CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Indian English Literature is a significant by-product of the Western impact on Indian culture. The literature born out of this interaction can be divided into two types, i.e. the literature created by the English men who responded to the call of East and made India the theme of their writing. This literature has been called Anglo-Indian Literature, the main contributors to this literature being Sir William Jones, Sir Edwin Arnold, Rudyard Kipling and E.M. Foster. Then there is literature written by Indian in English, which is now referred to as Indian English Literature.

As for Indian poetry in English, Henry Derozio (1807 – 1831) was probably the first Indian to use English for writing poetry. In the year 1827, he published his first book of verses called Poems. His poetic career, however, could not last long, as he died a premature death in the year 1831. Another well-known work by him was The Fakeer of Junghera: A metrical Tale and other poems (1828). A patriotic poet, he was inspired by intense love for the motherland to write the poems such as “To India”, “My Native Land” and “The Harp of India”. His poetry not only inculcated a spirit of patriotism but also influenced other Indian poets in English.

Kashi Prasad Ghose, writing at the same time, published the first book of Indian verse in English using conventional metres and conventional imagery. The following line of verse exemplify characteristic features of his poetry:

Religion of bliss! Irradiate gem of night!
Soother of sorrows! Orb of gentle light!
For still resplendent moon! When’er we see
Thy placid face, and fondly gaze on thee,
Its gentleness upon the wounded soul
Exerts a healing power and calm control.

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Kashi Prasad Ghose was followed by Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Toru Dutt, and Manmohan Ghose. Michael Dutt’s *The Captive Ladie* – a narrative poem on Rajput princess Sanjukta carried off by Prithviraj – came out in 1849, *The Dutt Family Album* in 1870 and Toru Dutt’s *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* with an introduction by Sir Edmond Gosse in 1882. David McCutchion writes:

*This was the time of harmony and collaboration between the English and their charges, a time when English literature provided new inspiration to a vernacular literature in conventionalised decay, a time compared to the cultural conquest of Rome by Greece or by European Renaissance.*

The work of Derozio, Ghose and Dutt are largely imitative and derivative. It reminds us of Byron and Sir Walter Scott. As V.K. Gokak aptly remarks, “Indo-Anglian poetry was born under a Romantic Star. It learned to lisp in the manner of Byron and Scott in the verse of Derozio, M.M. Dutt and others. It began with verse romances and lyrics written in the romantic vein.”

This happened before the upsurge of nationalism. After independence, the feeling of nationalism led some writers to shift back from English as a medium of expression to their own mother tongue. Michael Madhusudan Dutt, for example switched from English to become the first modern Bengali poet. He advised his fellow poets: “Let those who feel they have springs of fresh thought in them fly to their mother tongue”. Sir Edmond Gosse and Y.B. Yeats also urged the poets to write in their mother tongue and to concentrate on Indian themes.

It was sometimes felt that due to the feeling of nationalism the creative writing in English would die out. But instead of dying out it became richer and
richer. Some of our talented Indian poets like Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu and Sir Aurobindo, however did not pay heed to all this and kept on writing poetry in English. Iyengar in a special ‘Language in common’ issue of the Times literary Supplement (10 August 1962) boldly proclaimed:

Already it is as proper to the talk of Indian and African literature (in English) as it is of Canadian or Australian, and all the evidence suggests they will grow in strength and be joined by the others. 

Toru Dutt is the first Indian poet in English to present ancient legends and stories in English. She with her sister Aru, published an English version of French poems in 1875 under the title ‘A Sheaf Gleaned in French Field’. Her second collection of poems, ‘Ancient Ballads and legends of Hindustan’, presents famous Indian legends in English verse. Besides legends she also had great fascination of nature. In her sonnet “Baugmaree” she speaks of her response to the garden house in Calcutta:

The light green graceful tamarind abound
Amid the mangoe clouds of green profound,
And palms arise, like pillars gray, between,
And over the quiet pools the seemuls lean,
Red-red, and startling like a trumpets sound.

