

Modern Indian English Poetry and Tradition

Manash Pratim Borah

Assistant Professor in English
Central Institute of Himalayan Culture Studies, Dahung
(An Autonomous Institute under the Ministry of Culture,
Govt. of India)

The general consensus regarding the post-1947 or the post-independence poetry Indian Poetry in English is that it marks a decisive break with the 'tradition' established so far by the pre-1947 poets through the thematic and technical innovations and thereby becomes what we call now as modern. As "(M)odern poetry is ...regarded by the overwhelming majority as on principle antitraditional", the post-1947 Indian Poetry in English is too judged from the principles of innovativeness, experimentation and "flat rejection" (Brooks 69). Being 'antitraditional' in 'trend', the entire body of poetry even felt challenges from older nationalist-intellectuals and from regionalist, as Bruce King says, "who demand a renaissance of the culture of the pre-colonial languages of India" (King 2). In his sophisticated reading of modern Indian English Poetry, King too observes the fact that there is "no continuity between the new poetry and that written before independence" (Ibid 11).

Modern or the post-1947 Indian Poetry in English marks a departure from the imitative or the derivative background of Indian English poetry and is engaged in technical and thematic innovativeness by incorporating the true picture of the day-to-day reality, moral and spiritual upheaval corroding the vitals of rich tradition and cultures, sense of alienation and frustration in a fragmented society. K.N. Daruwalla in his introduction to his anthology assumes the fact that the "efflorescence of poetry" in the nineteen sixties and seventies was due to "a clean break had been made with the past" (xix). However, Amalendu Bose seems more critical in his reading of the trend of Indian poetry in English and affirms boldly that there is "no tradition of Indian poetry in English" (33). All the post-1947 poets, according to these critics, condemn the "greasy, weak spined and purple-adjectived and spiritual" poetry of the pre-1947 period (Lal vii). All those pre-independent poets wrote like the British poets, as R. Parathasarathy says, and hence "failed to establish an indigenous tradition of writing in English" (285).

This questioning of existence of an 'indigenous tradition', however, has problematised the whole trend of Indian Poetry in English as a genre established by the pre-independent poets starting with Toru Dutt. In these radical criticisms, these critics have strictly negated the pre-independent poets as the forerunner of this genre on the basis of thematic and technical derivativeness. The question regarding the derivativeness of the pre-independent poets will be discussed later on; however, the most fundamental question relating to the distinctiveness of the post-1947 poetry is more or less an ethical one. All these radical critics have failed to critique the "stark realities of literary history", instead its values only (Naik 208). If there is no tradition at all established by the pre-independent poets so far, then how can the post-1947 poetry be regarded as 'antitraditional'? What were the direct objects of repudiation of the post-1947 poets through their technical and thematic innovativeness? These two are the most vital questions which should be approached before considering the post-1947 Indian Poetry in English as a distinctive modern genre.

In his sophisticated reading of Indian Poetry in English, P. C. Kotoky assumes that till the sixties the genre “has been a product mainly of individual talent. A tradition of its own it has yet to build up...” (11). Although, Kotoky has personalized Eliotian concept of tradition and individual talent, still, he too fails to accumulate the ‘historic sense’ of the past, which Eliot considered as vital one for the perception of the past as well as the present. Modern or the post-1947 poetry, in stark contrast to the comments of the radical critics, is not totally sporadic to the pre-1947 Indian Poetry in English; rather it is a move towards modernization with continuation of some trends so far established by the poets of the pre-1947 period. The continuous flow of the growth and development of Indian Poetry in English is explicitly revealed through the influence of foreign poetry throughout the periods and in reconciliation of myth and reality by the Indian poets as a specific tool to recover the lost identity and nationhood. These are two main areas, along with decolonial sensibilities and the projected Indianness by the poets of both the periods, and constitute the continuity of an Indian English poetic tradition of which the post-1947 poetry is a continuation with mere innovations and variations.

