

The Modern Poets and their Background

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Abstract: *Many anthologies of Indian women's writing emerged in the 1990s ____ Susie Tharu and K Lalitha's two-volume Women Writing in India. 600 B.C. to the Present (1993), Arlene K Zide's In Their Own Voice: The Penguin Anthology of Contemporary Indian Women Poets (1993) and Eunice de Souza's Nine Indian Women Poets. (1997) This century has seen the emergence of new gender neutral anthologies of Indian English poetry such as Eunice de Souza's Early Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology (2005) and Both Sides of the Sky: Post Independence Indian Poetry in English (2008), Jeet Thayil's 60 Indian Poets and The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets (2008) and most recently Sudeep Sen's The Harper Collins Book of English Poetry (2012).*

Amidst all these anthologies a historical reckoning of women's poetry from the nineteenth century to the present times was getting deferred. As many new women's voices appeared in Sen's 2012 anthology it was necessary, to map the women's voices that had emerged from the 1960s. For the women poets, modernism meant something quite different from the literary modernism of Eliot and Auden. It meant a reconfiguration of identity in postcolonial terms. In this they were inextricably linked to the concerns of their colonial as well as their nationalist predecessors such as Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu respectively.

Keywords: *Nascent Nationalism, Repertoire, Modern inclinations, Derivative, Multilingualism, Blatant honesty, Inner turmoil, Alienation, Frustrations, Nostalgia.*

INTRODUCTION:

Modern Indian English Poetry may be located as beginning post 1947. Until then this poetry followed a Victorian idiom in imagery and mood along with a sense of homeland that is today interpreted as a nascent nationalism. Derozio and Toru Dutt best represent what is known as the 'early' period of Indian English poetry in the nineteenth century, while Aurobindo and Sarojini Naidu its later expression in the nationalist period of the twentieth century. The term 'modern' is applied to poets who began to publish in the 1950s. In the Introduction to *Indian English Poetry Since 1950: an anthology*, Vilas Sarang observes that, 'modernity came to Indian English poetry as late as the fifties', and that it appeared in the poetry of some Indian languages much earlier. Sarang cites as 'modern' the Marathi poetry of B.S. Mardhekar which appeared in the 1940s. (Sarang 4) According to Bruce King, 'Modern Indian English-language poetry is one of the many 'new literatures' which began to emerge at the end of the Second World War after the end of colonialism'. King explains how this poetry did not share the nationalist commitments of earlier Indian English poetry, nor of the English poetry of Africa and the Caribbean that was related to 'the cultural movements which led to national independence'. (King, 1) Rajiv Patke observes in the chapter titled 'Poetry since

Independence' in A. K. Mehrotra's *An Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English* that, 'Poets choosing to use English in India during the late 1940s were heirs to a post-Romantic legacy which had transposed a received stylistic repertoire to local materials'. Patke writes in 2003 that the poets who 'provide more interesting material' are the ones who 'chose to initiate [the] new beginnings' even though this was 'no more than a shift in allegiance from post - Romantic to modern inclinations'. (Mehrotra, 243) K. Ayyappa Paniker however bypasses the division of 'traditional' and 'modern' in his 2004 anthology, even though the title is *Modern Indian Poetry in English*. He begins from poetry written in the 1950s and stresses, in the 'Introduction', on the roots of the poets in regions of India and thus to their indigenous experience and literature even when they do not read or write the mother-tongue or live in India any more. Among his modern poets are included, Meena Alexander, Gauri Deshpande and Kamala Das. Jeet Thayil in 2008 begins his Preface to the *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets* with a reminder that the advent of modernism in India 'arrived with Independence, which is to say after it had already established itself as a new orthodoxy in other parts of the world'. More recently, *The Harper Collins Book of English Poetry* (2012) edited by Sudip Sen uses the word 'contemporary' and not 'modern' to define the poetry published in his anthology: 'The history of contemporary English poetry by Indians is well over sixty years old ___ it has been over sixty years since India became a Republic in 1950'. Sen's poets are not those who began publishing in the 1950s but those who were 'born post-1950s'. Independence, or post 1950s poetry thus emerges by critical consensus as the beginning of the 'modern' or 'contemporary' period of Indian poetry in English. What also emerges is the visibility of women poets.

