

Indianness in Indian English Poetry

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Abstract

The diversity of India is unique. Being fairly a large country, India has been a home of pretty a large number of languages, traditions, customs, festivals and beliefs. Not because of nothing, we Indians entertain diverse ideas. However, culturally we are one. A glimpse of vibrant Indian sensibility can be felt and witnessed in the poetry of Indian English poets. Indianness manifests itself through language, imagery, sensibility and principally the way we look at life and the cosmic world. It's an integration of languages, cultures, traditions, religions and philosophy. To be precise, it is indeed difficult to define Indianness in Indian English poetry. This paper aims to trace the Indianness in the poetry of Indian English poets.

Keywords: diversity, Indianness, Sensibility, Religion, Philosophy

Poetry is the highest achievement of human mind and a powerful means to express human feelings and emotions. It is perhaps the most accomplished artistic form which captures human nature in all shades and colours. Indian English Poetry does not have a long history. It is nearly two hundred years old. Colonization of the Indian subcontinent introduced English and this language was soon adopted as an indispensable tool of modern education. It is argued with convincing and verifiable evidence that pre-independence Indian English poetry is imitative and derivative of British poetry. A few poets tried to be English by imitating the style and pattern of the native English poets and in doing so they lost their own identity, originality and authenticity. In the Post-independence era, things changed. Indians were both politically and culturally free. Post-independence Indian English poets protested against the imitative poetry influenced by Anglo-American poetry. Modern Indian English poets write with remarkable originality and authenticity. K.R. Srinivasa Iyenger remarks, "Indians have written - are writing in English for communicating with one another and with outside world for achieving self-expression." (1990). The Indian English poets try to verbalise Indian action in English and sometimes they fail to find suitable words and expressions and therefore they use new idioms i.e. Indian English idiom in their

poetry. They take to heart Raja Rao's advice that we Indians cannot write like English. We need not. We'll write in our own way and create indigenous Indian English idioms with a view to distinguish their poetry from Anglo-American poetry. Their poetry is rooted deep in Indian soil giving indigenous flavour and taste with typical Indian images and vocabulary.

World renowned Bengali writer Toru Dutt is considered to be the first Indian poetess to write in French and English. She powerfully conveyed Indian life through her creative genius to the western world. Her poetry gives the feel of Indian life in foreign tongues. It was her expression of Indian sensibility that led to the publication of 'Sanskrit Sheaf' in 1882 by Kegan Paul entitled Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan. Though converted into a Christian, she held with respect the gods of ancient India. This is evident everywhere in her artistic creations. Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan provides the best description of Hindu though in competent narrative and descriptive verse. The stories are brought from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Vishnu Purana and the Bhagwat Purana. She revealed the soul of India to the West through her English poetry.

The appearance of Indian gods and goddesses is witnessed in her poem Savitri. When Satyavan is dead and Savitri is holding anxious vigil by his side, Yama appears before him. Yama is the god of death. Satyavan dies. Savitri tries to persuade Yama to restore Satyavan's soul and she argues on the basis of vedantic philosophy.

Buttoo, based on the famous story of Eklavya, is a neat and wonderful picture of Indian life and thought. Buttoo has been rejected by his master Dronacharya. Buttoo makes the statue of Dronacharya and learns the art of archery. Dronacharya demands his thumb as guru dakshina and without giving a second thought he offers his right thumb. The poem is an example which glaringly manifests the reverence of Indian pupil for his guru and validates what position a guru held in ancient India. High respect and regard for teachers has been deep rooted since ancient periods.

Lakshman is episodic in nature. It starts at a point in the

Ramayana where Marichaa in disguise as deer cries in pain 'Oh Rama, oh Rama'. Sita thinks that her husband is in peril and asks Lakshman to rescue him. But Lakshman understood that this is an act of treachery. His sense of duty initially doesn't allow him to leave Sita alone.

Toru Dutt was fond of writing on Indian themes even though she lived abroad. Our Casurina Tree is an assertion of Indian nationalism. The tree is associated with Toru's childhood in India. She acutely and very fondly remembers the Indian tree of her home though she is miles away in a foreign land.

Sarojini Naidu presents the traditional Indian panorama of life. She occasionally presents exotic India by talking about pardahnashins and palanquin-bearers. Deobrata Prasad has rightly said; "The Pardahnashins and Palanquin-bearers may remind us of Kipling's India but the weavers, the bangle sellers, the fishers and even the snake charmers still form the vital part of Indian folk life. And, Sarojini has the talent needed to invest these characters with a sense of individual identity and personality. They are presented not as faded types, but as live individuals participating in the general drama of life with ever changing note of joy and sorrow" (1905). She was fond of writing poems based on common Indian sights. Palaquin-bearers is no exception. The theme is that when a daughter is married she is taken as a bride to her new home by palanquin-bearers.

Village Songs tells the story of a woman who goes to fetch water from well. The poem describes her plight.

"There are no tender moonbeams to light me,
 If in the darkness a serpent should bite me,
 Or if an evil spirit should smite me,
 Ram re Ram! I shall die."