This love of nature is also reflected in her celebrated poem “The Casuarina Tree”. Through the casuarina tree Toru goes back to her childhood:

But not because of its magnificence
Dear is the casuarina to my soul:
Beneath it we have played, though years may roll.

O sweet companions, loved with love intense.

For your sakes shall the tree be ever dear:

Toru Dutt’s contribution to Indian poetry in English is remarkable. But her sudden death gave a blow to it. Manmohan Ghose’s Songs of Love and Death appeared in 1926. Laurence Binyon, in his Introduction to Ghose’s work, wrote: “No Indian has ever used our tongue with so poetic a touch, and he would win a phrase, turn a noun into verb with the freedom, often the felicity of our own poets” (p-21). His Love Songs and Elegies appeared in 1898. Soon the misfortune befell on him: His wife died and he went blind in 1918. He published “Immortal Eve” and “Orphic Mysteries” in memory of his beloved wife. Ghose’s Late Lyrics depicts beautifully the spring and autumn season in India, though the mood and scenery in the poem is English.

Michael Madhusudan Dutt was also a gifted poet. His well-known narrative poem, The Captive Ladie appeared in Madras in 1849. His work betrays the influence of Byron. This poem is written in Blank Verse, and describes the primeval innocence, the temptation of man and his fall in the form of visions.

Sarojini Naidu was a born poet. As a poet she is in W.B. Yeast’s phrase a ‘pure romantic’. She wrote four volumes of verses: The Golden Threshold (1905), dedicated to Edmond Gosse, The Bird of Time (1912), The Brokenwing (1917) and the posthumous The Feather of Dawn. Her poems can be classified into following types: Folk songs, Love lyrics, songs of spring, and poem of life and death. Her poetry is full of Indian images. Some memorable poems on India are: “Indian Dancers”, “The Indian Gypsy”, “The Queen’s Rival”, and “Nightfall in the city of
Hyderabad”. “The Palanquin Bearers” is a beautiful folk song, which goes on like this:

Lightly, O lightly, we bear her along,
She sways like a flower in the wind of our song:
She skims like a bird on the foam of a stream
She floats like a laugh from the tip of a dream.

Other beautiful songs composed by Sarojini Naidu include “The Song of Radha, the Milk Maid”, “The Flute-player of Brindabun”.

Like Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu, Sri Aurobindo was educated at Cambridge. He had a wide knowledge of Greek, Latin, French, and Italian and had full command over Sanskrit and English. He was still an active poet when India became independent. He died pre-maturely and most of his work was published posthumously. His contribution to the poetry of man is of vital importance. His poetry is full of spiritual symbolism. His epic Savitri (1950), written in Blank Verse, is a monumental piece of art in which the original legend and the spiritual wisdom are forged together through out all the twelve books of the epic.

Savitri is not just an epic which tell the story of a devoted Hindu wife who brought back her husband from the clutches of the god of Death, ‘Yama’, but a symbol of innocence and purity which triumphs over evil. Savitri the heroine of epic, has attained godhood and is worshipped by Hindu wives in India. Regarding the epic H.M. Williams writes:

Nevertheless, it is a noble attempt to breathe new life of
Indian metaphysics into a dead European form and it has
moments of high emotional intensity especially in Books IX, X and XI.
Sri Aurobindo was a powerful poet who influenced various other practitioners of verse in Indian languages. This gave rise to a distinctive Aurobindonian school in Indian English Literature. Dilip Kumar Roy, Nirodbaran and V. M. Gokak are among the important poets who were influenced by Sri Aurobindo. Other major works of Sri Aurobindo are: *The Human Cycle, The Ideal of Human Unity, Essays on Gita* and *The Synthesis of Yoga*.