Toru Dutt (1856-1877) struggled to match the overwhelming shadow of European especially English poetry with native elements – at first native trees and flowers and later in the last days of her short life, explorations of Hindu mythology, to not only invent a new tradition of telling, as in 'Sita', but a new fire to counter colonial rule, in 'Prahlad' for instance. In 'Savitri' Toru Dutt was perhaps redefining the position and role of women in patriarchal society. Jharna Sanyal in her essay 'Anthologies and Beyond: Indian Women's Poetry in English', refers to the 'female tradition' of the struggle to establish a personal, social, linguistic and political domain. Just as Toru Dutt in 'A Mon Pere' and 'Sita' was attempting to find her own space arising from the 'anxiety of dislocation', modern Indian women poets both at home and abroad are attempting to find their own space and voice, a continual search for the 'mother's race'. (Sanyal 197) Sanyal talks about these two poems by Toru Dutt as expressing a need to redefine her life in the perspective of her own roots. The anxieties and uncertainties of relationships in love, the failure of human bondings were written about by Sarojini Naidu and fifty years later by Kamala Das and her successors.

Sarojini Naidu's poetry was written between 1891 and 1927. (Paranjape, 2013, 171-175) The last collection to be published in her life time *The Broken Wing* (1917) reveals a sense of pain. The title poem 'The Broken Wing' refers to the land's desolation as well as the poet's personal sense of a poetic sensibility in crisis ___

Shall spring that wakes mine ancient land again

Call to my wild suffering heart in vain?

Or fate's blind arrows still

the pulsing note

Of my far-reaching frail

unconquered throat?

Recent criticism hints at a personal crisis as well as a literary one in the poet's own life at this time. Sarojini Naidu's later poems published posthumously in 1961 under the title *The Feather of the Dawn* was according to Paranjape 'panned by Nissim Ezekiel'. The present writer has been unable to locate Ezekiel's review published in *The Evening Standard*, February 11, 1961, although it appears in a few bibliographies.

Post-Independence poetry however moved towards an evaluation of contemporary life. The newly independent nation adopted industrialism and modernity. There was an increase in English medium education. Anglo-American literary modernism had been marked by expressions of alienation and a focus on the self. The modern Indian poets writing in English from the 1950s to the 70s looked within, to their language, to their lives, and to their craft. Many of the 'modern' poets of Indian English were in their early youth during the nationalist phase. For the modern Indian poets writing in English therefore, it is their bypassing of an overt nationalism and the expression of an angst ridden sense of self that marks them as 'modern'. Much of this modernism as Bruce King observes was 'derivative', it was the modernism of Eliot and Auden that influenced Ezekiel and his fellow poets. Ezekiel born in 1924 and Kamala Das, born in 1934, negotiated modernism in extremely different ways. For Ezekiel the advent of modernism in English literature, his own life as a Marathi speaking Jew in Bombay with English as a preferred language, and higher education abroad, framed a perspective of distance and observation. Living in metropolitan Bombay, Ezekiel, schooled with Muslim, Parsi, Hindu, and Christian boys at a Christian missionary school, was distanced from Marathi that was spoken at home but never the language of his craft.

India in **Ezekiel's** poetry is mediated through a spectatorial gaze a feature he records in a poem such as 'In India' in *The Exact Name* (1965) where he sees himself among hutment dwellers and pavement sleepers,

Suffering the place and time

I ride my elephant of thought

A Cezanne slung around my neck. (Ezekiel 131)

Ezekiel's concern that fellow Indian English poets were, like him, observing and noting India like foreign visitors is also expressed in the poem 'Enterprise' where he writes of their poetic enterprise,

We stood it very well I thought,

Observed and put down copious notes

On things the peasants sold and bought.

