CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, A.K. Ramanujan, R. Parthasarathy and Jayanta Mahapatra, the leading contemporary poets, belong to a self-sustaining tradition of Indian English poetry. They are among those poets who have moved poetry into new dimensions. They are the originators of modern poetry in English, having created a cultural space for post-colonial poetry in English. Their one significant achievement is that they have succeeded in forming a national tradition in which poets like Nissim Ezekiel and A.K. Ramanujan have become models for other poets to follow. The essential purpose in writing is a quest for roots, leading to self discovery. Having an identity is significant for all poets and it becomes doubly so for those writers who choose to write in a language other than their mother-tongue. No wonder that they go through a tremendous crisis of identity. The poets I have taken up in my study have gone through a whole gamut of emotions - anguish, guilt, ambivalence and alienation.
The question of identity leads us back to our past, mythical as well as historical. It is not possible to move ahead unless we have the feeling of our myth and tradition in our bones, always sustaining and giving us strength. The need to move ahead is also innate. There always comes a time when all of us become 'Jonathan Livingstone' and turn our backs on the familiarity and warmth of our home and hearth in search of new pastures. The tug between the tradition and the deep desire to be in step with times, is eternal and can be agonising. It is imperative that a balance between the past and the present is maintained so that the onward stride continues. This struggle and conflict of the modern Indian poets brings to my mind, the poignantly moving lines of William Wordsworth:

...Blank misgivings of a creature
Moving about in worlds not realised
High instincts before which our mortal
nature
Did tremble like a guilty thing surprised:
But for those first affections,
Those shadowy recollections,
Which, be they what they may,
Are Yet the fountain - light of all our day,
Are Yet a master - light of all our seeing.

India is one country which continues to cherish traditional, mythical values and it is those great, sacred traditions of India which have bound centuries, bringing together communities and races more strongly than anything else, transcending narrow geographical, social and cultural
barriers. The great Indian tradition has the immense capacity to imbibe all outside influences and Indianise them and because of its innate strength, it is able to provide sights and insights into the mysteries of life and death. The west has always found India exotic. In India, for us the world of spirit is more important than the world of senses. So it becomes the special task of the poet to turn inwards and seek guidance so that he may be able to create not mere words but powerful, life infusing 'Mantras'. In our scriptures the poet is looked upon as a visionary, a revealer of the truth as apropos a popular saying, 'Jahān nā Pahūnché Ravi, Vahān Pahūnché Kavi'. (The poet has the power to penetrate deeper than even the rays of the Sun).

The poet is also considered a 'Guru', a 'Sage' and a 'Seer' who with his writings will be able to guide the world.

The five poets I have taken up in my study, belong to a point in time when great things are happening in the world of modern Indian poetry. The second world war and the great event of Indian Independence tended to liberate their sensibilities from excessive concern with nationalist or socialist politics and give a more personal voice to their poetry. It also resulted in a sharp awareness of their own individuality. There also began a conscious struggle to rid themselves of their 'colonial image' and emerge as the new
'Indian voice'. The liberation of the country from a foreign rule gave them the vantage point to take a new look at the changed reality of national and social truths. And from then on their major concern became their relationship with and alienation from the realities of their society.

They have discovered a new 'Poetic mode' which is confessional in nature and hence cathartic and more direct. It stands for de-romanticising the reality and facing it without rose-tinted glasses. This also stands for accepting and asserting their 'Indianness' in a subtle manner and by not being overtly and aggressively nationalist or patriotic. To prove their Indianness, they do not have to sing effusive songs, praising their mother-land as per the romantic tradition. Their Indianness goes deeper than this, as in Kamala Das the bold assertion of her being an Indian is for her partly a process of self-analysis of her complex personality and partly a refusal to conform:

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

Although these poets have chosen the English language to express themselves in, yet they view themselves as essentially Indian. Their poetry exhibits their intense involvement with their native country on different planes, on a much deeper level. There seems to be an heightened
involvement in and awareness of Indian experience and a sense of actual participation in the social and community life. They seem to have internalized the experience. They are aware of the shortcomings; yet there is no attempt to dissociate themselves. In Nissim Ezekiel, his Indianess forms the significant core of his poetry. Many of his poems derive their effectiveness from the poet's confused emotional reaction to modern Indian dilemma of conflicts between tradition and modernity, the city and the village. He with his tormented awareness, is a part of it all:

Here among the beggars,
Hawkers, pavement sleepers,
Hutment dwellers, slums,
Dead souls of men and Gods...

