

INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY THROUGH THE LENS OF POSTMODERNISM: A CRITICAL SURVEY

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ABSTRACT

It is after the 1980s that the readers can witness and new identity and sense of direction in Indian Writing in English. One can also perceive both as Indian literature and also part of commonwealth literature. This new emerging trend is generally held as postmodernism in English literature- both fiction and poetry. As we come across several post-modernist writers in the field of fiction, in the field of poetry also, several poets contributed a great deal Kamala Das, Nissim Ezekiel, and A.K. Ramanujan are worthy of detailed consideration. In fiction, Salman Rushdie marks a significant presence in the fictional world. His work, *Midnight Children*, is an embodiment of postmodernist concerns.

Keywords: Postmodern, alienation, contradiction, traits, changes.

There is no doubt in denying the fact that explaining and describing the term postmodernism is a daunting task. There is a large heated controversy regarding this term in the corridors of English literature, so much so that it has been defined and projected by different critics as per their taste, temperament, and angle of perception. During the last recent years, it has been witnessed how postmodernist literature has successfully met the challenges raised by Bhasha literature at the national level as well as postcolonial literature and Anglo-American literature abroad. Indian literature has been transformed from a local to a global level.

As far as the field of Indian poetry is concerned, it was with the emergence of A.K. Ramanujan's poetry that one can find the beginning of postmodernist traits. A close and incisive study of Ramanujan's poetry reveals that it is neither nostalgic nor Westernized but an amalgamation of both elements. Moreover, his poetry is a powerful blending of vitality, freedom, contradictions, and a reflection of changes in personality consciousness. Besides, Ramanujan is also meticulously aware of memories that form his inner self and the memories of unconscious namelessness.

There is no doubt in denying that as a postmodernist poet, Ramanujan does not write in the tradition of Kamala Das and Nissim Ezekiel. His poetry is a powerful illustration of the quest for roots in Indian traditions and the higher self. Some of the recurrent features of his poetry comprise his frequent use of irony, humour, and human relationships coupled with Hindu consciousness imbued with Hindu myths and typical Indian sensibility. In his poetry collection, "The Strides," "Relation," "Second Sight," and "Collected Poems," the author demonstrates the qualities discussed earlier that are essential to his poetry.

As a unique and individual voice of the postmodernist period, Ramanujan poetry symbolizes Nature with Indian ethos and sensibility. Man has a close connection with nature, as is illustrated by A.K. Ramanujan as the subject matter of his poem, *A River*, which projects Madurai city with conventional Tamil culture as the poet also asserts in this connection:

In Madurai,
City of Temple and poets
Who sang of cities and temples:
Every summer
A river dries to trickle
In the sand

Ramanujan's poem, *A Hindu to His Body*, expresses his desire to be born as a tree again. By being so, he also desires to feel the weight of honey hives in his branches. The poem is a brilliant castigation regarding his identification with nature when he says;

“When you muffle
And put away my pulse
To rise in the sap of trees
Let me go with you and feel the weight
Of honey hives in my branches
And the burlap weave of weaver-birds
In my hair.” (A Hindu to His Body)

Ramanujan displays his close and intimate connection with nature vividly and graphically. The leafless trees in the USA remind the poet of leafless trees in India. He feels his inability to distinguish the branch from the tree's root.

For a moment, I no
Longer know
Leaf from parrot
Or branch from root
Nor for that matter
That tree from you or me. (Christmas)

The woodpecker pains Ramanujan's feeling of pity and compassion for the tree. He has expressed his wishes in the following lines:

“My sister and I always wished a tree
Could shriek or at least writhe
Like that other snake
We saw under the beak
Of the crow.” (TS 7-8)

His poems, *Chess Under Tree*, *Ecology*, *An Image of Politics*, *Epitaph on a Street Dog*, *Army of Ants*, *Lac into Steal*, and *Snake*, depict the poet's love and compassion for trees and animals. Like William Wordsworth, Ramanujan also considers nature as a constant companion of individuals. He preaches this idea in one of his celebrated poems, *No Man is an Island*, when he asserts:

Certain small sea birds are said
To pick its teeth
For yellow crabs and jellyfish
But this man,
I know; he buys dental floss. (TS 26)

Besides expressing a close and intimate relationship between body and nature, Ramanujan also displays a very inmost bond between time and culture as he thinks of all these aspects as an integral part of an individual life when the poet also points out:

Time moves in and out of me
A stream of sound, a breeze,
An electric current that seeks
The ground
Morning brown
Into the evening before I turn around
In the day. (Sonnet CP 220)