The ways of serpents and of goats,

Three cities where a sage had taught. (Ezekiel 117-8)

Kamala Das - a woman schooled largely at home, married early, writing first in Malayalam and then in English, a revolt in personal life leading to a new poetic voice in English ____ there is no baggage of European influence to distance her from her locale. It is her immediate social and personal world that determines the tenor of her verse, rather than literary influences. And this feature sets her apart from most poets in her generation. Das reckoned with the indigenous at the personal as well as the political level. The interior landscape, a personal philosophical voice marks the work of many of Kamala Das's male contemporaries. For Ezekiel, alienation leads to a final recognition and embrace of home as a personal and locational space. In the concluding line of 'Enterprise' Ezekiel writes, 'Home is where we have to gather grace'. Ezekiel attempts to shake off his philosophical distance, in the poem 'Philosophy':

What cannot be explained, do not explain.

The mundane language of the senses sings

Its own interpretations. (Ezekiel 129)

The poetry of Kamala Das marks the beginning of modern Indian English poetry by women. One may begin with her poem of self-definition, 'An Introduction'. Das dismantles some of the pressing concerns of the male Indian English poets. She

dismisses the debate on mother-tongue versus English – a struggle that permeates the poetry of Parthasarathy __ by declaring that she has the right ‘to speak any language I like’. Kamala Das declares multilingualism and hybridity to be her heritage. (Derozio to Dattani, Sanjukta Das 9) Instead her struggle is with the social hypocrisies regarding women’s lives and sexuality. Kamala Das also differs from the male poets whose poetry did not touch on the real life around them as they explored their interiorized journeys and struggles. Das speaks of communal violence, poverty, the language issue of the sixties and corruption in the public sphere. In the poetry of Ezekiel there is often found an aloofness regarding family that the poet consciously struggles against, either by reminding himself that ‘Home is where we have to gather grace’, as in ‘Enterprise’ (Parthasarathy, 30) , or, as in ‘Marriage Poem’, a prayer to

... let the quieter passion come

To every lover, till

The nuptial pattern is secure

Though you are still. (Ezekiel, 46)

Kamala Das’s poetry on marriage is in sharp contrast to Ezekiel’s resigned philosophical tone. It expresses the torment and anguish of dysfunctional conjugality in powerful and bold language that, in a way, indicates women’s greater investment in marriage. Ezekiel seems to acknowledge loveless sterile conjugality as normative in his India. In ‘Commitment’, also in *The Unfinished Man* (1960) he writes of men who are,

.....lost

Who only wanted quiet lives

And failed to count the growing cost

Of cushy jobs or unloved wives. (Ezekiel 121)

Eunice de Souza for instance derives from but also moves away from Kamala Das. Modern Indian English poetry by women has addressed the issue of borders in multiple ways. Das critiques borders between languages in ‘An Introduction’ and between religions in ‘The Inheritance’. For other Indian-English women poets – born and raised in India but within a hybridised racial identity ‘Anglo-Indians’ and persons of mixed Portuguese descent __ and a multilingual, multicultural social identity, divisions of caste, religion and race constitute a different grid. Indian English poetry by women is marked by recognition of the many bloods in one’s veins and a simultaneous dismissal of such markers of identity for women who in any case are bearers of children but not bearers of bloodlines. Thus in the poem ‘de Souza Prabhu’ in the collection *A Necklace of Skulls*, Eunice De Souza writes:

No, I’m not going to

Delve deep down and discover

I’m really de Souza Prabhu

Even if Prabhu was no fool

and got the best of both worlds.

(Catholic Brahmin!

I can hear his fat chuckle still.)

No matter that

My name is Greek

My surname Portuguese

My language alien.

There are ways

of belonging.

I belong with the lame ducks.

The language and theme of this poetry is subversive. It mocks all orthodoxies of history, philosophy, language, faith, of governments and families. It also underlines that 'Indianness' is 'not a singular or exhaustive identity'. (Khilnani 2004, 175)

Mamta Kalia, also born in 1940, is a bilingual poet, writing in English and Hindi. She exposes the falsities surrounding a woman's life such as the dictum that the ultimate satisfaction for a woman lies in self-sacrifice and within the family. The poet expresses with blatant honesty how relationships can be a cause of disillusionment. The life the woman believed was her own, the relationships that may have kept her happy, were all a sham. In 'Sunday Song' in Tribute to Papa, she notes:

In reality

all our friends were your friends,

all our ideas your ideas

all our projects your projects.