Using 'Ram re Ram' is Sarojini's own way to create peculiar Indian atmosphere. V.K Gokak rightly remarks that India inspires Sarojini's music. "The pageantry of Indian life style which stimulates Sarojini Naidu's imagination so greatly, also includes the cavalcade of wandering beggars, singers, snake charmers and dancers. She loves the colourfulness, their adventure and above all their freedom from care."

Coromandel Fishers describes a typical day in the life of Indian fishermen. She has written about the cosmopolitan Hyderabad. In The Bazaars of Hyderabad she creates a typical atmosphere of Indian market.

"What do you weigh, O ye vendors?
 Saffron and lentil and rice.
 What do you grind, O ye maidens?"

Sandalwood, henna and spice.
 Chessmen and ivory dice."

These lines bring familiar scenes of any Indian market. The poem Indian Dancers portrays the vivid and enchanting picture of Indian dancers with 'hourly like faces', 'their eyes ravished with rapture' and 'passionate bosoms a flaming with fire'. The poem captures the spirit of Indian dance.

Famous poet A K Ramanujan's poetry also bears the note of Indianness. The most charming features of his poetry is its Indianness. Though he was far removed from his soil and lived in the land of plenty - Chicago for a longer period of time, he never severed his association with his motherland - India. In his poetry he talks about Indian myths and legends, Hindu gods and goddesses, customs, rituals etc. His poetry exemplifies that his soul was deeply rooted in Indian culture and society. One can witness amalgamation of two diverse cultures in his poetry. His early Indian experience frequently appears in his poems and his long stay in Chicago leaves an indelible mark upon his poems. Dulai commented on Ramanujan's poetry - "His poetry is born out of dialectical interplay between his Indian and American experiences on the one hand, and that between his sense of his own self and all experiences on the other. It's a substance in both Indian and Western,"

Ramanujan in many of his poems talks about his childhood memories and experiences of life in South India. Indian rituals also find a considerate place in his poetry. In 'Obituary' after the death of the father the ashes were taken by the son to immerse in water so that all the sins are pardoned; the dead will never return to the cycle of births and rebirths and will attain Heaven.

"throw as the priest
 said, facing east
 where three rivers met
 near the railway station;
 no longstanding headstone
 with his full name and two dates"

The above lines depict a typical Indian belief in Indian tradition and superstition. He is a sensitive expatriate who has not forgotten his soil and he remembers his city Madurai in the poem 'A River' The poet reminiscences the Tamil culture. He says that Madurai was the city of temples, culture where poets drew inspiration. But due to westernization the disintegration of Indian culture started. He gives a vivid picture of India in his poems.

"In Madurai,
 city of temples and poets,
 who sang of cities and temples,"

Ramanujan makes conscious efforts to be Indian in his sensibility despite his prolonged stay in Chicago. He has written a few Hindu poems. 'The Hindoo: he reads his Gita and is calm at all events', 'The Hindoo: he doesn't hurt a fly or a spider either', 'The Hindoo: the only risk'. His poem 'The Hindoo: he doesn't hurt a fly or a spider either' portrays the kindness and humbleness a Hindu possesses.

Nizzim Ezekiel's contribution to Indian English poetry is commendable and noteworthy. One can witness the element of Indianness in many of his poems. K. N Daruwalla says; "Nizzim Ezekiel was the first Indian poet to express modern Indian sensibility in modern idiom."¹² In his poems he makes a common error which most of the Indians make that is using present progressive tense in place of simple present tense. He uses various Indian words to give his poem an Indian feel like 'one goonda fellow', 'Indiraben', 'a glass of lassi', 'Ram rajya', 'guru', 'chapati', 'paan'. He uses such Indian words to add Indian flavour to his poetry.

"You want one glass lassi?
 Very good for digestion.
 With little salt, lovely drink,
 Better than wine;
 Not that I am ever tasting the wine."

Nizzim Ezekiel portrays poverty of India in his poems. He presents the dirt and squalor and brings about the true picture of poverty in India. Night of the Scorpion presents a picture of Indian woman who is a mother. He portrays the mother as creator, protector and educator. He tells about the painful night in the life of the poet's mother when she was stung by a scorpion. The poem echoes the Indian superstitious belief in washing away the sins of their previous birth by suffering in their present birth.

"May your suffering decrease
 the misfortunes of your next birth, they said."

In 'The Patriot' he expresses his deep concern for the problems which India faces on borders and he writes about it in a typical Indian English which shows his Indianness.

"Pakistan behaving like this,
 China behaving like that,
 It is making me really sad, I am telling you.
 Really, most harassing me."

Like all forms of art Indian English poetry too reflects the Indian society and Indian sensibility. Though imitative in the beginning in themes and styles, the modern poets writing in English successfully capture Indian life in all its hues and temper. Socio-political fabric, psychological issues, economic concerns, religious gusto all which go to make India the present India find a genuine and bold expression in modern Indian English poetry. Women writers do not lag behind. They have come in a big way to raise issues of women's freedom and equality and quite successfully they have registered their voices and the world listens to them carefully.

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