It is true to say that, the basis of discarding the pre-independent Indian Poetry in English as the scaffolding of modern Indian Poetry in English is certainly its imitative nature in terms of thematic and technical skills. All the pre-independent poets wrote at a time when British ruled supreme over India and romanticism in their literature. From the perspective of the nature of newly emerged ‘colonial literatures’ in English, its derivativeness, hence, is not a question of serious critical importance. Unlike the national and regional literatures of the world, the root of all post/colonial literatures was not poetry but prose literature. Indian Writing in English has emerged with letter writing. The entire body of literature, as a byproduct of British colonialism, is itself like a “third space” where in-between-ness is the very nature of all the branches of creation (Rutherford 211). In such a situation the meaning of the phrase “usable past” seems certainly redundant. As Bloom assumes from the perspective of Freud’s account of the Oedipal struggle in his *Anxiety of Influence* (1973) that an *ephebe* or a beginning poet deliberately misreads the literary predecessors in order to circumvent the influence and to get originality, the model for misreading for those pre-independent poets was none other than the immediate predecessors of British literature. This defense mechanism can also be regarded as the defensive mimicry of a colonial poet in anxiety. This defensive mimicry seems to be a prevailing trend in the whole genre as a postcolonial gesture for the sake of “postcolonial self-recovery” and identity assertion (Gandhi 11). If Toru Dutt’s “Savitry” is the mythical image of an Indian woman to counter the negative image projected by British Orientalism, Kamala Das’ “An Introduction” is a personal and secular reply to such discourses in feminine tongue. For example:

- (i) In those far-off primeal days
Fair India’s daughters were not pent
In closed zannas. On her ways
Savitry at her pleasure went
Whether she chose.
(Savitry, *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*)
- (ii) I an Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one...
...It is half English, half
Indian,...but it is honest,

It is as human as I am human...

(An Introduction)

In both the stanzas, what is typical is the “reactive construction of a ‘free’ woman to counter the negative image projected by the British” incorporating the anti-essentialist view of womanhood (Mukherjee 108). This strain of countering colonial hegemonic discourse and anti-essentialism is an established norm of modern Indian woman poetry actually pioneered by Toru Dutt. Herself being a woman of free will and westernized in education, Toru, was the forerunner of the feminist strain of Indian Poetry in English. On the other hand, Sarojini’s importance is too recognized in her mastery of craftsmanship and projection of Indianness. Her work “acquired an overt ‘national’ ambience that transcended the merely local or regional” and still continued in the poems of Mahapatra, Parthasarathy, Ramanujan, Meena Alexander, Mamta Kalia, along with the earlier poets like Ezekiel, Lal, and so on (Ibid 101). It is that nationalistic flavour which unites all the pre-independent poets (except Monmohan Ghose) together the post-independent poets corresponding the nostalgic yearning for the golden past. The modern poets romanticizing account of the past or idealization, hence to say is not an entirely new to the genre; its root lies in the sense of rootlessness explicitly evident in pre-independent poetry. Ezekiel’s “Background Casually”, “From Malabar Hill- Bombay”, Kamala Das’ “A Hot Noon in Malabar”, Mamta Kalia’s “Tribute to Papa”, Daruwalla’ “Dialogue with a Third Voice”, Parthasarathy’s *Rough Passage*, and Ramanujan’s “Still Another View of Grace”, “Some Relations”, “Some Indian Uses of History on a Rainy Day” are some examples where the poets’ nostalgic yearning of the past is reconciled with their recognition of the present in melancholic or in elsewhere in ironic tone. This reconciliation of the past and present or memorizing the golden past is a prevailing trend in Indian Poetry in English, which is conditioned by the poets’ urge either to have the sense of belonging or to counter the rapid growth of fragmentation. For example, Shoshe Chunder Dutt’s agonizing over the loss of the ‘myth-time’ and Daruwalla’s predicament as a modern individual in the below stanzas are not thematically coterminous:

- (i) My fallen country! where abide
Thy envied splendour and thy glory now?
The Pathan’s and the Mughals’s pride,
Spread desolation far and wide
And stain’d thy sinless brow.
(Shoshe Chunder Dutt, “My Native Land”)
- (ii) There is no time like myth-time
sprout of the taut grape
under glooms
fables of the sky
and fables of the earth
meeting on a young horizon.
(Daruwalla, “Myth-time”)

In both the poems, apart from the technical innovativeness of Daruwalla, the mythopoetic imagination of both the poets renders the predicament of a displaced individual writing in an alien language in a previously colonized country. Such predicament or the sense of reminiscence, hence, is not entirely new to modern Indian Poetry in English. The technical innovation of modern Indian Poetry in English, especially the linguistic reform in the post-independent era is the answer to the question raised during the pre-independent period

regarding the use of English as a vehicle for creative expression as its idiom was considered as “too polite and genteel” and the language itself as a tool to disseminate Western hegemony (qtd. in Parthasarathy 65). The process of Indianization of English was already started during the pre-independent period.

