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THE NEW POETRY IN INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Indian English literature is as old as the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. Then there was Bengal Renaissance upto the 1900 or so. The famed Bengali English poets Toru Dutt, Henry Derozio, Manmohan Ghose, Sri Aurobindo, Sarojini Naidu and even Rabindranath Tagore, - all of them were Romantic poets. M.K. Naik observes:

After 1947 once India got its independence, and such ghastly events like Indian Partition took place, Indians just like the western writers after 1900, reacted against the Romantic traditions in literature in general and poetry in particular. (Naik 202)

By the 1950s, the 'new poetry' had already made its appearance. In 1958, P. Lal and his associates founded the Writers Workshop in Calcutta which soon became an effective forum for modernist poetry. The Workshop manifesto described the school as 'a group' of writers who agree in principle that English has proved its ability, as a language, to play a creative role in Indian literature. The Workshop 'Miscellany' was to be 'devoted to creative writing', giving 'preference to experimental work by young and unpublished writers'. The first modernist anthology was *Modern Indo-Anglian Poetry* (1958) edited by P. Lal and K. Raghavendra Rao. In a somewhat brash Introduction the editors condemned greasy, weak-spined and purple-adjective spiritual poetry, and 'the blurred and rubbery sentiments of... Sri Aurobindo' and declared that 'the phase of Indo-Anglian romanticism ended with Sarojini Naidu.' This is true.

It is said all great literature is known for its irony. Shiv K. Kumar remarks, "What is truly distinctive about post-independence poetry is that it allows irony to play freely around all facets of human experience-social, religious, moral or political." (Kumar 3)

The following were the important ones of this New Poetry Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, P. Lal, Adil Jussawalla, A.K. Ramanujan, Gieve Patel, R. Parthasarathy, A.K. Mehrotra, Pritish Nandy, K.N. Dharuwalla, Shiva K. Kumar, Jayanta Mahapatra and Arun Kolatkar, and one vibrant woman whom we add to this list was Kamala Das.

Nissim Ezekiel: The first of the 'new' poets to publish a collection was Nissim Ezekiel (1924-), easily one of the most notable post-Independence Indian English writers of verse. His *A Time to Change* appeared in 1952, to be followed by *Sixty Poems* (1953), *The Third* (1959), *The Unfinished Man* (1960), *The Exact Name* (1965) and *Hymns in Darkness* (1976). A major shaping factor in Ezekiel's poetry is that he belongs to a Bene-Israel family which migrated to India generations ago. The alienation theme is central to Ezekiel's work and colours his entire poetic universe. This explains his early fascination for Rilke, though he learnt his poetic craft from Eliot and Auden, whom he frequently echoes in his early verse. Ezekiel experiments with three different solutions to his problem. The easiest way out is a protective assumption of easy superiority expressing itself in surface irony as in his 'Very Indian' poems 'in Indian English.' Another persistent motif is an obsessive sense of failure, leading to agonized bouts of self-doubt and self-laceration, revealing the poet 'in exile from himself.'

Dom Moraes, the first of the 'new' poets to win recognition in England, appeared on the scene as this Moraes. His first book won the Hawthornden Prize in 1958. Son of Frank Moraes, the well-known Indian journalist, Dom Moraes (1938-), lived in England for years, having adopted British citizenship in 1961. He has studiedly disowned his Indian heritage.

It is impossible to think of Dom Moraes as anything but an Indian English poet and the Penguin

Companion to Literature rightly describes him as an 'Indian poet'. Born in a Goan Christian family, Moraes, an only son, had an excruciatingly troubled and insecure childhood and adolescence during which his mother's frequent bouts of insanity were a persistent nightmare, as his autobiography, *My Son's Father*, reveals. The varied repercussions of this traumatic experience and his attempts to come to terms with them in adult life form the driving force behind his verse in *A Beginning* (1957), *Poems* (1960) and *John Nobody* (1968). His *Poems 1955-1965* appeared in 1966 and his *Collected Poems* in 1969. Deeply influenced by Dylan Thomas and the surrealist school, Moraes is a highly personal poetry with a persistent confessional tone.

P. Lal: During the 1960s, several prominent 'new' poets appeared, the earliest of whom was P. Lal (1929). Born in the Punjab, Purushottam Lal migrated to Calcutta with his parents at the age of one. Educated in this city, Lal taught English there. His verse collections include *The Parrot's Death and Other Poems* (1960), "*Change!*" *They Said* (1966), *Draupadi and Jayadratha and Other Poems* (1967), *Yakshi from Didarganj and Other Poems* (1969), *The Man of Dharma and the Rasa of Silence* (1974) and *Calcutta: A Long Poem* (1977). His *Collected Poems* appeared in 1977. Lal's early verse, 'Vocal/In times of beauty', is full of "apples and birds", 'white roses and bees' and 'dew filigreeing the grass'. He is also fascinated by the sound of words. 'The melodic pattern... is to me all-important,' he declares in his preface to the *Collected Poems*. Of Lal's two long poems, *The Man of Dharma* and *The Rasa of Silence* trace Yudhishthira's passage 'through the spectrum of the eight *rasas* till he arrives at... the *rasa* of silence.'

Adil Jussawalla: Adil Jussawalla's (1940-) first book of verse, *Land's End* (1962) contains poems 'written in England and some parts of Europe.' Unlike Dom Moraes, however, Jussawalla chose to return to India after a sojourn of more than dozen years in England and has since published another collection, *Missing Person* (1974). Jussawalla's usual strategy in *Land's End* is to project a clearly visualized situation and then comment on it, bringing out either the personal or social or existential significance latent in it.

