

INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY AND K.R. SRINIVASA IYENGER

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Abstract:

K. R. Srinivasa Iyenger is one of the chief exponents of Indian English Poetry in the post-colonialism phase. He provided a new identity to Indian English Poetry. To recapitulate, the history of Indian English Poetry is one of the many “new literatures” which began to emerge at the end of the II World War, after the end of the colonialism. Unlike the creative writings of Africa and the Caribbean, Indian English Poetry is neglected by most of critics. By 1947, the situation has changed, Indian English Poetry is fast becoming, a favourite academic endeavour for well-known poets both in India and abroad. From the very beginning, Indian English Poetry was essentially romantic, imitative in form and content. It assimilated the influences of Persian and English poetry over century. Obviously for the sake of convenience Indian English Poetry can be sub-divided into two phases: The pre-colonial phase and the post-colonial phase. The Pre-Colonial phase of poetry is imitative in nature but much work and notable contribution to Indian English Poetry is done in the post-colonial phase.

Key Words: *Indian English poetry, new literatures, pre-colonial phase, post-colonial phase.*

The Pre-colonial phase of poetry was a master's voice mostly in the sense it is devoted to English men and their culture. The poets mostly imitated English themes, forms, content and imagery. It exclusively lacked charm and novelty. In its trend of writing, it was pre-dominantly romantic. Although, the native poetry began to take native colouring with Tagore, Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu and Aurobindo as much as it adopted Indian themes, with a distinctively Indian background expressed in an imagery that was purely Indian in character. Time and again, the poets have experimented with new upcoming forms which were taken from abroad writers. The major poets were: Derozio, Toru Dutt, Michael Madhusudhan Dutt, R.C. Dutt, Manmohan Ghose, Sri Aurobindo, Rabindra Nath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu.

Almost all the early Indian English Poets took British romantic poets as their model; but in spite of that they failed to produce a genuine poetry. It was with Toru Dutt that Indian English Poetry really switches off from imitation to experimentation. Toru Dutt's verse depicts total freedom from imitation. For the first time she introduced Indian themes in Indian English Poetry with keen sensibility and an acute awareness of the abiding values of Indian life. Apart from Toru Dutt, R.C.Dutt did translation of Sanskrit classics like Upanishads and the Rigveda into English. In poems of R.C.Dutt there is a hovering impact between two worlds of the England of eighteen nineties and India- the one dead and other powerless to be born.

Sri Aurobindo career reflects a multi-dimensional approach as a person. He was a great Mahakavi who is known as a poet, seer and a yogi. His *Savitri* is a famous contribution to Indian English poetry as an epic. In the verses of Sarojini Naidu, the chief theme of her poetry was love, nature. She uses Indian landscape to express her emotions vividly. Rabindranath Tagore was a versatile man of his age. He

contributed to ancient tradition of Indian saint poetry. His *Gitanjali* is a manual of devotion. Thus we can say in the pre-colonial phase of poetry although the poets attempted and used Indian landscape, themes but they were imitative in their mode of expression. The major forms of writing were lyric poetry but the new trend of spirit was seen in the poetry of Sri Aurobindo and Tagore who introduced in Indian English Poetry Indian spiritual poetry and devotional lyrics.

The post-colonial phase of poetry was surprisingly progressive and innovative in nature. It began to assume the native character both in themes and landscape. The new genres of poetry were like satire, mythical poetry, confessional poetry, spiritual poetry and poetry on common men and manners. It evidences a sensibility totally divorced and therefore gradually divergent from their predecessors. A whole generation turned its back on tradition and found itself alienated in the new India. They declare themselves opposed to idealism and romanticism. They write poetry in sentimental voice and in everyday language. The poets introduced a bold, new frankness into their poetry, turning away from religion, they sought meaning and order in personal relationships.

They explore human sexuality and wrote about it with confessional candour. Nature for them was no longer the ennobling and grand proof of God's faith world, instead they prefer to write on city and its dirty-poverty stricken and dehumanizing environment. They explored irony as their best means of representing their love-hate relationship with their surroundings. Mokash-Punekar surmises and rightly puts up that the modernists sensibility in India owes itself, chiefly to the influences of Eliot-Pound, Leavis and Richards (Prajape 21-22).