The Aurobindonian tradition was based on the theme of spirituality. The pattern of writing of these poets was traditional and they did not prefer any experiment just for the sake of novelty. But soon there emerged various writers who tried to break away from the traditional mode of writing practised by Manmohan Ghose, Sarojini Naidu and Sri Aurobindo. The movement was headed by P. Lal, a professor of English from Calcutta who organised a writer’s workshop. He wrote:

> We are committed to the agreement in principle
> that English has proved its ability as a language
> to play a creative role in All-India Literature.\(^7\)

After isolated attempts at creative writing in English in the nineteenth century, in the twentieth century, coinciding with the struggle for political independence, a continuous tradition of Indian writing in English began to emerge. Those who did not take part in Indian politics but were moved by the struggle for political freedom, chose creative writing to make themselves heard. The writings of Gandhi, Nehru and Tagore have become a significant part of literature.

Now when we are standing at the turn of century,

> Indo-Anglian writing is ... on its way of evolving
> a tradition and acquiring a recognizable character
> of its own.\(^8\)
Indian Literature in English had to face various criticisms. The writers were accused of directing their interest overseas. It was believed that love for India can be truly expressed only in one’s native language. However, people like Thomas Piles would accord the same legitimacy to Indian English as to any other variety of English in the world:

There are of course in addition to American English, Australian English, Canadian English, South African English, Indian English among others... all as legitimately English as that form of language which happens, to be spoken in mother country.

According to R. Parthasarathy is that “Indian poetry is Indian in sensibility and content, and English in language”.  

Despite various criticisms, Indian English poetry kept on flourishing. After 1960s various new poets started writing poetry in English. Some of the significant names, which can be mentioned in this context are: A.K. Ramanujan, Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das and Dom Moreas. They constitute the second generation of Indian poets in English. The poets of first generation were against any experimentation just for the sake of novelty. But in the poets of second generation there is a total denial of the earlier tradition and an urge to create a ‘new’ poetry, in revolt against “the blurred and rubbery sentiments”11 of the Aurobindonian school. P. Lal and his groups are strongly opposed to Sri Aurobindo and the Aurobindians. In introduction to his Anthology of Modern Indo-Anglian Poetry (1959), Lal condemned Savitri as “greasy weak-spined and purple adjectived”, 12 and conclude “We think that poetry must deal in concrete terms with concrete experience”. 13
Nissim Ezekiel, another foremost new poet, adjudged Savitri as “a confused unconscious parody of the worst feature of English rhetorical style grafted on a degenerate Eastern mysticism”. The charge of being literary might have been a compliment for the earlier poet. But when we go through the work of poets of the second generation we notice a stern voice of duty and excessive self-consciousness. As Ezekiel puts it,

\[
\text{Beneath his daily strategy,}
\]
\[
\text{Reflected in his suffering face}
\]
\[
\text{I see him dim identity –}
\]
\[
\text{A small, deserted, holy place.}^{14}
\]

Love poems were no longer confined to the physical beauty and charms of the lady:

\[
\text{The object of my love and Francesca,}
\]
\[
\text{Is in perpetual motion. For you I would}
\]
\[
\text{Snuff out the candle of creation, I}
\]
\[
\text{Would plough through the offal mass of}
\]
\[
\text{Humanity, and play with a comet’s tresses.}^{15}
\]

The themes of the poem of these poets are more intellectual than emotional, and appeals more to head than heart. For example, Dom Moreas in his “Kanheri Caves” writes:

\[
\text{Blocks are fallen: sunlight cracks these floors,}
\]
\[
\text{And fidgets in the courtyard where a pair}
\]
\[
\text{Of giant Buddhas smile and wait their crash}
\]
\[
\text{The temples, audience halls, a lonely tomb.}
\]
Then, there is another kind of poetry that dominated the scene of the Indian poetry in English during this generation and that is ‘the poetry of Soul’ of which Iyengar has made himself a special champion. Along with national resurgence there was a religious revival that has taken place. As McCutchion writes,

*Sarojini Naidu’s hunger for God was inevitable in the land which, as everybody knows – thanks to the nineteenth century orientals – is the age old home of religion and spirit.*

Frustrations at the ways of achieving independence could also not be avoided. Strains of this frustration can be marked in Armando Menezes’s “Of Gandhi”:

*Why is your rising mother, solemnly cold,*
*With the heavens clouded to a murky mood?*
*With downcast eyes, and monsters age ape for*
*And angry gnashing in the wintry fold?*

However, for understanding the Indian poetic scene better we have to pay a particular attention to the works of poets like Nissim Ezekiel, P. Lal, and Kamala Das.