Like Kamala Das, Nissim Ezekiel, too, reveals in his poetry his process of self discovery. His poems too, become a medium for him to delve deep into his psyche.

Ramanujan is a brilliant, intellectual poet who cleverly hides his true feelings and presents a philosophically detached and cool front to the world. We catch vivid glimpses of his traditionally rich, Tamil Brahmin Childhood. He has his way of expressing his nostalgia through the metaphor of family which he uses extensively or in the kind of rapidly expressed ironies found in his poetry. He carries his past with him as an inner world of memories which erupt into the present.
Similiarly, Parthasarathy's *Rough Passage*, records his experience of alienation and desire for reintegration into a cultural tradition. Mahapatra's *Relationship* is a conscious attempt at reconciliation and associating with the past. Time and again he gives voice to his desire of redeeming the past from the rut it has fallen into and to recapture it in all its glory.

There is a definite change in the sensibility. English is no longer viewed as the language of the colonial rulers or even of the Indian elite. It is a language uniting us all and making us a part of a new world culture. The poets may experience an occasional twinge of guilt or have ambivalent feelings towards the language, Yet by and large, they are able to overcome it all. English has now become a part of our national stream, alluding to local realities, traditions and ways of feeling. It has got itself thoroughly assimilated into the Indian Character, even 'Babu English' as is shown in many poems written by Nissim Ezekiel. English has come to stay as the prominent literature of India. The Indian writers writing in English have managed to carve a place for themselves in the world of literature. More specially, the English verse has come to become a part of the mainstream of the literatures of India, acquiring an obstinately regional bias. Even if the poets experience exile, it only lends a new tension, making their
poetry more intense and even interesting.

The poets today seem to react differently to the concept of traditional Hindu society. It is partly because of their education through the medium of English and partly because of their coming from varying communities. Although their religious, social, cultural traditions do form a significant core of their psyche, yet their Hindu, Jewish, Parsee, Christian, Muslim identities do not have much pull. They are conscious of their ethnic roots; yet they consider themselves a part of the modern world. Their poetic concerns and the themes they choose for their poems are different. There are questions about values, sex and morality, religion, poverty, social and political injustice and corruption which hold and absorb them. They seem to question everything and all this has a personal basis, a reaction. It is here that we often have a glimpse of ambivalence and dualism. Like in Kamala Das, who craves for the security of a traditional society, yet shuns it, finding it stifling. There is much in the traditional setup to disgust the sensitive mind of the poet, filling him with despair and sadness and bringing into play a modern sensibility, confronting the confusion, bewilderment and the disillusion of the time. All these poets are sensitive to their past, mythic, traditional, cultural or familial and keep exhibiting it in different ways. There seems to be an acceptance of the past. All of them realise that they are a
part of that unbroken chain, uniting them with the past and leading to the future.

Indian poets are incorporating techniques and themes of major twentieth century modernists. Their work reveals an awareness of most of the prominent world literatures. Their perspective is modern rather than traditional. Whereas the early poets were interested in Indian legend, the contemporary poet writing in English is concerned with finding a personal language. Most of the poems written by these poets are based on individual interests. For example, Mahapatra tends to speak of a poet's mental landscape, an inner world of his own making with immense spaces of his own life, allusions, his personal hopes, desires, longings and agony. All this makes his poetry very introspective and obscure. It is a kind of journey through symbols and allusions, where a reader is generally left to his own recourse.

Kamala Das writes a very moody, a very cynical poetry. She writes about different, conflicting emotions. Her poems are confessionals in tone. Her concerns are very feminist; at par with any modern liberated woman of the world. Usually, she uses her own life as the subject matter to give vent to her disillusionment in life. For Parthasarathy the major theme is the distance between the modern sceptical individual and the traditional beliefs of a community.
Ramanujan's poems are an attempt at catharsis to rid himself of the nostalgia and pain he carries around as a burden. Ramanujan is naturally the most rooted in Indian tradition; he is also an example of how different traditions can be and how much and how often they change. Nissim Ezekiel wishes to use his poetry to get a more organised view of life in a quest for physical, social and spiritual integration of the self. It makes his poetry open as well as guarded.