The post-colonial phase of poetry can be divided into three categories: diasporic poets who lives in abroad but writes about India. From the foreign lands they visualized the pristine glory of the culture to which they themselves and their forefathers belongs. The true representative of diasporic poetic consciousness was A.K.Ramanujan. A. K.Ramanujan's Indian experience repeated in his poems. Although educated in India but he spent most of his life in America His pre-occupation with Kannada, Tamil and classics folklore gave him enough substance for his forms, images and symbols in his poems. His poems are like the patterns in a Kaleidoscope and every time he turns it result never fail to astonish.

In Ezekiel's poetry, his sense of alienation is a dominant factor. He will always be remembered as the chief pioneer of modernism in Indian English Poetry. Dom Moraes writes mostly in the confessional mode. He found the atmosphere of isolation and alienation suffocating and sought release in confessional verse. His favourite themes are loneliness and insecurity from which escape is sought in fantasies, of a fertile imagination which creates a haunted world in which classical, Christian, medieval and fairy tale myths are mixed together. Adil Jussawalla's most of the poems represent a conscious effort to connect the west with the India ethos; he beautifully juxtaposes Achilles with Vidura of the Mahabharata in one of his poems, *Missing Persons*.

R. Parthasarthy's best poems reveal an uncommon talent and a sensibility that deliberately reveals an understanding of India. He is alone among contemporary poets who essentially explore poetical predicaments as a poet, as well as the linguist, cultural and historical dilemma of his environment, the perplexing literary and cultural situations of bi-lingualism and bi-culturalism. The discovery of self is the most significant motif of Parthasarthy's poetry.

The second category was of native poets who live in India and wrote about India. They choose Indian themes to depict their poetic talents. The most successful of the new poets were Toru Dutt, Kamala Das, Nissiem Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, P. Lal, Adil Jussawalla, A.K.Ramanujan, R.Parthasarthy, Gieve Patel, Arvind Kumar Mehrotra, Pritish Nandy, K.N. Daruwalla, Shiv.K.Kumar, Jayanta Mahapatra, Arun Kolatkar, Keshav Malik, Pradip Sen and others.

To illustrate with native poets, Kamala Das introduced a new phenomenon in Indian English poetry. She brought a fiercely feminine sensibility that dare without inhibitions to articulate the hurt it has received in an insensitive largely man-made world. P. Lal poems show a unique development from aestheticism towards an increasing awareness of social realities and life's little and great tragic ironies. Shiv K. Kumar seems more concerned to dissect the failure of love in marriage..

Gieve Patel poetry is of distinctive and individual character, who strives to focus on the tortures involved in the being and becoming of man. Many of his poems render, the poet's anxiety and bitterness of human neglect and destitute and the sufferings of fellow men. His concern is the tormented soul in/ tormented body and he probes into the phenomena with a clinical fastidiousness. A.K.Mehrotra and Pritish Nandy give an evidence of enterprising and erratic ideas. They contribute to surrealist world in Indian English poetry. Keki.N.Daruwalla writes poetry on socially emotive themes: curfew, riots, racial violence with impersonal tone. His poems are essentially Indian in context.

Shiv. K. Kumar verses depict ironic vision focusing on human inadequacies and his victims range from all walks of life. Jayanta Mahapatra reveals an increasing concern on contemporary reality, love, marriage, parenthood, private sex and other intimacies appear in poems after poems. The Orissa scene and the Orissan tradition play a major part in Mahapatra's early verse. Arun Kolatkar was a bilingual poet writing both in English and his mother tongue, Marathi, presents a surrealist vision in his verses. His 'Jejuri' represents a significant step in the assertion of Indian identity. It can be regarded as Kolatkar's Wasteland. However, it was only with the advent of spiritual poetry in the third phase of Indian English Poetry, the Indian English Poetry assumed its distinct identity. This phase visualize the emergence of such great poetic personalities as Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo and K.R.Srinivasa Iyenger. The poets embedded Indian soul in their poetic consciousness. They took Indian myths to give it a modern consciousness. The western influences are still there, but that is being adjusted and attuned to the temper of the new age. Explorations of ends and means and confessional outspokenness are rather characteristics of the new poets, both as individual and as group.

To elaborate last category of the spiritual poets under whom a few names come: Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, and K.R.Srinivasa Iyenger. Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo belong to Pre-colonial phase of Indian English Poetry. However, the real thrust in quest of identity on the post-colonial phase of Indian English Poetry was made by K.R.Srinivasa Iyenger. Amongst all these poets who were writing on different topics, no poets has contributed towards the genres of spiritual poetry except Sri Aurobindo and further this trend was forwarded by K.R.Srinivasa Iyenger. Sri Aurobindo gave new directions to Indian English Poetry as much as he used exclusively Indian themes and forms. With Sri Aurobindo Indian English poetry assumed its authentic voice.

