

ENGLISH POETRY AND POETS OF PRE-INDEPENDENT INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The Indian Poetry in English started with verse romances, melody, and lyrics. The Indian Poetry matured in the mid 19th century. The famous poets were mainly from Bengal and most of them were highly educated. The poets were mainly influenced by Victorian and romantic strain. They started imitating the western poets like Keats, Eliot, Pound etc. Poets were influenced by culture, environment, tradition, struggle for Independence etc. Women poets like Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu constituted a kind of watershed between the two phases, In that they have shared their Predecessor's nostalgia and successor's sense of crisis and quest of identity. To conclude, Indian English poetry is a mixture of Africa, America, British and Australian English. The poets being influenced by various conditions have contributed immensely to the field of English literature.

KEYWORDS: Romanticism, Indianess, Socio-Religious, Influences

INTRODUCTION

The Indian English Poetry began with romanticism. It started with verse romances and lyrics written in romantic verse. The origin of Indian poets in English have shrouded the dim pre-history of the Indo-Western encounter centuries prior to the birth of Derozio. The first of these two conditions, the Indianization of the English language, began much before the Anglicization of Indians. The Indians writing in English can be dated from the landing of Vasco Da Gama in Kerala in 1498. The second being the Anglicization of the Indians, began in earnest when the British became a powerful colonial power in India. This happened more than 150 years after the East India Company was chartered (1).

Prof. V.K. Gokak has divided the Indo-Anglian poetry roughly into six periods. They are from 1825-1850, 1851-1875, 1876-1900, 1901-1925, 1926-1950, 1951-1965. The periods from 1876-1925 may be called the period of Indo-anglian romanticism. In India the poetry first began in Bengal, the province in which the British had a stronghold (1). The pioneers of Indo-anglian literature were men of education and the majority of upper class, who assumed the role of interpreting the ethos and culture of India to West through imaginative literature (2). The growth and development of Indian poetry is a result of many experiments and struggles for tradition, independence, innovation and imitation. Right from the beginning all most all the poets of Indian origin writing in English were found to be containing two streams, foreign influences and Indian elements in poetry.

Before the period of Henry Derozio, the poets wrote on Christian sentiment, tradition, Nature, Indian legends and history (3). The literary awakening dawned from the time of Derozio. The first part of poets were mainly from Bengal. The prominent poets include Toru Dutt, Manamohan Ghose, Sri Aurobindo Ghose, Sarojini Naidu, Harindranath, Rabindranath Tagore. These poets wrote under a romantic strain and were sharply influenced by Victorian and romantic poetry. They were mainly swept by a feeling of idealism and nationalist movement (4). It was the time of renaissance in Indian English poetry. Their writing even shows the influence of Keats, Wordsworth, Eliot, Shakespeare, Pound etc.

The poets were projecting the landscapes, moods, fancies and dreams while their followers sought the sense of origin and destiny (5).

Indianess in Indian English Poetry

Indian English Poetry was different from the western counter parts in its theme, language, style of writing. The writer also wrote for the Indian audience, so it ought to have an Indian appeal which was likeable to all, for them the feature of Indianess made it exotic and gave a deep feeling and experience of real India. The best that a poet could hope to do was to try to be as natural and as honest as possible and to concentrate upon the poetical enrichment of material and also not to be content with decorative use of Indian imagery (6). The nativeness being the prime factor of literary communication, an Indian writer inadvertently communicates Indianess (7).

Rajyalakshmi Says that

“Our models have been never Indian nor British but cosmopolitan. Europe, Asia, America and Africa have all become a part of our cultural consciousness, offering impetus and stimulation (8).”

Swami Vivekananda, Swami Ramthirtha, Swami Yogananda, Sri Aurobindho and Rabindranath Tagore left a poetry which is glorious summation of Indians cultural, spiritual and methodological heritage which dates back to Vedas & Upanishads. In their poetry, they endeavoured to nativise English language in order to make it a befitting instrument for the expression of Indian sensibility. Ghose considers the philosophy and religion to be the soul of Indian culture inseparable from each other. Women poets have equally contributed to the field of poetry before and after independence. The prominent one are Toru Dutt and her sister, Sarojini Naidu, Arun Kolatkar, Kamala Das etc (9). The Indian English writers have moulded the language to accomplish their communicative purpose by the process of Indianisation of the English (7).