This transitional phase, their questioning stance and the conscious attempt at associating with modern trends in literature lends their poetry a special edge, out of which it flows; now full of pain, now guilt and now touched with ambivalence. Infact, the poetry of these five leading poets is part of the process of modernisation which includes varied urban influences, independence, social change and an increased mobility and communication and the subsequent conflict and paradox, leading to an overwhelming sense of pride in their being Indians and also the realisation of their possible, positive role in the international, modern world. They find themselves in the centre of a world, where so much is happening! They are the alienated dwellers of the modern city, restless to find a new world for themselves with more personal freedom and even personal ethics.

These five poets, along with other modern Indian poets have invited much flak for their modernist tendencies.
There are critics who are critical of this attitude because they feel that Indian poets are ignoring their own traditions; literary and otherwise and also it is felt that Indian poets do not have much foundation in Western tradition. They are even accused of following the West, blindly.

Not only are they imperfectly aware of what is best in the myth-values of the Western tradition, they are only vaguely familiar with the durable values in their own tradition. Many of them feel, as Prem Chand felt with socialist 'myth' earlier that a composite serum of Sigmund Freud, D.H. Lawrence, Jean Paul Sartre, Soren Kierkegaard and Che Guevara will, if injected in strong doses, revive a moribund literature.

The critics who blame the poets for shunning what is best in their own tradition believe that a possible revival in the Indian literary scene can take place only if one's own myth-values and structures are studied and used with creative and critical imagination. On a different plane as well, these critics object to these new trends among the modern Indian poets of aping the West blindly of its existential trends. Combining in himself the processes of criticism and creation the poet should be a critic of life before expressing his refined sensibilities through discriminative perceptions. Technique is certainly the first step towards perfection but it is not the only prerequisite.
The Indian writers belonging to the nineteenth and early twentieth century were familiar enough with their mother-tongues as well as with Sanskrit Literature and were able to delve deep into the Indian tradition. The writers of today because of their Western education have no means of participating in the Indian myth. Urban society makes it possible for the individuals to live in little sub-culture islands, where one does not really feel the loss of tradition but no sensitive human being, specially a writer can afford to exist like that i.e. cutting ties with the past because a psychological and spiritual sense of the past helps one to penetrate and understand the significance of the present better.

In my opinion, the poets included in my study do not live in any spiritual or traditional vacuum. Although, they have consciously chosen to be with whatever is modern in spirit, yet they have not in any way disrupted the chain binding them with their roots. Existentialism has always been a part of Indian philosophy, where men have tried to know themselves or the meaning of their being. It has been a basis of 'Vedantic' and 'Upnishadic' philosophy. Otherwise, too, we find modern Indian poets, making conscious attempts to reach out to their past. In the first place their poetry had emerged as a revolt against the over-romanticisation and obsession with tradition which was
holding the society to emotional and spiritual ransom and kept it forthwith, from coming into its own. An excessive obsession with the tradition ridden Indian society and a blind devotion to dead and obsolete values had got the society into a rut, stifling the independent, sensitive spirit of the poet. The early writers writing in English were busy churning out over-decorative and imitative verses in the tradition of the English Romantics.

Independence of the country coupled with a new kind of more open education, ushered in a fresh whiff of air. It freed the poet from many pre-concieved notions. For the first time the Indian poets responded to a world culture, feeling the presence of a universal spirit in which they found the echo of their own tormented thoughts. Questing spirit in the poet wanted to soar, transcending all boundaries. The poet was not able to rid himself of his shackles and prejudices in one day. It took a lot of courage and daring on his part. The Indian poet was fascinated by what was being done to poetry and what could be done through it. Infact, the similar trends are apparent in Hindi and all the other regional literatures of India. The sense of experimentation appeals to the contemporary poet's questing spirit because,

The new poetry is that which is daringly different, experimental, often wildly eccentric and invariably the king-pin of
The modern Indian poet was able to have an access to the world through English language which offered to him many new challenges and opened areas of immense opportunities and possibilities. By and large, these poets were not tormented by the idea of writing in an alien language. Ramanujan confessed that he just happened to write in English. Kamala Das, too, does not wish others to bother her on this score as expressed by her in the poem 'An Introduction'. Mahapatra writes in English because of his love for the language and Nissim Ezekiel has chosen English as his medium because he can not write in any other language. It is only Parthasarathy, who although in love with the language, laments the lack of any real tradition of writing in English compared with other regional languages like Tamil etc. His poet's soul yearns for the purity which ever evades him. He feels that his love for English has made him an exile, symbolically both in English as well as in Tamil. As a result of this he experiences alienation from his own culture.