Aurobindo's poetry is to strengthen the spirit of man, to make mankind realize that spirit has innate power for evolution of poetic consciousness. In his poems subject and object are one. It is universally agreed that the sheer range of Sri Aurobindo's work is impressive. He wrote copiously in several forms including epic, narrative, lyrical poetry, drama, literary criticism, philosophical and religious prose apart from functioning as one of the important leaders in the revolutionary movement before he turned a yogi. His most substantial poetic achievement is Savitri. It is written in the light of Upanishadic wisdom which taught different sheath of soul like *ananyamaya*, *pranyamaya*. His *Savitri* is not modern woman like Iyenger's *Sita*. It is not a mere retelling of an ancient Hindu legend, but to reinterpret an ancient legend, to give it a meaning which is of urgent relevance to the human condition today. It traces out the evolution of man and of human consciousness. It's an original epic poem, marked by authenticity and power.

Aurobindo poetic consciousness emerges gradually in the stages of matter, life and mind. As each new principle emerges, the previous stages remain but are integrated into the higher principle. Beyond mind are higher levels of a spiritual and supramental consciousness. This higher evolution is inward, from the surface consciousness, culminating in the realization of the Psychic being (the personal evolving soul); and then upward to higher levels of spiritual mind (higher mind, illumined mind, intuitive mind and over mind), culminating in the final stage, once again united in consciousness with Sachchidananda.

P. Lal along with a few others (Anita Desai, Pradip Sen, Deb Kumar Das, Jai Ratan Kewliarseo and Ashish Gupta) used the following statement in December 1961:

Sri Aurobindo happens to be our Milton and Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu, Manmohan Ghose and Harindranath Chattopadhyay our romantic singing birds. They provide sufficient provocation to experiment afresh, set new standards, preserve what is vital in the tradition and give a definition to the needs of the present (Iyenger, 65).

The trend of spiritual poetry and Indian myths which was initiated and developed by Sri Aurobindo was further forwarded by K.R. Srinivasa Iyenger. Iyenger was a true disciple not only of spiritual poetry, but a successor of what he called the future poetry spiritual poetry. From where Sri Aurobindo left, Iyenger picked it up. As we know earlier in Indian English Poetry the most dominant trends of writing was romantic poetry, if poetry developed from romantic poetry then it turned out to be an intellectual or philosophical poetry. But there is a tremendous lack of genuine super conscious or spiritual poetry. Iyenger widens the consciousness of spiritual poetry, expands, enlarges and perfected it. He cultivated, developed and perfected his master's vision. He was a great scholar poet in the same way as Sri Aurobindo, Tagore, and Sarojini Naidu their respective ages. He is famous as a critic, biographer, poet, reviewer, translator, transcreator, editor and letter-writer. He also wrote with assurance and authority on topics like Indian administration, politics, University Education, Freedom and Culture and Science and National Development.

When Iyenger scaled so many peaks of achievement but then also his soul was unquenched to contribute something truly Indian in spirit, matter and content. Though, he wrote on so many issues but his real soul blended with spiritual poetry and producing some unique epics in Indian English Poetry. He elaborated, illustrated and improved the spiritual poetry. He used Indian myths, Indian story, Indian-consciousness, just only the language remains foreign. He reinterprets Indian wisdom to make it relevant to our modern consciousness. In his late sixties he contributed to some fine Indian English poetry ranging from descriptive, narrative, reflective, dramatic, heroic, tragic, ironic and satiric. He gave his tenets of poetry in his seminal work *Microcosmographia Poetica* in year 1978. *Microcosmographia Poetica* is a critical testament on Aurobindonian lines about the name and nature of Poetry. As Purasa Bala Krishnan insightfully commented on the poem:

While the Waste Land embodies the bareness and sterility of modern society, the drought and detritus of modern civilization, *Microcosmographia Poetica* is drawing on the evidence of history and mystic realizations of Sri Aurobindo intimates, the mellow land from which mankind may stretch its arms to the promised land of divine life (Sastry, 82).