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio [1809- 1833] is generally credited as being the first Indian English poet. He was born in Calcutta on 10th April 1809. He attended David Drummond's Dhurramtallah Academy School. He was a precious child and student. He had already taken to writing at his young age. At the age of 17, he joined the New Hindu college as a lecturer in Calcutta. He was a excellent Indian teacher and a famous poet. He encouraged the students to have the spirit of liberty, equality and freedom. His famous poetic works, Derozio published the two volumes of poetry: Poems and The Fakeer of Jungheera: A Metrical Tale and Other Poems. The shorter poems shows a strong influence of british romantic poets in theme like ‘To The Moon’, ‘The Golden Vase’, ‘Death, My Best Friend’ contains imagery, diction and some traces of neo-classicism. Derozio idolised Byron, modelling many of his poems in romantic vein and he used Victorian style of writing. Though he was Anglo-Indian, but he was fired by a poetic spirit for his native Bengal. He had a burning nationalist zeal. Poems like ‘to India- My Native Land’, ‘The Harp of India’ and ‘To the Pupils of Hindu college’. In his poem ‘To India – My Native Land’, he wrote:

“My Country! In the days of glory past
A beauteous halo circled round thy brow
And worshipped as deity thou wast,
Where is that glory, where is that reverence now?”

Michael Madhusudan Dutt [1824-1873] was born in Bengal. He was born to a hindu gentry family. He is better known as epoch making writer in Bengal. From an early age, he aspired to be an Englishmen. He began his carrier as an Indian English poet and he has written ardently on his homeland in his poems and sonnets. In addition to some sonnets he has written two long narrative poems ‘The Captive Ladie’ was his notable work, it is an interesting archetypal figure in modern endeavour poetry. He was a gifted linguist and polygot(10). His works include ‘Is this is called a civilisation’, ‘Ratnavali’, ‘Visions of the Past’. ‘Visions of the past’ is a poem in Miltonic blank verse, complete with weighty, abstract diction and latin inversions. In all his poems indicate a high level of sophistication. In his own words,

“Where man in all his truest glory lives,
And nature’s face is exquisitely sweet;
For those fair climes I heave impatient sigh,
There let me live and there let me die.”

Toru Dutt [1856-1877] it was with Toru Dutt that Indian English poetry really matured from imitation to authenticity. She was born in Calcutta and was the third daughter of Govind Chunder Dutt, though born as a hindu was baptized in 1862. Toru Dutt tragedy is that she died at very early age when her talent was still maturing.

Toru Dutt sailed to Europe in 1869, she studied one year in France and three years in England. Out of her two works, one was published in her life time, A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields and this was published one year after her sister’s death. This was a magnificent work and it comprises of 165 lyrics (2). Her other work Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan was an excellent work. Her diction was naturally of Victorian romantic school. Toru Dutt converted stories like Ramayana, The Mahabharata and puranas into English. Her famous poem was ‘Our Casuarina Tree’, about a imagery, memory and trancedency.

Manmohan Ghose [1869-1924] whose poetic carrier is a classic example of how the lack of roots stunts the growth of an artist cursed with ‘an exile’s heart’ in his bosom. He was the son of Dr. Krishnадhan Ghose, House surgeon of the Calcutta Medical College. He went on to win an open scholarship to Christ Church College, Oxford in 1887. There he befriended with Stephen Phillips and Lord Binyon. Going up to Oxford in 1887, he specialised in classical literature. His famous Primavera is a work of imagery and artistic creation, this includes works of Phillips, Binyon and Arthur are typical of the mood of world-weariness. His other poem Love Songs and Elegies is a celebration of nature and command of image and phrase. His other works include: Perseus, The Gorgon Slayer, Nala and Damayanti, Orphic Mysteries, Immortal Eve and Adam Alarmed in Paradise. In his poem ‘April’ he writes:

“Haste, April, upon city streets to blow
Thy purest, warmest breezes, fly beneath
The flower-girls’ poor beggary’s basket stow
With lordliest gold of daffodils aglow,
I will not live thee, save with sighing breath
On pale, worn cheeks thou waft reprieve of death.”