Ramanujan's postmodernist concerns are present in his attitude towards spiritual bonding when he emphasizes the dire necessity of relationships and family bonding in an individual's life, depicted by him through vivid and graphic imageries imbued with Indian sensibility. His poems, *Of Mothers Among Other Things*, *Extended Family*, and *Small Scale Reflections on a Great House* are excellent examples in this regard. In *Of Mother*, he deals with the Indian mother's youth, her love and affection for her children, and her devotion to her work, as she is entirely devoted to her domestic responsibilities. The last stanza sums up all in a beautiful way when the poet says:

“My cold parchment tongue licks bark
In the mouth when I see her four
Still sensible fingers slowly flex
To pick a grain of rice from the kitchen floor.”
(Of Mothers, among other things)

Among the Indian Postmodernist poets, the name Jayant Mahapatra cannot be overlooked and underestimated. He is a source of inspiration for the coming generations through the devices used in his poetry- the use of semantics, indeterminacy, and relaxation of form; the postmodernist concerns are perceptible. One can also find explanations with creative deviation and foregrounding in his poetry. An amalgamation of myths, history, and reason lead to making his poetry postmodernist poetry in the true sense of words. Besides, he also deals with these elements with his deep sense of rootedness and love for his native country and culture. He is an Oriyan poet who has vividly and graphically dealt with the culture of Orisa, how he evokes readers' sympathy and empathy through the twelve hundred artisans who worked tirelessly day and night to complete the Konark temple ordered by a strict emperor.

Mahapatra's postmodernist concerns are found in his poem, *A Missing Person*, a powerful illustration of frustrated yearning brought out by the stress and strain of modern-day living; base existence is rendered a problem. It becomes further aggravated if one is weighted down by cultural prejudices and presuppositions that impinge on human relationships and frustrate all attempts to arrive at meaningful relationships. In the present poem, the poet focuses on the frustrated yearnings of a woman who is unable to achieve fulfillment and is, thus, unable to find her reflection in the mirror as the poet asserts:

In the darkened room
A woman
She cannot find her reflection in the mirror
Waiting as usual
At the edge of sleep

In the same way, *The Indian Summer* by Mahapatra is a powerful illustration of cultural amnesia where we find a subtle indictment of the relegation of normal, instinctive healthy urges to the background in the formulation of a close and intimate interpersonal relationship. Mahapatra carves out the figure of a woman who has cast herself into a socially and culturally sanctioned mould. There is an inbuilt amnesia or forgetfulness in her about the spectacle of death close by. Mahapatra presents a virtual statement on the issue through the conduct of the women when he says:

The good wife
Lies in my bed
Through the long afternoon
Dreaming still, unexhausted
By the deep roar of the funerals pyre

Mahapatra's poem, *The Logic*, presents the conflict between the head and heart, a typical postmodernist trait that provides fresh prospecting on the poet's treatment of the complexity inherent in human relationships. The poet-persona blasts the scholastic and cold-blooded manner of the addressee, highlighting that the latter has forgotten the troglodyte or the caveman in him. No human relation can thrive or prosper by neglecting or ignoring the human personality's sensual, earthly responses. The poet-person, obviously, a thwarted beloved, has to underline her bodily instinct and craves for the edible, physical dimension of herself when the poet points out:

Make me small and edible, love
The scalp hurts not from the steep drag
Of your hand but from my own practice drivell

In the same way, Mahapatra's poem, *Lost*, has been regarded as a monologue where even at the risk of a small quantity of oversimplification, one can see a variant of a monologue in the poem. It is highly self-conscious and reflects the relationship between the poet-persona and the unnamed, described beloved with much trepidation and uncertainty. Mahapatra scratches the surface and points out the inability of self-fulfillment, as he rightly asserts:

And outside my hands, where
Your body keeps shrinking in space
The first faith of some child goes wrong
Like some defect in a mechanical toy

In the same way, the poem, *Grass* is a powerful exploration of bonding or relationship in a rather distinctive manner, a typical feature of the postmodern era. The poet has beautifully delineated the bonding with oneself rather than with society. The poet finds himself caught in the wetter of traditions. He cannot understand or love himself unless he realizes his place in the envision around him. It is under this compulsion that he seeks to make sense of *Grass*, the roots and trees dotting the landscape, as the poet also put it:

Now I watch something out of mind
Scythe the Grass, know that the trees end
Sensing the almost childlike submissiveness

Thus, after making an incisive and in-depth study of Mahapatra's poetry, one can safely and rightly over the fact that his poetry is an enigma of self before he seeks to undertake to form the bondage of love.

Loving as an experience of striking relationships has been seen as an emotional exercise. It has been rendered all the more exacting and nerve-wracking because of the uncertainties inherent in modern times. Mahapatra's Poetry, thus, deals with the theme of human relationships most comprehensively and artistically.

Nissim Ezekiel is one of the leading Indo-Anglian poets who delineate Indian sensibility in a very graphic and vivid manner. He is an outstanding Indian poet writing in English and, like the metaphysical poets and T.S. Eliot, believes that all art is based on conflict and contrasts of opposites. In the true sense of words, he is a poet of urban sensibility and Indian sensibility. As a poet of urban sensibility, Ezekiel has beautifully delineated urban life's mundane and wicked picture.

