

Indian English Poetry: Context

The first phase of Indian poetry was the period of literary renaissance in India. Derozio's poems, Kasiprasad Ghose's *The Shair or Minstrel* and other poems, Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *The Captive Lady*, Manmohan Ghose's *Love Songs and Elegies* are a testimony to the creative upsurge occasioned by the romantic spirit kindled by the literary renaissance. Toru Dutt alone among these romantic poets of the first phase puts an emphasis on India and her heritage by putting into verse a large number of Indian legends. The romantic Toru Dutt is also a predecessor in respect to the use of the tree in verse as demonstrated by "Our Casuarina Tree", a predecessor in respect of childhood memories recalled with nostalgia or regret.

The poets of the second phase, still romantic in spirit were Sarojini Naidu, Tagore, Aurobindo Ghose and Harindranth Chattopadhyaya. The poetic output of these poets was prolific. Romanticism of these Indian poets was fraught with nationalism, spirituality and mysticism. It was therefore different from English romanticism. Indian romanticism widened the poet's vision. While Aurobindo's was the search for the Divine in Man and Tagore's was the quest for the Beautiful in Man and Nature. Both were philosopher poets. Sarojini Naidu's romantic muse underscored the charm and splendor of traditional Indian life and Indian scene. She had a fine ear for verbal melody as she was influenced not only by English poetry but also by the Persian and Urdu poetry. She excelled in lyricism. Poetry written in the colonial period with a view to establish Indian identity by the Indian poets was an explosion or rather outburst of emotions: the nationalistic, philosophical, spiritual or mystical emotions. The appeal was to the heart of the readers. The poetry of Toru Dutt, Sri Aurobindo, Tagore and Sarojini Naidu could not be romantic since they had to express the ethos of the age. They were not merely imitating the English romantics, Victorians and Decadents blindly. Their poetry was the best voice of the contemporary Indian time - spirit. It would be fair to say that Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu constitute a kind of watershed between the first two phases, in that they share their predecessor's individual nostalgia as well as their successor's sense of crisis and quest for identity.

Post independence poetry

The ethos of the post-independence phase of Indian English literature is radically different from the first two phases. Its relation to the first two phases is that of the modern age in English literature to Victorianism. When the question of political independence was resolved in 1947 with the partition of India, the tensions of the Indian psyche suddenly relaxed. The

post - independence era of hope and aspiration was replaced by an era of questioning and ironic exposure. The national identity achieved after independence gave Indian writers a new confidence to be the critic of the present, the past and of themselves. In this new spirit and confidence the Indian poets found themselves in line with Modern English and American poets. So once again there was borrowing up to some extent as in the first two phases of Indian poetry. While the pre - 1947 poets borrowed from the romantics, Victorians and "new" Romantics of the decadent period, the post - 1947 poets borrowed from the modernist poets like Yeats, Eliot, Pound and Auden. Following are some of the factors responsible for the emergence of "new", "modernist", "experimental" Indian English poetry:

1. The economic progress achieved through the government's policies of democratic socialism and five year plans.
2. The social progress achieved through the rise in mass education.
3. The economic and social progress resulted in the broadening of the middle class sections of the society.
4. The spread of the English language and the evolution of the English culture alongside Hindi and the regional languages hastened the process of modernization. English has been Indianised in pronunciation, intonation, stress parts, idioms, word order and the syntax.
5. The scientific and technological advancement, the scientific temperament and modern sensibility has given rise to agnosticism and atheism among the educated intellectual. The modern educated intellectual Indian is critical of the formal and ritualistic religion.
6. The modern sensibility has led to an open mode of expression in social relationships.
7. Modern poetry deals in concrete terms with concrete experiences in free verse. Rhyme and other devices of meter and stanzaic forms are discarded.

The major post - independence Indian English poets are :

Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, P. Lal, Adil Jussawalla, A. K. Ramanujan, R. Parthasarthy, Gieve Patel, Arvind Mehrotra, Pritish Nandy, Kamala Das, K. N. Daruwalla, Shiv Kumar, Jayanta Mahapatra, Dilip Chitre, Saleem Peerdina, Santan Rodrigues, Eunice De Souza, Silgado, Meena Alexander, Agha Shahid Ali, Vikram Seth, Manohar Shetty etc.