Mamta Kalia subverts the identities imposed on Indian woman, mother, wife and all fixed notions of propriety of feelings and emotions. The fluctuations of emotions which are so natural for a human being are not considered proper for a woman who must put up a show of happiness and satisfaction at all times so as not to disturb the family and social equilibrium. In 'After Eight Years of Marriage' in Poems '78, Kalia remarks

I wanted to tell them how I wept in bed all night once

And struggled hard from hurting myself.

That it wasn't easy to be happy in a family of twelve.

In 'Compulsions' in Tribute to Papa, Kalia remarks how she wants to:

pick my nose

In a public place

I want to sit in my office chair

With my feet up

...

I want to pay Sunday visits

Totally undressed

I want to throw away

All my cosmetics

I want to reveal

My real age.

In the poem 'Untitled' Kalia writes: 'When I asked him what he thought of loyalty / He laughed, 'don't expect dog's virtues from a full – limbed man'. These lines echo Kamala Das's lines from 'An Introduction' in *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973)

When

I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask

for, he drew a youth of sixteen into the

Bedroom and closed the door.

In 'I'm Not Afraid of a Naked Truth' (Poems '78, 9) Mamta Kalia declares the time for secrets is over just as Kamala Das had retaliated against the strictures of role playing and hypocrisies in 'An Introduction'. Mamta Kalia vents the angst, frustrations and disappointments of the enlightened individual trapped in the role of the perfect woman in society. Her poems are all a revelation of the inner turmoil that plagues the woman writer.

Gauri Deshpande born in 1942, writing in Marathi and English, re-examines the norms regarding women. Keki N. Daruwalla observes that, Anchored in the world around her, Gauri Deshpande's poetry deals with the minutiae of everyday life, the coming of a lover, the death of a puppy, ingratitude of children. Everything is grist to her mill, from the city with its greasy caress and harsh endearments to a landscape. (Daruwalla 44)

Deshpande's poems show women in pain and anguish. In the poem, 'The Eclipse' in *Lost Love*, she is filled with gloom:

from the good fortune

of smiles and caresses

we move into the inexplicable

unintelligible dark

of sorrow, delay, departure, suspicion...

Physical love is a transitory experience that soon evaporates, she writes in 'Poems on a Lost Love' in *Lost Love* (1970):

When you left me lying

...

I hated the cold air

drying my sweat on your hands

and driving my thought

from your tired thigh...

The woman however is rational and she is determined not to be bogged down by heartaches as she exclaims in 'Poems in Winter' in *Between Births*:

When the vast barrenness of your presence

Confronts me

I feel your absence fruitful . . . In you personified were all

My loves unreachable.

Tara Patel's poetry expresses a sense of alienation, frustration, and search for identity in an urban milieu. Born in 1949 and employed as a journalist, Patel's poetry, according to her first anthologist Eunice de Souza, expresses, 'a weariness so extreme that at times it sounds almost posthumous'. (Eunice de Souza, *Nine Indian Women Poets* 89) She also notes that the emotions expressed are such that feminists would not approve. What de Souza means but does not state is the note of abjection in some of Patel's poems, as in the reiterating cry to a former lover/ husband to please lunch with her for old times' sake, 'have lunch with me, /I'll pay the bill', in the poem 'Request' (Eunice de Souza, *Nine Indian Women Poets* 90-1) Patel is bypassed in almost every anthology after that.

In fact de Souza had observed in 1997 that Patel, a journalist, does not even think of herself as a poet. In 2005, it is this poem, 'Request' that is included in the collection *Confronting Love: Poems*, edited by Jerry Pinto and Arundhati Subramaniam. Critical opinion is divided on Patel. Eunice de Souza had observed,

Single Woman is a brave book. It cannot have been easy to write poems in which the speakers express need so openly, unsheltered by irony'. (*Nine Indian Women Poets*, de Souza 89). Patel's poem 'Woman' in *Single Woman* states,

A woman's life is a reaction

to the crack of the whip.

She learns to dodge it as it whistles

around her

but sometimes it lands on the thick.

distorted welt of her memory.