In most of his poems, he deals with the dehumanizing discomforts of urban life (Bombay). However, at the same time, he has also covered a comprehensive panoramic view of Indian society with rich and vivid details of Indian manners and behavior. In his poetry, one witness the world projected by the poet imbued with deep Indian sympathy toward human beings, a world full of depression, oppression, predicaments, and suffering. Quoting the words of V.K. Gokak regarding As a critic, Indianness is: "A complete awareness in the matter of race, milieu, language, and religion." However, the concept of Indianness has been discussed by different critics as per their mood, taste, and temperament, as Keki Daruwallah says in this connection: Nissim Ezekiel was the first Indian poet to express modern Indian sensibility in a modern idiom."

Throughout his poetic career, Nissim Ezekiel has remained conscious of his Jewish Bene Israel family background, which separated him from the core of the Indian ethos. That is why he is a typical victim of rootlessness. This rolling stone ran to London after being boxed down by a Muslim boy in a Roman Catholic Convent School in search of his identity and belongingness. However, even in London, his basement was shared by poverty, philosophy, and religion. So, the theme of alienation is the very hinge on which the whole spirit of his poetry turns.

Consequently, Nissim is a refugee of spirit in search of a dim identity who tries to experiment with different solutions to the sense of alienation. Sometimes, he assumes the cover of superiority expressed through irony, as he says in the poem, Background Casualty

They told me I had killed the Christ.

That year I won the Scripture prize.

As P. Lal opines, Nissim treats the ordinary and mundane in his poetic furnace with rare ability and intensity to make his vision a powerful and faithful account of the social and psycho-spiritual nuances of human life within the framework of Indianness. Albeit influenced by the poets like W.H. Auden, W.B. Yeats, and T.S. Eliot, Nissim's poetry bears his stamp highlighting the themes of moral degeneration, spiritual chaos, and alienation expressed in terms of human relationships with the individual, the family, the society and the cosmic levels.

According to P.S. Kasture, Nissim's poetry is a reflection of our degenerated society with its cultural defilement, ulterior motives with fractured vision resulting in the loss of all human values with its concomitant chaos and alienation in the personal and social life of men. Even religion, which was a source of comfort and solace, has lost its healing power, as the poet himself laments;

The more I searched

The less I found

In this way, the poet has failed to find anything meaningful in the world around them. For example, in *For Elkama*, the poet analyses the contemporary chaos and alienation at the family level in a typically Indian setting and concludes that despite the erratic behavior of the son, the mother's love keeps the situation calm and under control as the poet also asserts:

My wife's delightful laughter

Adds the three of us together

In the poem, *The Night of a Scorpion*, through an Indian setting like a sack of rice and Hakim, Nissim depicts a world of ignorance and superstition vis-à-vis the world of science and enlightenment. Here, the mother is proud of the sacrifice when she says:

Thank God! The scorpion picked on me

And spared my children

The Indian faith is a complex mixture of metaphysical beliefs and superstitions. In contrast, the father's reaction is essentially urbanized, and the appeal of the magic is older than that of religion and science, but the power of maternal love is more ancient than all three. The endless flow of rain symbolizes the endless flow of life and that of a scorpion. It also symbolizes the essential suffering in human life. Nissim is not forgetful of the fact that:

"I am not a Hindu, and my background makes me and natural outsider, circumstances and decisions relate me to India."

Even the most unifying force of love seems to have lost its sanctity and degenerated into lust. Hence, one of the recurrent themes in Ezekiel's poetry is the theme of malice which is an ultimate and inevitable outcome of dehumanizing forces and selfish motives rampant in the society all around, as the poet says in Declaration:

A barbaric city with a slum-deprived obsession

Its hawkers iron lunged

In this way, after making a close and incisive study of Nissim Ezekiel's poetry, we can safely and rightly conclude that the whole poetic world depicted by Ezekiel seems to appear as a virtual hell with only a sense of disillusionment and alienation where the poet finds, why the world is fighting, fighting. So, the themes of alienation, isolation, spiritual stability, moral vacuity, and lust constitute the central thematic stream where the poet seems to be engaged in an endless quest for identity by carrying on an eternal discourse with reality all around.

A close and minute analysis of the Indian poets made in the present paper leads to the tentative conclusion that the poetry of these poets has been proven very instrumental in establishing the idea of national identity at the global level. The main impetus was provided by the recurrent use of gods and goddesses, Indian mythology, and epics coupled with the reflection of contemporary society. Moreover, it has also helped to assimilate Indian sensibility into its texture by including diverse concerns of contemporary interest. Choosing native Indian English has enabled Indian English poetry to seem different from that of Australian poetry, Canadian poetry, and African poetry.

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