The post - independence poetry underwent a sea change as far as the themes are concerned. The poets are faced with the crisis of identity so their poetry is one of quest, a search of their self, a search for their cultural roots. The reason for such a theme of Indian poetry is not far to seek. The Indian poets who express themselves in English have their cultural roots in their community. Many of these Indian poets have been educated abroad but since they belong to the middle - class, they find themselves alienated within their own immediate circle and even from the westernized ethos. Some of the poets come from different racial backgrounds but are nationals of India for example, Nissim Ezekiel is a Jew, Dom Moraes is an Anglo - Indian, Daruwalla and Jussawalla are Parsees, Eunice De Souza is a Goan Christian. The Indian poet writing in English therefore finds himself alienated. So the poetry of modern Indian poets naturally turns on the theme of identity crisis. Poets like Ramanujan, Parthasarthy and Arun Kolatkar are preoccupied with the problem of roots. Their examination of Hindu ethos has been in several directions. Ramanujan, for example, conjures up his early childhood memories with strong sense impressions. At the same time his mind keeps examining the strong and weak points of his cultural heritage. Parthasarthy too is obsessed with his roots in India while leading a westernized life style. His poem 'Rough Passages' is an attempt to deal with the theme of identity exposed to two cultures namely the Indian and the Western. The scrutiny of society is another subject matter of modern poetry. The poets who write in English were born, say in the twenties and thirties of this century and on growing up they have been a part of independent India. They are a witness to and a part of socio - economic and political changes. They cannot but be critical of all that happens around. So the socio- political and economic scene as it impinges on the poet's consciousness becomes the subject - matter of modern poetry. Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri* is an example in point. A mood of disillusionment and despair, cynicism and sarcasm characterizes modern Indian poetry. Alienation and exile, the crisis of personal identity and of cultural identity, childhood memories, familial relations, and love, nostalgia for the past and cultural traditions therefore constitute the themes of Indian poets. In the case of some poets, the sense of alienation from the family or the community becomes so overwhelming that they turn completely inward. The result of such inwardness is a highly personal poetry, confessional in tone and obsessed with loneliness and insecurity from which the escape is sought either in the erotic fantasies or the self- probing of a tortured soul. Such is the poetry of Kamala Das, Eunice de Souza and Shiv Kumar.

Nissim Ezekiel

Nissim Ezekiel was an Indian-born poet of Jewish descent and has been described as the “father of post-independence Indian verse in English”. He had a number of collections of poetry published which were very popular and some, such as *The Night Of The Scorpion*, and the anti-jingoism poem *The Patriot*, are standard verses still studied in some British and Indian schools. He had a varied career as an English teacher in India, England and the United States. He wrote plays, worked as a broadcaster on Indian radio and contributed many critical articles to the literary sections of magazines and newspapers.

Ezekiel was born in December 1924 in Mumbai. The family lived in a small, Marathi-speaking community known as the “Bene Israel” which numbered some 20,000 inhabitants at that time. Unlike other communities around the world this was a peaceful place with no evidence of anti-Semitism to worry about. They were a relatively affluent family with his father being a professor of Botany at the Wilson College in Mumbai and his mother the Principal of the school that she, herself, had set up.

Nissim was well educated and had a particular liking for the poetry of such as [T S Eliot](#) and [Ezra Pound](#). He did not much care for verse in his own language and, as he grew up, his writing attracted controversy. It was seen as too close to the old colonial influences by many radicals in India. He attended Wilson College and, in 1947, he gained a first class honours degree in literature and immediately started teaching English Literature.

India was, politically, a hotbed of activity at that time and he took an active interest in that for a little while but soon decided to travel to England by boat. He spent the next three years studying philosophy at Birkbeck College in London, living in very low standard accommodation. Much of what he experienced during this period is found in his first collection of poems which was published in 1952, called *Time To Change*. Having completed his studies he then made his way back home. He could not afford to pay for his fare so worked his passage, scrubbing decks and other menial jobs all the way on an arms carrying vessel bound for Indochina.