In its content, *Microcosmographia Poetica* is a reverie in search of the roots of poesy and the nature of the Sahitya Purusha. How a great poetry is written with words, about what is poetry, how some writers

desecrate with the great Indian tradition. Poetry is not a copy, a Xerox affair, / a leisure-class exercise, not a superior amusement, nor supreme fiction, not politics, not social engineering, nor surrogate religion, but poetry is Sadhana and it must be approached as yoga:

Poetry means looking at the face of Truth
 Behind the golden cover.
 What's a 'character' in poem or play:
 Savitri, Sakuntala?
 A spay out of heaving infinity
 Made real by magic of words.
 Yet not words alone, their sounds and fury
 But silences also speak,
 Poetry thus uses sounds and silences,
 Realizing waves of meaning. (Microcosmograpia)

Such poetry helps the evolution of the new man who is freed the chaos of contraries, “the god-man of Tomorrow.”

This new man with betimes transform his world
 And charge it with pussiant
 The future Arts make instant contact
 With the self-illuminates soul.
 The future poet will indite the Epic
 Of the soul's high sovereignty.
 And the word, crashing through space-time constraints,
 Will then reign as Power and Grace.
 That will be plenary Truth and Delight:
 Verily, Rasa Vai Sah! (Microcosmograpia Poetica 32)

After the Mahasamadhi of Sri Aurobindo, Iyenger sought to distil such experiences with the Mother into verse. Some of these verses gathered into sequence as Tryst with the Divine written during three visits to Pondicherry in 1973, were embodied into a sequence as Tryst with the Divine in 1974, a year after the Mahasamadhi of the Mother and when he was engaged in revising On the Mother. The work recalls, “the unique ministry of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in the context of the current crisis of survival for man and the world.” The brief epigraph captures the transformatory battle in which the mother engaged herself to usher in the life divine on this flawed earth:

Fosterer of the cell's new consciousness,
 Fosterer of life and mind:
 Giver of the soul's freedom in knowledge,
 Giver of the highest Good:
 Supreme solvent of inadequacies,
 Accept this flawed offering. (Sastry 77)

All the experiences gained in ever so many visits to the Ashram since 1943 get compressed in a description of the service Tree and Sri Aurobindo's Room. Iyenger's thoughts turn always towards transformation especially because the outer world gets to be increasingly daunting with the presence of politics, internal dissension and external aggressions. Whenever life outside became suffocating he turns towards Vadapuri in Pondicherry for the regeneration of his soul energy. The journey always rejuvenates his heart. The poem closes with a firm faith in this priestess of mother sovereignties:

The mist and opaqueness are touched with light,
 And matter feels spirit's glow
 The promised transfiguration phase.
 The millions the Power had drawn to her
 Feel filled by her and fulfilled,
 A light is lit in everyone and these
 Emblazon the living Flame. (Tryst with the Divine 42)

Apart from his spiritual jottings, he did note down his reactions to contemporary affairs. Some of these were collected in 1979 as *Leaves from a Log: Fragments of a Journey* unlike the recordation of the spiritual journey in *Tryst with the Divine*, these poems scald with dark laughter at times, without forgetting the glory and the good in our heritage. 'Freedom at Midnight' on the partition makes us 'shines in shame' even today and the series on the emergency send shocks down our spine.

But being transcender of Sri Aurobindo ideas, the book is concluded with a ray of hope. In Indian culture there are no tragedies, but only divine comedies. We must ever look to the Greater Dawn. Emergency has shown us Power at its worst. But when Mother might comes along with Mother Grace, then will life on earth become life divine.

Australia Helix: A Spiral of Verse sequence, is also about a journey. Though the one hundred and one poems speak of men and matters, nature and continents, it is mainly about Australia. The poems that touch upon consumerism are thought-provoking, shopping in a mall astounds him who spent a life-time in Gandhian simplicity:

But good people are good everywhere and sincere devotion does exist in all parts of the globe. There are warnings about nuclear power and the long poem "Zero hour" has moments of terror. Iyenger reiterates the Aurobindonian call for breaking out of the egoistic shells of separative consciousness and once again the concluding line spells hope if we pull back from the brink of a supreme act of ego-negation: Acquire the key to transformation,

Achieve retrieval from the brink,
 And activate the serried ascent
 Of this knot of matter, life and mind
 Up the stairs of ancient askesis
 Forward to the sunlit summit-realm
 Of peace, fulfillment and delight. (Sastry 82)

One of Iyenger's major concerns in the latter part of his life was the nuclear terror unleashed upon the world by the big powers. He wrote tirelessly against the entire nuclear adventure, be it for war or peace.