Sri Aurobindo Ghose [1872-1950] probably has the best claim to be regarded as the greatest Indian poet in English. He was born on August 15, 1872 in Calcutta. His father Dr. Krishna Dhan Ghose, was a medical officer. He was educated at Kings college, London. Sri Aurobindo found his roots in Indian culture and thought immediately on his return to India from Cambridge in 1893. Lyrics, sonnets, long narrative poems, dramatic poetry and epics poured out of his prolific pen for sixty years and yielded an impressive volume of several kinds. The early ‘Short Poems’ are mostly minor verse of the romantic twilight in eighteen nineties.

His sonnets include ‘Transformation’, ‘A Dream of Surreal Science’, ‘Poems in New Metres’ and some of his lyrics are ‘The Bird of Fire’, ‘Thought the Paraclete’ and ‘Rose of God’ are made of emotional rapture with a verbal exuberance. His longer poems are ‘Urvasie’, ‘Love and Death’, ‘Baji Prabhoo’, ‘Chitrangada’, ‘The Tale of Nala’, ‘The Vigil of Thailard’. Of all his works ‘Savitri’ is his extraordinary reveals a love story of satyavan and savitri and is one of the longer poems in the history of English literature and is roughly twice the John Milton’s Paradise Lost. He was a great spiritual and philosophical writer. He has been compared to John Milton by Gokak. In his poem ‘I have a hundred lives’ he writes:-

“I shall approach thee in things and people dear
And in thy spirit’s motions half-possess
Loving what thou hast loved, shall fear thee near;
Until I lay my hands on thee indeed
Somewhere among the stars, as ’twas decreed.”

Sarojini Naidu [1879-1949] also known as the sobriquet The Nightingale of India, was a child prodigy, Independence activist and poet. Naidu was the first Indian woman to become the president of the Indian National Congress. She was truly one of the gems of the 20th century India. She was born in Hyderabad and later moved to Calcutta. At the age of 16, she travelled to England and studied at king’s college. She has contributed immensely to the field of poetry. Her songs are meant to be heard rather than to be read.

The chief quality is the sense of melody, music and emotion. Her first volume of poetry, The Golden Threshold was followed by The Bird of Time and The Broken Wing. They all showed a significant emotional romantic sensibility. Her other works include Muhammad Jinnah, The Sceptred Flute, The Feather of Dawn, Palanquin Bearers, Indian dancers. She has described as John Keats of India by Gokak.

Rabindranath Tagore [1861-1941] hailed by Mahatma Gandhi as ‘The Great Sentinel’ was one of the versatile man of his age, who improved modern life in several ways. Tagore was a great poet, essayist, painter, nationalist, educationist, novelist and dramatist. Tagore started his career as Indian English poet in 1912. Though, strictly speaking, Tagore wrote only one poem, The Child in English.

His famous and immortal work - ‘Gitanjali’ which took the literary world of London and brought him the Nobel Prize in 1913 Followed by this was ‘The Gardener’ and ‘The Crescent Moon’. His other collections are ‘Fruit Gathering’, ‘Stray Birds’, ‘The Fugitive’, ‘Lover’s Gift and Crossing’, ‘Fireflies’ and ‘Poems’. He has been described as the national poet of India. His work ‘Gitanjali’ is his finest achievement which is made of devotion and motto. In this he writes:-

“Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
Where words come out from the depth of truth;
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever widening thought and action-
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.”

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, the Pre-Independence Indian English poetry is a development from neo-romanticism to mysticism and to neo-modernism. From Derozio-Sarojini it is the hub of romanticism. Toru Dutt, Tagore and Aurobindho started neo-romantic, philosophical and tradition of mystic poetry. Many other poets like Dutt brothers, Harindranath, Swami Vivekanada, Kashiprasad Ghose and many others have equally contributed and enriched the Indian English poetry. The vast geographical, cultural, traditional, spiritual and struggle for independence gave many ideas for the poets for the development. The Indian English literature started maturing from 1850's. Women poets have equally contributed to the literature. Even the western culture and there style of living has contributed during the time of 1930's. Lastly, Indian English Poetry it directly highlights the spirit of Indian culture and offers spiritual and philosophic reflections on the lives of Indian people. Indian English poets and Poetry has given a bright future to the field of literature.

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