A.K. Ramanujan: The most outstanding poet of the 1960s is easily A.K. Ramanujan (1929-) another exile who, unlike Jussawalla, has not chosen to return, and continues to teach Dravidian Linguistics at the University of Chicago. His first volume, *The Striders* (1966) won a Poetry Book Society recommendation. *Relations* followed in 1971. He has translated into English poetry in Tamil and Kannada in *The Interior Landscape* (1967) and *Speaking of Siva* (1972) respectively. Ramanujan has said 'English and my disciplines (linguistics, anthropology) give me my "outer" forms-linguistic, metrical, logical and other such ways of shaping experience, and my first thirty years in India, my frequent visits and field trips, my personal and professional preoccupations with Kannada, Tamil, the classics and Folklore give me my substance, my "inner" forms, images, symbols.' Ramanujan appears to have the surest touch, for he never lapses into romantic cliché. His unflinching sense of rhythm gives a fitting answer to those who hold that complete inwardness with language is possible only to a poet writing in his mother tongue.

Gieve Patel: Gieve Patel's (1940) first book, *Poems* appeared in 1966, and his second one *How Do you Withstand, Body* in 1976. A member of the small Parsi community, Patel is an 'outsider' like Ezekiel and is equally conscious of the fact, but this has not produced a feeling of rootlessness for him. A strong sense of compassion establishes for him some kind of a bond between himself and the under-privileged-a leprous woman (in 'Nargol') or the 'brown whores' of Bombay (in 'Tourists at Grant Road') or domestic servants (in 'Servants') for example-and sets his nagging social conscience working. Being a medical practitioner by profession, Patel is all too familiar with pain, disease and death and tries to talk about them with clinical detachment, which cannot, however, completely obliterate his deep human sympathies. Patel's is mostly 'situational' poetry.

A.K. Mehrotra: In contrast with Patel, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (1947-) writes a poetry in which the image is all-dominant. He is the author of *bharatmata: a prayer (sic)* (1966), *Woodcuts on Paper* (1967), *Pomes/Poems/Poemas* (1971), and *Nine Enclosures* (1976). Mehrotra has described himself as 'not an Indian poet but a poet writing a universal language of poetry, of feeling, of love, and hate and sex.'

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His true affinities are with Surrealist poetry.

K.N. Daruwalla: The 1970s witnessed the arrival of K.N. Daruwalla, Shiv K. Kumar, Jayanta Mahapatra and Arun Kolatkar. Keki N. Daruwalla (1937-), one of the most substantial of modern Indian English poets, has so far published *Under Orion* (1970), *Apparition in April* (1971) and *Crossing of Rivers* (1976). He is a police officer by profession and this fact is not without significance in understanding his response to men and matters.

Shiv K. Kumar: Shiv K. Kumar (1921-) is a senior academic who published his first volume *Articulate Silences* (1970) when on the threshold of his age 50. This was followed by *Cobwebs in the Sun* (1974), *Subterfuges* (1976) and *Woodpeckers* (1979). His work reveals a mastery of both the confessional mode and ironic comment.

Jayanta Mahapatra: Jayanta Mahapatra (1928-), another academic, began his career with *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten* (1971) and has since published *Svayamvara and Other Poems* (1971), *A Rain of Rites* (1976), *Waiting* (1979), *Relationship* (1980, Sahitya Akademi Award, 1981) and *The False Start* (1980). Mahapatra's poetry is redolent of the Orissa scene and the Jagannatha temple at Puri figures quite often in it. His most characteristic note is one of quiet but often ironic reflection mostly concerning love, sex and sensuality in the earlier poetry and the social and political scene in some of the later poems.

Arun Kolatkar: Arun Kolatkar (1932-) is that rare phenomenon among modern Indian English poets—a bilingual poet, writing both in English and in his mother tongue Marathi. His shorter poems in English are still uncollected, but his long poem, *Jejuri* appeared in 1976 and won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize. Many of Kolatkar's shorter poems, like Mehrotra's, present a dark, surrealistic vision in which his persona's 'loin has bared its teeth'; the cat 'knows dreaming as an administrative problem'; and a hag 'devours oranges/In self-defence.' In *Jejuri*, the technique yields better results. The thirty-one short sections of the poem describe a visit to Jejuri, a famous temple near Pune.

Kamala Das: Women poets form a sizable school in modern Indian English literature and the most outstanding work, expressive of what Mary Erulkar has trenchantly called 'the bitter service of womanhood', is by Kamala Das (1934-), a bilingual writer like Kolatkar. A distinguished author in her mother tongue, Malayalam, Kamala Das has published three books of verse in English: *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967) and *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973). The most obvious (and to the casual reader colourful) feature of Kamala Das's poetry is the uninhibited frankness with which she talks about sex, referring nonchalantly to 'the musk of sweat between the breasts', 'the warm shock of menstrual blood,' and even 'my pubis'. But a closer reading proves that this is not just a cheap exercise in stretching 'my two-dimensional/ Nudity on sheets of weeklies,' nor a wanton display of 'thighs and sighs', nor yet merely a case of 'from bed to verse', Kamala Das's persona is no nymphomaniac; she is simply 'every woman who seeks love'; she is 'the beloved and the betrayed', expressing her 'endless female hungers', 'the muted whisper at the core of womanhood', She may 'flaunt... a grand, flamboyant lust', but in her heart of hearts she remains the eternal Eve proudly celebrating her essential femininity.

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