As Iyenger plunged deeper into the Ramayana version in various languages, when translating the Sundara Kanda, he is convinced by the fact that the Kanda was an epic by itself. He vindicated the early assertion of Valmiki that his epic is really Sita's great story, this own Vaishnava tradition asserted that the Ramayana speaks "of the greatness of the lady who was imprisoned."

Sita readily came to Iyenger's mind because of his immersion in the Ramayana. The Sita centric poem deals with girlhood are retold in "Mithila", the palace revolution in "Ayodhya", great battle in "Yuddha", the reign of Rama in "Rajya", and the second exile and withdrawal in "Ashrama". In effect, the epic is a legend of good, great women. There is an attempt to minimize physical novelties (the ten heads of Ravana, for instance), and the supernatural is in a low key. Introducing his epic, Iyenger writes: Sitanaya is the story of Sita, and of the vicissitudes of her human relationships with Rama; the rest will have to be accepted if necessary with "a willing suspension of disbelief", a very legitimate preparation while approaching literature. After all, once logical reason sets up an inquisition inventiveness and imagination will have to fold up and retire.

Not that there is a need for any disbelief, since the story is well known and has been flowing in our views down the centuries. Sitanaya has been reinterpreted in the light of modern consciousness. Sita is a symbol of Mother's image, equality, not condescension nor negligence. Sita represents Indian feminist who hold on to the time tested heritage of womanhood, who is aware of her rights as well as her duties. But unfortunately she is often misjudged:

This is my lord, this popular assumption
That we're but Doll's House creatures
Foolishly engrossed in colourful clothes and
Glittering jewellery.
Happily contained by domestic chores,
The securities of home
And boudoir and the throes of child-bearing
And rearing is mere fancy
It is a human tale, after all. (Sitanaya 141)

Her thoughts turn to the future. This destruction of greenery these jungles of concrete, these inventions of Science, these instrumental of Science; where we are going. After Sita, the heroines of the Mahabharata had brought strength and a sense of purpose to Iyenger's psyche. While using these myths he represents seven emanations of female as a shakti. He formed them into an array of divine flowers for the epic. Sati-Saptakam (1991) is shaped as an Avatamsa Kavya, a garland narrative where there is no exact progression in terms of time, but simply the presentation of "seven near apocalyptic visions of maidenhood-womanhood-motherhood, distinctive in their tints and colours." Iyenger admired every one of the classical women characters. Sati-Saptakam does indeed "team into a spectrum of archetypal variety projecting almost a parable of Evolution spanning a whole yuga cycle." As he says in his introduction to the epic, the adesh came to him one-day: "After Sitanaya, look for a constellation of Saptamatrika, seven mothers, amidst the breath-taking munificence of the Mahabharata, the Bhagavata and similar seminal classics."

Sati Saptakam was thus launched. Iyenger decided that there would be no visible connecting link for the seven but the connection would still be there, strong and inviolable:

Thus it was that eventually I made a choice of seven images of girlhood, womanhood, motherhood: Devahuti, Sukanya, Devayani, Damyanti, Renuka, Draupadi, Kannaki. Like the seven swaras in music, like the seven colours of the rainbow couldn't they be visioned as the music of maidenhood, the rainbow arc of womanhood, the golden glory of motherhood? Seven of Adya shakti's emanations, seven choice petals of the Rose of God? And so my choice was made, and I felt committed to telling the stories of the elected seven as Satisaptakam or Saga of Seven Mothers." (Satisaptakam xi)

Devahuti, Sukanya, Devayani, Damyanti, Draupadi and Kannaki, how they had suffered and overcome, a whole range of their nobility, endurance, fire and love. Its "a mandala of unfading lights that sustain with hope and faith to all confused wanderers in the Dark." (Satisaptakam xxiii) Iyenger deliberately left out Savitri, as Sri Aurobindo had written an epic on Savitri. These seven heroines become role models for Indian feminism. Unlike in the west, fragility is not the mark of Indian women, to judge by the nations classical heroines in the Prologue the Master(Sri Aurobindo) advise the author :

Other countries, my son, see her branded
 With the birthmark of frailty,
 Pity her for her weakness or succumb.
 To her sheer beauty of form.
 But sufferance in most situations
 Is frozen shakti, unlike
 The spendthrift and vagabond dispersal
 In which the male oft excels
 Thus with their uncanny inner vision
 Our seer-poets and rishis
 Saw woman as embodiment of strength
 and as mother of the Race. (p.no.xxxvi)

From Vyasa to Sri Aurobindo there were plentiful barrier-breakers, "the great creators with wide brows of calm."(Sastry,89).

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