

INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY: AN UNDERSTANDING

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Abstract:

Indian English literature began as an interesting by-product of an eventful encounter in the late 18th century between Britain and India. The first Indian English poet of note, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-31) was the son of an Indo-Portuguese father and an English mother. A precocious child, he had already taken to writing in his teens. After completing his school education, he tried his hand at journalism before joining the Hindu College, Calcutta, as a lecturer. Under his leadership, a debating club ('The Academic Association') and a magazine (The Parthenon) were started to discuss all subjects under the sun. In his all too brief poetic career lasting hardly half a dozen years, Derozio published two volumes of poetry: Poems (1827) and The Fakeer of Jungheera: A Metrical Tale and Other Poems (1828). A noteworthy feature of Derozio's poetry is its burning nationalistic zeal, somewhat surprising in a Eurasian at a time when the average representative of his class was prone to repudiate his Indian blood and identify himself with the white man, for eminently practical reasons.

Equally undistinguished are Rajnarain Dutt's (1824-89) verse narrative, *Osmyn: An Arabian Tale* (1841) in faded heroic couplets; Shoshee Chunder Dutt's (1815-65) *Miscellaneous Poems* (1848) and Hur Chunder Dutt's (1831-1901) *Fugitive Pieces* (1851). A better title to fame the last two Dutt's possess is that they were the uncles of a girl who was to write *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* a generation later.

Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-73), better known as an epoch-making writer in Bengali, began his career as an Indian English poet. In addition to some sonnets and shorter pieces, he wrote two long poems in English: *The Captive Ladie* (1849) narrates the story of the Rajput King, Prithviraj. The first period of Indian English literature may be said to end in the 1850s, a few years before the Indian Revolt of 1857 that great watershed in the relationship between India and Britain.

Toru Dutt (1856-77): It was with Toru Dutt (1856-77) that Indian English poetry really graduated from imitation to authenticity. The third and youngest child of Govin Chunder Dutt, Torulata, born a Hindu, was baptized along with the other members of the family in 1862. She learnt English at a very early age and reading and music were her chief hobbies. Sailing for Europe in 1869, she spent a year in France, studying French, and was thereafter in England for three years. Returning to India in 1873, she died of consumption four years later, at the age of 21. One of her father's sonnets contains a remarkable pen-portrait of her: 'Puny and elf-like, with dishevelled tresses/Self-willed and shy. .../ Intent to pay her tenderest addresses/ To bird or cat, but most intelligent.' Of Toru Dutt's two collections, only one appeared in her own life time and that was *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* (1876).

Among the younger contemporaries of R.C. Dutt was Manmohan Ghose (1869-1924), whose poetic career is a classic example of how the lack of roots stunts the growth of an artist cursed with 'an exile's heart' in his bosom. Manmohan Ghose's poems in *Primavera* (1890), which also included the work of Stephen Phillips, Laurence Binyon and Arthur Cripps, are typical of the mood of world-weariness and yearning and the colourful aestheticism of the Eighteen Nineties. *Love Songs and Elegies* (1898), while expressing the same strain more effectively, adds to it a celebration of Nature, and a surer command of image and phrase. *Songs of Love and Death* (1926) shows the poet still lost in the *fin de siècle* world, as a lyric like 'London' shows.

Sri Aurobindo: (1872-1950): A younger brother of Manmohan Ghose, Aurobindo Ghose provides a striking contrast. Though he had very much the same kind of upbringing as his elder brother, whom he accompanied to England at the age of seven, Sri Aurobindo found his roots in Indian culture and thought immediately on his return to India from Cambridge in 1893. Manmohan's career is a sad story of arrested artistic development while Sri Aurobindo's was a glorious chronicle of progress from patriot to poet, yogi and seer. After a brief, quiet spell in Baroda State Service (1893-1906) and a much shorter but far more hectic one as a political radical (1906-10), which landed him in jail for one year, Sri Aurobindo escaped to Pondicherry (then a French possession) in 1910, and made it his permanent home. Sri Aurobindo's long poetic career spanning sixty years yielded an impressive volume of verse of several kinds lyrical, narrative, philosophical and epic. The early *Short Poems* (1890-1900) are mostly minor verse of the 'romantic twilight' of the 1890s, celebrating the characteristic themes of love, sorrow, death and liberty. Among the longer poems of the early period are three complete narratives: 'Urvastie', 'Love and Death' and 'Baji Prabhau' and six fragments including four with an Indian background 'The Rishi', 'Chitrangada', 'Uloupie' and 'The Tale of Nala'. Both the main aim and the poetic strategy of his epic poem *Savitri* are indicated in the sub-title 'A legend and a symbol'. The ancient Hindu legend has been made here a vehicle of Sri Aurobindo's symbolic expression of his own philosophy of Man's realization of the 'life divine'.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941): Sri Aurobindo invites comparison with another prominent contemporary, who was actually his senior in age, but whose work in English began much later. Rabindranath Tagore, hailed by Mahatma Gandhi as 'The Great Sentinel', was one of those versatile men of his age. Poet, dramatist, novelist, short story writer, composer, painter, thinker, educationist, nationalist and internationalist such were the various roles that Tagore played with uniform distinction during his long and fruitful career.