On the other hand, the hegemonic use of English right from its implementation as a tool to perpetuate the British reign still has not diminished in India; the binary oppositions created by colonialism remain even today in India. English as a language of power and its practice as the practice of power are still prevailing in the socio-cultural sphere of all the third world nations. The entire body of literature, as Abhijit Pathak remarks, still stands for “all that English symbolizes- elitism, domination, power and privilege” (Pathak 25). That dilemma is manifested in the poems of both the periods; however, the questioning attitude is only the gift of the explicit postcolonial gesture of the post-1947 poets. The thematic Indianness of the pre-independent poets manifested in the *Dutt Family Album* (1870), and in the poems of Sarojini Naidu is certainly in contest with the technical innovativeness of the post-1947 poets. What is missing in the pre-independent poets is the acute manifestation of the social reality and the ironic detachment from exoticism and the colonial legacy. The modern Indian poets in English, otherwise, are too subservient to the trends of mythopoetic imagination and derivativeness prevailing in pre-independent Indian poetry in English. The continuous flow of Indian Poetry in English, hence, cannot be discarded by the technical and thematic innovation of its modern version. As we know

that all postcolonial literatures in English is a type of consciousness rising writings incorporating the themes of identity, counter discourse to the totalitarian British Orientalism, hegemonic use of English as a language of power and so on, that consciousness, in real sense of the term was entirely missing in pre-independent poetry. All the major poetic voices during that period were found to be busy in projecting the picture of an exotic India diminishing in the jaw of colonialism in a style directly borrowed from the British romantic poets. As a result of the fact that the national differences and specificity of identity which are certainly important for adding the “novelty of ‘personality’, ‘light’ and ‘colour’” were missing from the genre (McLeod 15). Following the liberal humanist perspective of Commonwealth Literature, the poets of the pre-independent period were themselves detached from the “provincial context of their initial production” in order to “deal with moral preoccupations relevant to people of all times and places” (Ibid). Hence, although colonialism is said as the epicenter of the dissemination of forces, which are at once ‘antitraditional’ and modern, like hybridization, mimicry, violence, and concepts like “third space”, class consciousness and ethnicity from Indian perspective vis-à-vis the traditional India, the poetry written during that period has not been considered as modern. The strong reasons of discarding the pre-1947 Indian Poetry in English as modern and as a part of the tradition established by the Indian English poets after independence are its renunciation of the provincial context of production and lack of distinctiveness.

However, the lack of the anticolonial agenda as considered the vital force of consciousness rising could not denounce the similarity of trends available in both the periods. If pre-1947 poets are derivative in terms of their British romantic influences, the post-1947 poets are too derivative in a larger context. Bruce King himself says in his sophisticated reading of modern Indian Poetry in English that “(I)f at first, modern Indian English verse appeared to be indebted to British and few European models, it now reveals an awareness of most of world literature, including contemporary American, recent South American, and other older Indian devotional verse in the regional languages” (5). Most of the modern poets of the twentieth century like Jayanta Mahapatra, Kamala Das, A.K. Ramanujan, Daruwalla, Arun Kolatkar,

and even Dom Moraes are the followers of the same tradition. Notwithstanding their innovative approaches and projection of contextual sensibilities, in their use of less formal language skills and dictions and of highly personal voices to write about ordinary experiences and cultural predicament, they reveal their close affinity with modern American poetry. Likewise, their responds towards their own predicament as a modern individual and alienation are almost akin to Eliot, Pound and other modernists like Hopkins, Auden, the French experimentalists like Rombaud and Lautreamont to the twentieth century Dadaists and Surrealists. It seems quite astonishing that in the poems of Mahapatra and Daruwalla, the universal predicament of modern individual is more poignant than the postcolonial predicament of an individual of a previously colonized country. The re-rooting tendency and the local colour specific to the national difference as evident in Parthasarathy's *Rough Passage* are entirely missing in the poems of Mahapatra, Daruwalla or in Dom Moraes. If the traditional rhyme and rhythm of British romantic poetry are revitalized by the poems of Dom Moraes, Daruwalla and Mahapatra are incorporating the universal themes of alienation and frustration of modern individuals. For example:

(i) I know of failing strength and fattering feet,
I know I am hungry but I cannot eat
For though I am patient
For Lamb within me has tuned urgent
(Daruwalla, "Lambing")

(ii) I am that stranger now
my mirror holds to me;
the moment's silence
hardly moves across the glass
I pity myself in another guise.
(Mahapatra, "Of that Love")

The universal Prufrock image predominates all the major poets after 1960 in such a way that the contextual specificity remains of secondary importance to them.

