanujan's poetry is essentially Indian in material and sensibility and occupies a prominent place as a poet in the cosmos of Indian English poetry. He explains the paradox in a note to Twentieth Century Indian Poets: "English and my disciplines (linguistics, anthropology) give me my 'outer forms— linguistic, metrical, logical and other such ways of shaping experience, and my first thirty years in India, my frequent visits and field trips, my personal and professional preoccupation with Kannada, Tamil, the classics and folklores give me my substance, my 'Inner' forms, images and symbols. They are continuous with each other, and I no longer can tell what comes from where."

He has earned the name and fame all over the world after the publication of his two volumes of poetry

"The Striders" (1966) and "Relations" (1971). After the promulgation of "The Striders" he won a 'Poetry Book Society Recommendation' and established his position as "one of the most talented of the 'new' poets." According to William Walsh he is "the most gifted poet." Ramanujan not only in English he achieved fame but also achieved recognition in Kannada and Tamil languages with his anthologies — "Hokkulalli Hoovilla" and "Kurunthohai." He has also translated into English poetry in Tamil and Kannada in *The Interior Landscape* (1967) and *Speaking of Siva* (1972) respectively. Each and every piece of his literary output in Kannada and Tamil proclaimed a new epoch in vernacular literature. Ramanujan's poetry reflects a touch of humanity, Indian ethos and pertinence of life. He is the outcome of a perfect, polished, sophisticated and profound multiculturalism. His English poetry incorporates and assimilates linguistic, literary and cultural features of Kannada and Tamil into the linguistic, literary and cultural form of English literature. Like the house in "Small Scale Reflections on a Great House" he absorbs the Western model to express a supposedly Indian way of being. " S.S. Dulai expressively says: "Ramanujan observes closely and often laments poignantly the human misery resulting from material want and moral corruption in contemporary India."

But his achievement as modern Indian English poet was that he blended both India and European models into new forms and accommodates and assimilates other cultures without losing consciousness of being an Indian.

Jayanta Mahapatra

Jayanta Mahapatra needs no introduction in the Indian English literary circles as he was the part of the trio of poets who laid the foundations of modern Indian English Poetry. He is not only a writer of verse but a dreamer and a visionary, a physicist and a philosopher delving too far into the unknown and uncharted domains and trajectories. His poetry revolves around the India and Indianess. Jayanta Mahapatra was born and brought up in Orissa and his poems are mostly delineating the landscape of Orissa. His sensibility is essentially Indian, but he does not create the traditional impressions like tigers, snakes, snakes-charmers, jugglers, crocodiles etc. He is really Indian, and his Indianness can be

seen at its best in his poems revolving around Orissa, where the people and the region is portrayed in such a way that it becomes universal. His collections of poems include *A Rain of Rites*, *Life Signs* and *A Whiteness of Bone*. But he is better remembered for his long poem '*Relationship*' which won him the Sahitya Akademi award in 1981. Being the product of Bombay school of poets he has over the time managed to carve a quiet, tranquil poetic voice of his own purely different from those of his contemporaries. His wordy lyricism combined with authentic Indian themes puts him in a league of his own.

In his poetry, Mahapatra sings the tales of many things of nature, on the basis of his sincere love for all creation, poverty, deprivation, social injustice, the plight of the Indian woman prostitution recur in his verses. He says all things happen around me and he cannot ignore them and write about the better things of life. His belief in poetry as a social reality gives him a special distinction from other contemporary poets writing in English.

The fusion of language and emotion in the poetry of Mahapatra creates pent up of emotions in the mind and heart of the readers, for which he becomes prominent among Indian English poets and also the most discussed in the field of international poetry. R. Parthasarthy rightly points out; the true poets among Indo- Anglian seem to be those who write in English as well as in their own language. They are poets in their own right who have something significant to say, and know how to say it, both in English and their native tongue. They are not out to sell their poetry through a skilful manipulation of words and the employment of sophisticated techniques. Mahapatra belongs to that group of Indian bilingual poets whose secret of success lies by not disowning their Indian inheritance.