There followed a period of writing for the *Illustrated Weekly of India* along with broadcasting on All-India Radio. He wrote for a number of other newspapers and magazines including the Times of India, where he was their art critic in the mid- 1960s. Shortly after he held visiting professor posts at colleges in America and, like many others at that time, experimented with the mind bending drug LSD. He enjoyed his travels but always seemed to gravitate back to Mumbai despite some feelings of isolation due to his ethnic origins.

Ezekiel's early efforts as a poet had seen him as some kind of dreamer but he developed into someone constantly seeking the truth. He saw much corruption in his country, with a disenchanted population, and tried to highlight the problems strongly enough so that something might be done to make things better. By the 1970s though his motivation had waned and he realised that nothing much could be done. He seemed to accept "the ordinariness of most events"; he laughed at "lofty expectations totally deflated". Reluctantly he had to acknowledge that:

Below is an extract from his poem *The Patriot* which is written in a distinctive Indian-English style. It was his protest against the radicalism and violence seen all over the Indian sub-continent in the post-war years of the 1940s onwards:

I am standing for peace and non-violence.
Why world is fighting, fighting?
Why all people of world
Are not following Mahatma Gandhi,
I am simply not understanding.
Ancient Indian Wisdom is 100% correct,
I should say even 200% correct,
But modern generation is neglecting –
Too much going for fashion and foreign thing.
Other day I'm reading newspaper
(Every day I'm reading Times of India
To improve my English Language)
How one goonda fellow
Threw stone at Indirabehn.
Must be student unrest fellow, I am thinking.

Nissim Ezekiel died in January 2004, aged 79.

Night of the Scorpion

Ezekiel is a poet who has always stood for lucidity of language in poetry and has strongly opposed charges of obscurity in his poetry. This has often misguided critics into studying

only the literal meanings of his poems, considering them to be hermetic cultural objects. Seldom have critics bothered to go deep into the poems or to take a closer look at the symbols, ignoring thereby the embedded meanings in the texts and the heterogeneous and polysemic network of references and influences. The apparent lucidity of the poems coupled with a frequent discursive style has succeeded in camouflaging the latent symbolic interpretations of the poems, with the result that the undiscerning or casual reader has merely glossed the poems at the surface and has come up with frivolous and fallacious theories and comments about his poetry. It is exactly such a misconception that has hindered a proper analysis of Ezekiel's well-known poem "Night of the Scorpion", from his anthology *The Exact Name* (1965)¹. The poem could hardly be simpler and if anyone has read one solitary poem from Ezekiel's oeuvre, it is usually this. The fact that "Night of the Scorpion" is often included in school texts has further encouraged many to take its simplicity for granted and bypass its inner meaning; such readers have burnt their fingers, for the simplicity of the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel, like the poetry of William Blake, is only skin-deep and hides profound meanings within, visible only to the discerning eye. To put it very literally, "Night of the Scorpion" describes how a village woman, having been bitten in her mud hut by a scorpion on a rainy night, lies writhing in agony on the ground, while the villagers who sit surrounding her do precious little save shake their heads and make sagacious remarks often verging on the bizarre. Even her husband's so-called knowledge of medicine is of little use. In the end, the pain subsides naturally and the woman thanks god that the scorpion had bitten her and not her children.

The poem has been subjected to various interpretations, some erroneous, some partially correct, some obvious, and many "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing". Most of them have been gender-based, owing to the central role of the mother in the poem and her pious Nirupa Roy-like utterance in the end. Most critics have contented themselves with the ordinary, literal meaning as given in the previous paragraph, and have commented accordingly². Many critics have been moved by the "self-denying role" of the mother in the poem (Lall 78) to viewing the role of the mother in the light of the archetypal Indian mother in the Indian epics. Christopher Wiseman has made a stylistic analysis of the poem, trying to discern a connection between the sustenance of dramatic tension vis-à-vis the prosodic regulation of syntax (qtd in Lall 78). E. N. Lall considers "Night of the Scorpion" to mark a change in Ezekiel's feminist discourse in that it "points to later poems that project a positive image of woman in the complex man-woman relationship" (78), thereby assuming that the