The question of an authentic poetic tradition in Indian Poetry in English, hence, still remains a problematic question to us. The very nature of modern aestheticism i.e., resistance to tradition and archtype is still lingering controversial. Being a late product of the modern world, modern Indian Poetry in English is still oscillating in between tradition and modernity. It fails to banish the trends already available in the pre-1947 poetry such as reconciliation of myth and reality, imitation of European literature and the tendency to revitalize the past memories in search of a belonging. On the other hand, the tradition that is established so far by the modern Indian Poets in English is not unanimous to the diversified poetic voices which ultimately constitute the tradition. Excluding the diaspora poetic voices, the poets residing in India surprisingly vary in their perspectives, revelation and in their preoccupation of the contextual dilemma. The main dilemma in this regard is that modern Indian Poetry in English has to counter a poetic tradition which itself was not fully grown and strengthen. In another sense, modern Indian Poetry in English did not have a matured poetic tradition to be countered to become 'antitraditional'. Its modern elements, hence, are not the products of a counter discourse vis-à-vis the pre-independent poetry rather a borrowed discourse semi-representative to its provincial context.

Work Cited

- Daruwalla, K.N. ed. *Two Decades of Indian Poetry. 1960-80*. Shahebabad: Vikas, 1980. Print.
- Deaspande, Gauri. *an anthology of indo-english poetry*. Delhi: Himd Pocket Book, 1974. Print.
- Gokok, Vinayak Krishna. *The Golden Treasury of Indo-Anglican Poetry*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1970. Print.
- Mehrotra, Arvind Krishna, ed. *Twelve Modern Indian Poets*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992. Print.
- Paranjape, Makarand, ed. *Indian Poetry in English*, Madras: Macmillan, 1993. Print.
- Parthasarathy, Rajagopal, ed. *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1976. Print.
- Ramanujan, A.K., "Classic Lost and Found", in *Contemporary India: essays on the Uses of Tradition*. ed. Carla Borden: Oxford University Press, 1989. Print.
- Sarang, Vilas, ed. *Indian English Poetry Since 1950: an anthology*. Bombay: Orient Longman, 1989. Print.
- Allen Ginsberg quoted in R. Parthasarathy, "Meeting Allen Ginsberg". *Miscellany*. 11 May-August 1967. Print.
- Bose, Amalendu. "Some Poets of the Writers Workshop," in *Critical Essays on Indian Writing in English*. ed. M.K. Naik. Dhawar: Karnatak University, 1968. Print.
- Brooks, Cleanth. *Modern Poetry & the tradition*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1967. Print.
- Choudhury, Bibhas. *English Social and Cultural History: An Introductory Guide and Glossary*. New Delhi: Prentice-Hall of India Private Limited, 2005. Print.
- Daruwalla, K.N. "Introduction". *Two Decades of Indian Poetry: 1960-1980*. ed. K.N. Daruwalla. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1980. Print.
- Gandhi, Leela. *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. New Delhi: OUP, 1998. Print.
- King, Bruce. *Modern Indian Poetry in English*. New Delhi: OUP, 2001. Print.
- Lal, P. Introduction. *Modern Indo-Anglican Poetry*. ed. P. Lal and K. Raghavendra Rao, New Delhi: Kavita Publication, 1959. Print.
- Kotoky, P.C. *Indo-English Poetry: A Study of Sri Aurobindo and Four Others*.

Gauhati: Gauhati University, 1969. Print.

Mcleod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. New York: Manchester University Press, 2000. Print.

Mukherjee, Meenakshi. *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi: OUP, 2002. Print.

Naik, M.K. "The Achievement of Indian English Poetry," in *Perspectives on Indian Poetry in English*. ed. M.K. Naik. New Delhi: Abhinav Publication, 1984. Print.

Parthasarathy, R. "Indo-Anglican Attitudes". *TLS*. March 10, 1978. Print.

Pathak, Abhijit, "On Vikram Seth and all that he Symbolises". *Mainstream*. Vol. XXXI, No. 32, June 19, 1993. Print.

Rutherford, J., "The Third Space: Interview With Homi Bhabha". *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*. J. Rutherford. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990. 207-221. Print.

The Criterion