Arun Kolatkar and Dilip Chitre are multi- lingual poets who developed regional poetry and took it into new horizons by translating it into English successfully. Kolatkar's long poem *Jejuri* is one of the significant and important poems in Indian poetry in English. It has almost uniformly been regarded as 'quest poem' as a presentation of modern urban skepticism impinging upon ancient religious tradition. The dominant theme of their poetry is based on the themes of Indian social problems.

There is also a group of Parsi poets who contributed contemporary Indian English poetry.

There are many other notable poets who depicted and reflected the socio-cultural realities of the day to day Indian life and contributed to the contemporary modern Indian English poetry. Keki. N Daruwalla considered as the front ranking modern Indian English poet. His poetry is full of images drawn from the landscape, depicts life and time realistically and shows great craftsmanship and using almost all poetic tools than any other Indian poet. Gieve Patel is another shining star whose poetry depicts the contemporary realities with pungent humor and crude sense of irony. A K Mehrotra is another well known modern English poet whose poems are the ironical depiction of present realities with a touch of surrealism. There are many other known poets who have broadened the horizon of Indian modern English poetry like R. Parthasarathy, Agha Shahid Ali, Vikram Seth, Pritish Nandy and Prof.R.Raj.Rao etc.

CONCLUSION

Thus Indian modern English poetry has achieved a distinctive range and power both in volume and in variety. 'the best indo-Anglian poets have given us something which neither English poetry nor any of our regional literatures can give; in other words, they have effected to true marriage of indain processes of poetic experience with English formulae of verse expression'. (Quoted by Dr.K.R.S.Iyengar) Modern Indian English poetry is of missed hue, a blend of different cultural and religious sensibilities as English poets of India have come from different religious backgrounds. It is the main feature of Indian English poetry that it's multi-cultural, multi lingual and multi racial. The contemporary Indian English poets write with a sense of analysis, interpretation and evaluation of the contemporary social, political and economic realities and present texts that reflect their response to the flux of experiences. Indian English poetry has already carved its niche as it has established its identity as a part of world literature. The modern Indian English poet doesn't slavishly imitate British or American poets as they have developed their own style of narration. Today the galaxy of Indian English is much larger and more varied than it was ever before. The new poets have found appropriate

techniques for their perception of reality. The range, variety, themes and voices of Indian English poetry have made great strides in recent decades.

Works cited

1. Thomas Macaulay, "Minute on Indian Education", Victorian Prose (Poona: University of Pune, 1968)
2. King, Bruce. Modern Indian poetry in English. New Delhi: OUP, 2001, p. x)
3. Ibid.
4. King, Bruce. *Three Indian Poets*. New Delhi: OUP, 2005,
5. Bharvani, Shakuntala. *Nissim Ezekiel*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, p. 3)
6. Ezekiel, Nissim. *Collected Poems*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989. Print.
7. Chindhade, Shirish. *Five Indian English Poets: Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan, Arun Kolatkar, Dilip Chitre, R. Parthasarathy*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001. Print.
8. In an interview with Imtiaz and Anil Dharker, *Nissim Ezekiel Remembered*. Ed. Havovi Anklesaria. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008, p. 46)
9. www.literary-articles.com/2013_11_01_archive.html
10. Kamala Das, "The Descendants", Calcutta; Writers Workshop 1967.
11. Kamala Das "The Old Polyhouse & other poems", Madras; Orient Longman 1973
12. Kamla Das, *Summer in Calcutta*, Everest Press New Delhi. P.10
13. Das, Bijay Kumar. "Post-1960 Indian English Poetry and the Making of Indian English Idiom." *Indian English Literature since Independence*. Ed. K. Ayyappa Paniker. New Delhi: The Indian Association for English Studies, 1991. 115-23. Print
14. Surjit S. Dulai, "First and only Sight: The Centre and the Circles of A.K.Ramanujan's Poetry", *Journal of South Asian Literature*, 24.2 (1989),p.160
15. Dr. Iyengar.S.R.K: *Indian writing in English*, New Delhi, 1983, p04.