Nissim Ezekiel was the first modern Indian poet to publish a volume of poems. He was dedicated practitioner of poetry, and with the publication of *A Time*
to Change broke new grounds in the field of Indian English poetry. By 1960 Ezekiel had published four volumes of poems. A Time To Change, Sixty Poems, The Third and The Unfinished Man. Despite being a foreign native, he has adopted himself to Indian landscape and situation. His earlier work reflects the influence of W. B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot, who guided him in the beginning of his poetic career. He is a committed poet who has made his ‘commitment’ to this country. In his poem “Background Casualty” he states:

    The Indian landscape scars my eyes
    I have become a part of it
    to be observed by foreigners.

And then boldly asserts:

    I have made my commitment now
    This is one to stay where I am,
    As others choose to give themselves
    In some remote and backward place
    My backward place is where I am.

He has greatly sympathy for the common suffering people. Having made the ‘commitment’, he has proceeded to depict different aspects of Indian life and has begun to understand and even appreciate the various Indian traditions and observances, discovering in the process his ‘voice’. His poetry has thus acquired a new Voice that has dispelled the echoes of Yeats and Eliot from it.

To him “Journey through words is the process of his reaching perfection – as man. Hence his conviction:

    His past like a muddy pool
    From which he cannot hope for words, 19
and his prayer:

Whatever the enigma,
The passion of blood
Grant me the metaphor
To make it human good. 20

Pointing out the distinct Indian sensibility in Ezekiel’s work, C.D. Narsimhaiah writes: “The extent he has availed himself of the composite culture of India to which he belongs he must be said to an important not merely in the Indian context but in a consideration of those that are writing poetry anywhere in English. What distinguishes him from a crowd of versifiers is a genuine sophistication in the use of the language born of fine insights into life”. 21 Ezekiel’s poetic craft has developed steadily and he is today a most talented poet who handles his themes with a remarkable technical skill. He has been a source of inspiration to younger generation: almost all-young Indian poets writing in English have looked up to him for guidance and leadership.

As we move from Ezekiel to P. Lal we notice a change in theme, tone and language. Lal’s poems are personal in tone. He creates a bright summary world—“rose world” as he calls it—“where meaning is in fragrances”. 22 His themes are largely restricted to birds, bees, roses, and apples, and, to him, “what holds them all together is a moral tenderness”. 23 Notwithstanding echoes and influences of Eliot, Lal’s expressions are light and are conveyed through the use of apt words. His poems, unlike Aurobindo’s, are pebbles and not mountains at their best, neat and pleasing:

My love is no less bright
Than there bright birds today
In the diffuse delight
Of sun and wind and play-
Think sparrow, tit and crow
But as the shades advance aslant,
As the sun goes, wind goes. I want
Their tender ignorance.  

A mention may also be made of Lal’s translations, which he calls ‘transcreations’. These translations are from Sanskrit poems. The expressions are superb and the images are concrete. Swiftness in movement and Vigour of expressions in his poetry are worth noting:

Like much riches, like light, like breath of life, like one’s own son,
Like a milch cow washed and shining, like fever in blazing wood,
Is Agni the sun-god.  

Praising his translations, C.M. Srinath observes: “It would not be exaggeration to say that in such translations Mr. Lal has achieved better poetry than in his original composition and that is not the small thing to say when one appreciates the difficulties of translation. 

