

A Preview of Indian English Poetry

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Abstract

Indian English Poetry has its root in Derajio's Fakir of Jangheera and Other Poems, inspiring a number of Indians for English language and literature. Indian English poetry has traversed a long distance since 1800 through the ups and downs of the pre and post independence phases. Nissim Ezekiel is the first modern Indian English poet guiding and inspiring numerous young poets and writers about Indian life and ethos. Though the genuineness and the authenticity of Indian English poetry is a contentious issue, yet Indian poets have been very successful to come across the world map through the baffling and confusing phases. Ironically, English education given to the Indians by the colonial governments proved very fruitful, making the Indians enlightened and free from ignorance and superstitions. Raja Ram Mohan Rai is a great link in this context, who made many reforms in Indian life. Constant experimentations by many poets created a unique Indian style, form and expression as the pre and post independence eras are marked a self-definition and self-identity of Indian English poetry. In spite of the influences of the western concepts, Indian poets give native hues to their poetry and encounter with the British on various fronts gave Indians impetus to fight for identity, which ultimately emerged as Indian English literature, however, the British influence on Indian writer is a significant in cultural, social and religious domains. Macauley was incorrect to subjugate Indians as in about 150 years Indian English knowing population made English language as a medium of creative expression of diverse cultural, religious and social ethos.

KEY WORDS:

Genius, English Romantics, cultural heritage, genuineness of Indian poetry, colonial, herald, Indian renaissance, reform, modernity, paradigmatic, positivism, neo-aesthetics, contemporary, experimental.

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The Indian English poetry has a history of its own. Though its history is recent, yet the genesis of Indian English poetry is marked at the beginning of 19th century when Henry Derojio wrote *Fakir of Jungheera and Other Poems* (Dwivedi 1), and as such history of Indian English poetry begins with Derojio. Young Indians derive inspiration from him for English language and its literature. Derojio himself was influenced and inspired the English romantics and Greek mythology. As of now Indian English poetry is more than two hundred fifteen years old, and has nearly twenty-two decades of a chequered history of growth and development. Nevertheless, Indian English poetry evolved as a genre of Indian English literature during the pre-colonial and post-colonial periods and that is why it is easy to distinguish the generations of Indian English poets as pre-independence post-independence eras. Sri Aurobindo, Tagore, Gandhi, Nehru, Sarojini Naidu and many others used English for their poetry. Majority of them were influenced by Indian nationalism and they wrote with conviction and commitment and their vision held the entire country in sway celebrating its cultural richness, heritage and diversity. Indian English poetry since independence shows strong evolutionary changes towards modernity. Nissim Ezekiel's poetry testifies this change towards modernity.

Nissim Ezekiel became the first modern Indian English poet in post-independence era whose book *A Time to Change* heralds modernism in Indian English poetry. His poetry guided, inspired and encouraged numerous young poets. The 50's and the 60's produced an number of poets writing in modernist style. K R SrinivasIyengar says, "sundry Indians trying to accomplish creative self-expression though the English medium has given us Indo-Anglian literature" (Iyengar 9). Ironically, the authenticity and the genuineness of Indianness of Indian English poetry is often questioned. Primary reason for this could be the dominance in fiction of the Indian diaspora, and many believe that Indian English poetry simply does not exist. Baffled and confused for being sidelined, the Indian English poets feel like SrinivasRayaprol, "I have been puzzled and do not know what to say. I've never thought that a poem required racial characteristics" (Rayaprol 30). Perhaps Indian poets writing in English, do not have English as their first language, as they are bilingual or some tri-lingual and even multi-lingual, however, linguistic diversity and fear of linguistic inadequacy as well, never bothered them to write poetry in English. They were successfully able to come across the wide audience not only at home but abroad also. A K Mehrotra rightly observes "English . . . also offered the promise of a wider audience at home, among the urban elite abroad, among the discerning or at least the more sought after readership from the west" (Mehrotra 276).