anthologies of Ezekiel before this one gave a negative image of woman, which is not entirely correct³. Apart from these, critics have also highlighted the obvious features of the poem, such as its rural theme (in contradiction to the motif of the 'city' usually found in Ezekiel's poetry) and its irony, specially in the attitudes of the villagers and the narrator's father. Rajeev Taranath, in his short introduction to Nissim Ezekiel for Saleem Peeradina's wellknown anthology of Indian-English poetry, comments on the poem's structure referring specially to the irony: ' "The (sic) Night of the Scorpion" [he even gets the name of the poem wrong, there is no 'the'] absorbed irony into the poemstructure—the second stanza is related to the first in terms of an ironic contrast' (Peeradina 1). The conclusion of "Night of the Scorpion", like the concluding couplet in the sonnets of Shakespeare, is so striking that critics have riveted their attention on the last three lines of the poem and interpreted the entire piece on the basis of these three lines alone and the person who speaks them. These lines, poignant and memorable no doubt, comes in the guise of a surprising twist (like the ending of a Jeffrey Archer short story) on the unsuspecting reader and is of such magnitude that it gets embedded in his mind. As a result, many images and markers in the poem, placed at important and strategic points by the poet, are completely ignored by the reader, with the result that he fails to grasp what the poet wants to convey and ends up clutching at straws.

The villagers, instead of trying to fetch help or do something useful, merely sit idly in a circle surrounding the patient, clicking their tongues, nodding their heads and making sagacious comments that range from the arcane to the downright fatuous. The woman's suffering and ordeal is given a philosophical colour and interpreted on a cosmic scale encompassing birth and death, sin, redemption and beatitude. Notwithstanding the fact that it is none but the males of the village who enjoyed her body and who had driven her to sin, the villagers are quick to isolate her, denigrate her and arraign her as the sinner: May the sins of your previous birth be burned away tonight, they said. May your suffering decrease the misfortunes of your next birth, they said It is the male who perpetrates physical and emotional suffering on the woman when he exploits her sexually; and in the poem, he turns out by far to be the more diplomatic for, with deft lawyer-like arguments, he succeeds in pinning the guilt of lechery on the female sex, insinuating thereby that it is fleshly desire and concomitant pecuniary motives of the woman that lead her to indulge in prostitution, and not the general exploitative demeanour of the male: "May the poison purify your flesh / of desire, and your spirit of ambition, they said ...". It is, as any gynocritic will point out, a potentially provocative reversal of roles, obtained through phallogocentric casuistry. Having thus found a sacrificial

lamb and extricated themselves from a sticky situation, the villagers in the poem sit ensconced in smug contentment, “the peace of understanding on every face”. In fact, so natural is their behaviour and act that a gullible M.K. Naik (otherwise a very discerning critic), considers their role in the poem to be that of “invest[ing] the poem with deep significance by trying to understand the Indian ethos and its view of evil and suffering” (194-195). It is now time for the narrator’s father to enter the scene. He is described as a “rationalist” and with good reason too, for he is the only one who tries to revive the sick woman with medicines. Quack-doctor that he is, he uses his posse of powders, herbs and mixtures to alleviate the pain. But it is an economic rather than a filial motive that moves him to this act of piety. He is nothing but a pimp who had been quick to realize the sex-appeal of his pretty wife, and had over the years used her as a sort of cash cow for monetary gains, after having satisfied his own personal lust. Realizing that a steady and substantial source of income may be extinguished soon, he is reduced to “trying every curse and blessing” to goad her to be up and working again. After twenty hours, says the narrator, the poison loses its sting — it’s all over. Death is neither swift nor painless: the twenty hours of pain seem twenty years of sexual servitude. Ironically, it is the husband who cremates her — burns her body would be a more appropriate term (“he even poured a little paraffin/ upon the bitten toe and put a match to it”) — for what use does a pimp have for a prostitute who is no longer economically useful? It is the son who is the silent spectator to his mother’s funeral: “I watched the flame feeding on my mother”. The last words of his mother, a sort of prayer to God that probably occurs as an epiphanic flash in her mind before she dies, seems to reverberate as an echo: “Thank God the scorpion picked on me/and spared my children”. The mother prays that the life of prostitution ends with her and her daughters never be forced into a life of sexual slavery like her, and that her sons never become scorpions like the other males and continue the obnoxious cycle. The prostitute’s prayer seems to be for all mankind and thus the woman, who had lived in shame and dishonour, dies a redeemed soul. Conception of the essence of womanhood and its representation in poetry has always been a fascinating experience for Ezekiel, and his interpretation of sex and the sexual act has been a part of the exercise. As K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar points out, “He was painfully and poignantly aware of the flesh, its insistent urges, its stark ecstasies, its disturbing filiations with the mind” (657). "Night of the Scorpion" is novel in the sense that it provides for the first, and only time, Ezekiel's view of unnatural sex, in that it is fraught with shame and pain and forced upon the unwilling but helpless victim. The woman had been experiencing such ‘nights’ and such ‘scorpion stings’ ever since she had forced into flesh-trade by her pimp-husband; the