Imtiaz Dharker's website, <http://www.imtiazdharker.com/> does not mention her border crossings __ born in Pakistan in 1954, raised in Scotland, married to an Indian and living and working in both UK and India and then married to the Welsh poet Simon Powell. Dharker is a celebrated poet in the U.K. and her poetry expresses what another Indian poet Arundhati Subramaniam calls, 'an unabashed embrace of unsettlement and settlement'. In the section,

'Bombay: The Name of God' in *Postcards from God*, (1997) there is a poem titled 'Minority' where Dharker writes,

I was born a foreigner.

I carried on from there

to become a foreigner everywhere.

Dharker's poetry deals with not just the situation of women in her country of origin, but in England as well as they live within the immigrant community in a foreign land. For those who break away, engage with white men, there are other barbed borders to be confronted.

Sujata Bhatt appears in *Nine Indian Women Poets* with a rather critical assessment by Eunice de Souza, of her bi-lingual poems and concern with mother-tongue. The poems that are free of these qualities are the ones included in the collection. In Sudeep Sen's 2012 anthology, of the five poems by Bhatt, one poem, 'Truth is Mute' mentions 'mother tongue / father -tongue' and the matter of language. In Thayil's anthology overt treatment of the theme is bypassed in favour of other poems. Language is a major concern in Bhatt's poetry not only because she has moved between languages during childhood but like many Indians

she had three languages to begin with, only in her case it was not the usual English, Hindi and mother tongue, but Marathi, Gujarati, and Hindi. From the age of five to eight, after learning English under pressure when the family moved to the USA, Bhatt returned to India and had to start anew learning the English that was spoken here. At twelve she went to the USA 'for good'. Bhatt's uncles were poets and writers in Gujarati and it was an early influence. At college in the USA Bhatt had studied Spanish and French, and learnt German after her marriage to a German fellow student. In an interview she states,

Each language offers a different perspective on life, a different way of organising the world. I find it tiresome and simplistic when people claim that one language is absolutely 'better' than another.

Meena Alexander lived in Allahabad till the age of five after which the family moved to Sudan where she studied English and French. The poet completed her doctoral studies in England and taught in India at the Universities of Delhi and Hyderabad. Later she moved to New York. The numerous migrations and the intersections of various cultures, religions, geographical territories nurtured in the poet a diversity of thoughts, feelings, influences, poetic forms and a deep consciousness of the inner and outer realities. The various uprootings, migrations, influences created for the poet new reckonings. Growing up in multiple locations, Allahabad, Khartoum, the U.K. returning to work in India, being uprooted several times creates nostalgia for the homeland which is often a reason for her to dismiss any sort of affiliation towards a geographical, cultural or political locus.

Smita Agarwal figures in de Souza's Nine Indian Women Poets (1997) without having, at the time, a single book to her name, a fact that according to Bruce King makes the anthology 'less assured, less convincing'. King himself excludes Agarwal from his list of poets under consideration and only mentions her as one of the several prize winners of the Poetry Society (India) contests. Born in 1958, Agarwal is a professor of Allahabad University.

In the poem 'At Forty' in the volume Wish-granting Words she writes: 'At forty she finds out how redundant emotion /is in the living of life'. From the tears over a dead pet at nine, heartbreak at sixteen, she reaches thirty-three when 'her marriage is nosediving', and,

. . . Her children are
fractious. Colleagues are vicious. Her car
breaks down very often.

Agarwal writes of the Indian woman poet in a remarkable poem 'Sarojini Naidu and She' in Wish Granting Words where the modern woman poet is 'Shocked at the sodden similarities of lives with separate histories', how both she and Sarojini Naidu

flip... for men much older; ignoring
ground reality,
Wishing to compose poetry, as if the hilarity
Of the first choice isn't enough to have
them labelled hip.

The poets discussed above mark three distinct ages of Indian English poetry by women — the colonial, the nationalist, and the modern periods. Today many more women poets are visible as the publishing circuit has expanded to include the Web. This has also facilitated collaborations. Academic writing on the subject is seeing a slew of books and articles.

Thus, the present survey stops at a point in terms of the poets' generation only. Some of the poets above such as Meena Alexander and Sujata Bhatt are still writing alongside younger contemporaries who have been appearing in twenty-first century anthologies.

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