Yet another competent of Indian English poet is Kamala Das. She writes about herself in the confessional mode. Her moods, her love, her grandmother and the cities in which she lived form the subject matter of her poetry. Her tone is conversational. In Kamala Das’s poetry we notice a shift from the legendary, sentimentalized India of pre-Independence poets to a more social, contemporary localised and personal India as can be seen from the titles of the poems “My Grandmother’s House”, “Visitors to the city”, “The Child in the Factory”, “A
Farewell to Bombay" and "Hot noon in Malabar". Her tone is distinctively feminine.

Later Indian poets, however, have to come to terms with their environment and milieu which is completely different from the one faced by the poets of the earlier generations. The destructive nature of Indian politics is eating the core of Indian life, and there is corruption everywhere. Aware of the contemporary challenges, modern poets, in general, are more and more committed towards the society. Some of them, however, have been charged with "enjoying the bliss of ignorance", and adopting indifference and complacency to burning social problems.

There is nevertheless a shift in sensibility in recent Indian English poets, which, is evident both in substance and form. But this shift in sensibility, which has revolutionized Indian writing, is qualitatively different from the modernity that took western literature by storm in the wake of the World War-I. Most of the modernist writing in the West can be described as literature of crisis that emerged from the imagination curdled with a sense of disaster. In contrast, Indian poets have been engaged in assessing the Western impact on our culture and redefining Indian identity. This is true of the poets who started writing poetry in English after the 1960s. Some of the poets of this generation are: K.N. Daruwala, Adil Jussawala, Arun Kolatkar, Krishna Srinivas, Shiv K. Kumar, Geive Patel, P. Lal, Jayanta Mahapatra, Pritish Nandy, A.K. Mehta, R. Parthasarthy and O.P. Bhatnagar.

The work of those poets has freshness and variety. Indian poetry in English has now found roots besides building up a tradition of its own. For H.S. Bhatia it is "a tradition with collective talent". They have written on various themes such as
corruption, degeneration, insecurity, terror of bloodshed, agony of aimless killing and death, exploitation of the poor and the innocent, and so on. Some poets of this period are also imitative and derivative. Not only the themes but also the imagery adapted by these poets are at times Western. Their poetry has remained consequently alien to both the words, i.e. English as well as Indian. Indians rejected their work for being written in a language foreign to them. The subject matter also failed to project Indian problems properly. Sometimes Indian English poetry is neither Indian nor English, and very often it is not even poetry.

There are, however, a few poets whose contribution to the development of Indian poetry in English cannot be ignored. Some poems of Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu and Sri Aurobindo, for example, are worth preserving. Despite adverse criticism, Sri Aurobindo’s Savitri stands out as a milestone in Indian English poetry, and it will always be remembered as only epic in Indian English Literature. For these poets language was never a barrier in presenting their thoughts and emotions. They beautifully encapsulated Indian sensibility in their work. Their poetry exhibits a love of the past and ancient myths. Indian scenes and scenery also find an important place in their poetry in its themes and imagery. Moreover, some modern Indian English poets have published excellent poems, which are not oblivious of Indian reality. Their work is characterised by a ruthless integrity and authenticity. In terms of mastery over the medium also they have proved their worth. One such poet is Om Prakash Bhatnagar, whose poetry deserves to be studied and analysed carefully. A modest attempt has been made in the present work to evaluate his poetry thematically and technically with a view to Indian English poets, highlighting his poetry and determining his place among modern poets.
References:


13. Ibid., p.31.
15. Ibid., p.59.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., p.60.
19. Srinath, Contemporary Indian Poetry in English, p.139.
20. Ibid.
22. McCutchion, Indian Writing in English, p.66.
23. Srinath, Contemporary Indian Poetry in English, p.139.
24. McCutchion, Indian Writing in English, p.66.
25. Srinath, Contemporary Indian Poetry in English, p.142.
26. Ibid., p.142.