Tagore's career as an Indian English poet began by sheer accident. In 1912, on the eve of his departure to England for medical treatment, he tried his hand at translating some of his Bengali poems into English. The manuscript, taken to England, was lost in the Tube Railway, retrieved by Tagore's son Rathindranath, and came later to be rapturously hailed by William Rothenstein and W.B. Yeats. The rest is history. *Gitanjali* (1912) took the literary world of London by storm and was followed in quick succession by *The Gardener* (1913) and *The Crescent Moon* (1913). The award of the Nobel Prize came in the same year. More collections followed *Fruit-Gathering* (1916), *Stray Birds* (1916), *Lover's Gift and Crossing* (1918) and *The Fugitive* (1921). By this time Tagore's reputation in the English-speaking world had already suffered a disastrous decline. Only two more volumes in English appeared: *Fireflies* (1928) and the posthumously published *Poems* (1942). M.K. Naik adds: "The hundred and odd pieces in *Gitanjali*, bound by the central thread of the devotional quest, exhibit a great variety of form also—a feature surprisingly ignored by those who have hastened to accuse Tagore of monotony." (Naik 64)

Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949): Sarojini Naidu, however, won recognition in England much earlier. Daughter of a Bengali educationist settled in the former princely State of Hyderabad, Sarojini Naidu, nee Chattopadhyaya started writing poetry at a very early age. Sailing to England when sixteen, she studied at London and Cambridge for three years. Here her poetic talent developed under the influence of the Rhymers' Club and the encouragement given by Arthur Symons and Edmund Gosse. Rightly finding in her early verse 'the note of the mocking bird with a vengeance', Gosse advised her 'to set her poems firmly among the mountains, the gardens, the temples, to introduce to us the vivid population of her own voluptuous and unfamiliar province; in other words, to be a genuine Indian poet of the Deccan. On her return to India in 1898, she married Dr. Govindarajulu Naidu. Her first volume of poetry, *The Golden Threshold* (1905) was followed by *The Bird of Time* (1912) and *The Broken Wing* (1917). Sarojini Naidu's younger brother, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya (1898) is a poet also cast, though somewhat less rigidly, in the romantic mould.

The tempo of political agitation was admirably kept up after the World War I by Tilak, who emerged from temporary retirement after his release from prison in 1914, rejoined the Congress, and founded the Home Rule League in 1916; and also by Mrs. Anne Besant, whose own All India Home Rule League was established in 1917. Meanwhile, Gandhi, fresh from his Satyagraha triumph in South Africa, had returned to India in 1915. Ten years later, Gandhi launched the Civil Disobedience movement in 1930, which differed substantially from the earlier Non-co-operation movement, though the goal remained the same. Indian English literature of the Gandhian age was inevitably influenced by these epoch-making developments in Indian life. India got its independence in 1947. Then there was partition of the country, resulting into hatred and violence.

New Poetry beginning in the 1950s:

It is in poetry that the post-Independence period witnessed the most crucial developments. In the 1950s arose a school of poets who tried to turn their backs on the romantic tradition and write a verse more in tune with the age, its general temper and its literary ethos. By the 1950s, the 'new poetry' had already made its appearance. In 1958, P. Lai and his associates founded the Writers Workshop in Calcutta which soon became an effective forum for modernist poetry. The manifesto described the school as consisting of 'a group' of writers who agree in principle that English has proved its ability, as a language, to play a creative role in Indian literature, through original writings and transcreation.'