particular night described in the poem is the final act in which helplessness, guilt and sheer sexual exhaustion get the better of her and she dies. The poem, like vintage Ezekiel, is simple and subtle and at the same time esoteric, but once comprehended, the poet's frustration is clear and unmistakable. It is, as Gieve Patel aptly characterizes it, "a cry issuing from a person who is totally involved in a situation which he feels also to be hopeless one"⁴. And like the boy towards the end of James Joyce's *Araby*, our eyes too burn with anguish and anger.

Villages are the backbone of India. Ezekiel's *The Night of the Scorpion* depicts a typical Indian village in flesh and blood. The poem is with a simple theme of a mother getting stung by a scorpion on a rainy day and the consequent reactions and responses of the family members and the peasant neighbours of a true village. The background, the characters and the actions of this poem are real life like. In fact Ezekiel has breathed life to each and every line of this poem to make us feel and smell and experience the essence of Indianism. The poem starts with the mother getting stung by a scorpion and the scorpion rushing out to the safety of rain through the sacks of grains. This itself gives the picture of a typical village house with the stored sacks of rice or wheat or cereals. The concern and care with which the neighbours and the house hold people are involved in helping the family is a remarkable feature of humanity typical to the innocent people of villages. Irrespective of the time, weather and inconveniences, each one was ready to do whatever was possible by them to help the mother get out of the so called evil effect of the scorpion sting. It was a voluntary act from each to rush to get hot water, to chant mantras and to do the other superstitious acts to rescue the mother. The relationship, especially the human relationship is the strongest among the villagers. This is the most ideal humanitarian aspect of village life. The feelings of oneness and belongingness are specific to the rustic people. Indian villagers are the model for the thick fellow feelings with sympathy and empathy. It is unconditional and without expecting any reward. Ezekiel emphasizes this when he says: "The peasants came like swarms of flies and buzzed the name of God a hundred times to paralyse the Evil One." ... and they sat around on the floor with my mother in the centre, the peace of understanding on each face." The sincerity and true concern reflected in the above mentioned lines are specific to the rustic people. For them relationship is the most cherished treasure. They are not rich financially but they are the richest in their mind with human love and readiness to help. There is no discrimination in the name of status, creed or caste. The peasant community that represents the village is devoid of the inhuman traits like selfishness, greed and narrow

mindedness. Forgetting the time, the rain and all other inconveniences they rushed to the house where the mother was suffering. They rushed there not to be the passive viewers or gossip mongers, but to partake the sufferings of their fellow being as best as they can. They involved physically, mentally and spiritually for the well being of the victim who belongs to a better status than that of theirs. They never tried to show off. With a genuine interest and concern they prayed and wished the immediate recovery of the mother. Each one contributed to console the mother. It was with empathy they sat around the mother. This genuine fellow feeling can be seen only in the rustic background of India. Urbanization has made man selfish, greedy and narrow-minded. The pleasure of human bonds is alien to those urbanized people. For them visiting a suffering person is an inconvenience, spending something for the needy is an unwanted obligation and spending time with the needy is a big wastage. The same poet in his poem "The Truth about Floods" describes the response of a group of urban students who visited a flood affected village for social service. They were more eager to get photographed while distributing biscuits for the hungry victims of flood. According to Nissim, an individual loses root as he /she gets cut off from the village, the cradle of tradition, values, morals and conventions. Ezekiel's depiction of the true Indian from the village is an incredible and envious experience.