Parthasarathy feels that an Indian poet in English feels alienated by his language from the environment and
from a living idiom. There is no tradition from which to evaluate his work. So the poet is conscious of his Indianness which reflects a crisis of identity. The tension of using a foreign language with its lack of roots in the local environment becomes the main theme of his *Rough Passage*. Parthasarathy feels that language has an ecology i.e. the "Study of interaction between any given language and its environment", hence "Language is a tree which loses colour under different sky." His feelings of pain, guilt, ambivalence and alienation run through *Rough Passage*. It is a different story though that he is able to make the most of the tension arising out of all these emotions, in his work.

Ramanujan is one poet who has handled the divided heritage, Indian and Western so well. He, through his work showed how the Indian poets could effectively be both modern and yet able to work through their traditions by employing the technique of using his South Indian, Brahmin roots as a source, contrasting it with his life in America, with his Tamil upbringing to create images of contemporary alienation set in specific situations. It is a technique, Ramanujan had learnt from his study of older, Kannada Poets who blended Indian and European models into new forms. Ramanujan through his work has earned the praise of his own contemporaries like Nissim Ezekiel and Parthasarathy and he has become a worthy model for others to follow.
Partbasarathy maintains that Ramanujan has shown the Indian poets the right direction and his poetry is the first step towards establishing an indigenous tradition of Indian verse. Nissim Ezekiel too had written Psalms but if he had based them on 'Jewish' or 'Puranic' lores, his poetry would have been richer. So is with Kamala Das. Although she has a Malyali background, having written many successful short stories and Prose pieces in it. She also had a traditionally rich childhood but she does not make use of it in her poetry. The alienation she experiences from her tradition is more personal and emotional. Spiritually, those traditions do form a part of her psyche. Mahapatra does make use of traditional and historical symbols and images, yet his poetic spirit is intolerant of all narrowing trends. He sees himself, essentially, as a part of that universal tradition. The entire agony of Parthasarathy stems from the alienation he experiences from his traditions, which leaves him feeling an emotional exile. But he reasons, the exile is not a prison house because "It is only in exile that a writer is most at home."  

The questing spirit of the modern Indian poet seems to have made the best use of his peculiar dilemma of the conflict between tradition and modernism. Searching for his roots, he had found answers to many questions, making him understand himself better; awakening in him a sense of pride.
for his roots and above all an acceptance. Many poets today realize that unless they have a knowledge of their own Gods in their bones they will not be able to write well in English. Hence many of the modern Indian English writers are turning bilingual. They realize that if the images are drawn from a common source, the literature becomes richer and the hiatus between two cultures too will become less. It is in a way, coming to terms with an Indian past and the environment as the language gets more and more acclimatized to Indian environment. Besides this the Indian Writer should turn to Sanskrit literature to derive inspiration and help because basically Sanskrit aesthetics and western theories of poetry have points of convergence and there are linguistic similarities between English and Sanskrit. The Indian writer writing in English should delve deeper in tradition to understand the intricacies and also to acquaint himself better with the rules of prosody and poetic composition. It will not only enrich them traditionally but also enable these poets to express themselves in an alien language easily.

Finally as we draw the balance-sheet, we realize that these poets have made the transition from their familiar frames of reference to new ones, and it can be opined that they have achieved a balance, quite successfully. Having absorbed the culture of their own country, they are
expressing their sensibilities in the modern idiom. Their access to two cultures and their slow and painful conquest of that overwhelming feeling of nostalgia and ambivalence have contributed to their development as people no longer uprooted. Maturity is nothing but self awareness and the knowledge of the environment in which we are. These Indian poets exhibit a developed maturity and seem to have overcome the oedipal tug. They appear to have realised that to achieve balance, the poetry has to draw strength from the bed-rock of tradition, yet must be contemporary. To end up, I would like to quote from Parthasarathy,

This history of Indian English verse is therefore the history, on the one hand, of a growing relationship between two traditions and two cultures and, on the other, of the reshaping of English to express the Indian experience. The tension of this dialogue has produced and is still producing significant, and often excellent, writing. To understand Indian English verse is to understand the traditions involved and how they interact. The individual work is for us the only focus of value. If, however, it is valid, its value will be outside the personal and traditional, and reach out to the universal. For the present, it appears to me, each poet has to make the imaginative grasp at identity for himself. And, if he can find no means in his tradition to sustain him, he will have to start from scratch.
REFERENCES


9. Ibid., p. 10.