The first of the 'new' poets to publish a collection was Nissim Ezekiel (1924-), easily one of the most notable post-Independence Indian English writers of verse. His *A Time to Change* appeared in 1952, to be followed by *Sixty Poems* (1953), *The Third* (1959), *The Unfinished Man* (1960), *The Exact Name* (1965) and *Hymns in Darkness* (1976). Ezekiel belongs to a Bene-Israel family which migrated to India generations ago.

Dom Moraes (1938-) was the first of the 'new' poets to win recognition in England. His first book won the Hawthornden Prize in 1958. Son of Frank Moraes, the well-known Indian journalist, Dom Moraes lived in England for many years, having adopted British citizenship in 1961. He has studiously disowned his Indian heritage repeatedly.

During the 1960s, several prominent 'new' poets appeared, the earliest of whom was P. Lal (1929). Born in the Punjab, Purushottam Lal migrated to Calcutta with his parents at the age of one. Educated in this city, Lal taught English there. His verse collections include *The Parrot's Death and Other Poems* (1960), *"Change!" They Said* (1966), *Draupadi and Jayadratha and Other Poems* (1967), *Yakshi from Didarganj and Other Poems* (1969), *The Man of Dharma and the Rasa of Silence* (1974) and *Calcutta: A Long Poem* (1977). His *Collected Poems* appeared in 1977.

Adil Jussawalla's (1940) first book of verse, *Land's End* (1962) contains poems written in England and some parts of Europe. Unlike Dom Moraes, however, Jussawalla chose to return to India after a sojourn of more than dozen years in England and has since published another collection, *Missing Person* (1974). Jussawalla's usual strategy in *Land's End* is to project a clearly visualized situation and then comment on it, bringing out either the personal or social or existential significance latent in it.

The most outstanding poet of the 1960s is easily A.K. Ramanujan (1929), another exile who, unlike Jussawalla, did not choose to return, and continued to teach Dravidian Linguistics at the University of Chicago. His first volume, *The Striders* (1966) won a Poetry Book Society recommendation. *Relations* followed in 1971. He has also translated into English poetry in Tamil and Kannada in *The Interior Landscape* (1967) and *Speaking of Siva* (1972) respectively. Ramanujan has said, '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 preoccupations with Kannada, Tamil, the classics and Folklore give me my substance, my "inner" forms, images, symbols.'

Gieve Patel's (1940) first book, *Poems* appeared in 1966, and his second, *How Do you Withstand*,

Body in 1976. A member of the small Parsi community, Patel is an 'outsider' like Ezekiel and is equally conscious of the fact, but this has not produced a feeling of rootlessness in his case. A strong sense of compassion establishes for him some kind of a bond between himself and the under-privileged leprosy woman (in 'Nargol') or the 'brown whores' of Bombay (in 'Tourists at Grant Road') or domestic servants (in 'Servants') for example and sets his nagging social conscience working. Patel's is mostly situational poetry.

In contrast with Patel, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (1947) writes a poetry in which the image is all-dominant. He is the author of *bharatmata: a prayer (sic)* (1966), *Woodcuts on Papes* (1967), *Pomes/Poems/Poemas* (1971), and *Nine Enclosures* (1976). Mehrotra has described himself as 'not an Indian poet but a poet writing a universal language of poetry, of feeling, of love, and hate and sex. His true affinities are with Surrealist poetry.

Another poet in whom Whitmanism and Surrealism appear to meet (with Tagore forming a third ingredient) is Pritish Nandy (1947), a prolific writer who has produced more than a dozen collections including *Of Gods and Olives* (1967), *The Poetry of Pritish Nandy* (1973) and *Tonight this Savage Rite* (1977), within a decade. Nandy's verse gives the impression of wild energy and verbal belligerence only occasionally amenable to discipline a verse of which nimety is at once a source of power and a weakness.

The 1970s witnessed the arrival of K.N. Daruwalla, Shiv K. Kumar, Jayanta Mahapatra and Arun Kolatkar. Keki N. Daruwalla (1937), one of the most substantial of modern Indian English poets, has so far published *Under Orion* (1970), *Apparition in April* (1971) and *Crossing of Rivers* (1976). The fecundity of post-Independence Indian English poetry is thus amazing but the quality of its minor verse does not match its abundance of output.

References:

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