The colonial governments' primary objective was to give Indian natives English

language to promote European literature and science, however, besides giving English education in /English language, they wanted to lift Indians out of their ignorance and superstitions, though many historians do not agree to this fully. Then came Raja Ram Mohan Rai, who heralded renaissance in modern Indian English literature, whose social reforms acted as bridge between India and England as Iyengar correctly contends, “Ram Mohan thus came, not to decry, but to fulfill, not to divide, but to unite”(Iyengar 31). Raja Ram Mohan Rai’s area of interest was wide and varied from woman’s rights, religious tolerance, and plight of the peasants, science, education and democracy.

In the 60’s works of Ezekiel, Kamala Das, and A K Ramanujan made English poetry as a distinct genre, and later P Lal’s works played as a catalyst to further the cause of Indian English poetry. Constant experimentation with content, diction, form, style and expression made Indian poetry imitative, assimilative and experimental. From 1850 to 1900 Indian poets leaned heavily on romantics and Victorians, while during 1900 to 1947 Indian poetry was compulsively nationalistic. The post-independence era saw a conspicuous outbreak of creative and poetic activity demanding a nationalistic self-definition and a painful heart searching. There is a visible experimentation in an effort to achieve modernity as well. A paradigmatic shift occurred when poets encountered and grappled with post-colonial situation.

Influence of western concepts such as existentialism, positivism, surrealism and neo-aesthetics is visible on modern Indian poets, yet there is their self-conscious return to native locales and contexts. Experiences of rootlessness, homelessness and placelessness give new color to their poetry, and can be easily be called the Indian color. Ironically, the nomenclature of Indian English poetry is always a contentious issue. India’s encounter with the British cannot be ignored in political, social, cultural and literary spheres. The splendor and richness of cultural diversity and ambiguity of Indian cultural, spiritual and religious heritage force many Britishers to appreciate them, though political power in their hands made them arrogant and thus they ignored the multi-dimensional characteristics of Indian soil as KSatchitananda rightly contends “Britishers with their mono-lingual and mono-religious culture were unable to comprehend the multi-lingual and multi-religious culture of India” (Satchitdananda 15). Titles such as Indian Literature in English, Indian Writing in English and Indian English Literature remained always under the scanner. With the popularity of English language, Indian intellectuals felt the desire to articulate their human expressions, situations and reality of their life in poetry, prose, fiction and drama.

Poets such as P Lal, A K Ramanujan, JayantMahapatra, Agha Shahid Ali, Nissim Ezekiel, R Parthaasarthi, Gieve Patel, Kamala Das, A K Mehrotra, ChitraBenerji, PritishNandy, Ruskin Bond, Vikram Seth and many others were part of the writers of the 'Writers' Workshop', which brought out their manifesto on the role of Indian writing in English, which summarize the aims and the objectives of contemporary Indian English poetry and laid down certain guidelines and principles, which Indian English poets abide by and adhere to. Indian English poetry developed in an alien language patronized by the colonizers as their effects and influences on Indian life were already visible in the political, social and cultural aspects of the colonized. The efforts of the Christian Missionaries to proselytize India was not a successful move, however, it had serious influences and repercussions on British India and Orientalists suffered serious setbacks as the British cultural, social and religious diversity of Indian civilization.

In India, the English language continues as a symbol of aspiration of success for millions. 'Minutes of Macauley' of 1835, ironically was incorrect, which declared to form, "a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (Iyengar 21), as in the next 180 years, a new educated class of English learning in India emerged, which responded to the elite, consequently developed into a substantial body of literature in its own right and as Rama Nair rightly opines, "to many progressive minded Indians the English language stood as the magic door enlightenment, culture and art" (Nair 14). Now, large numbers of Indians use English language as a medium of creative expression, and it is their works, that is now referred to as Indian English Poetry.

Indian English Poetry passed through the colonial effects, post-colonial experiments and now it encompasses beyond national frontiers and its universal appeal cuts across all barriers and boundaries. Different phases of Indian English Poetry show directly and indirectly the changes that shaped and defined the fluctuating nomenclature. To be brief, Indian English Poetry became the new name acceptable to writers and critics in the body of Indian Writing in English.

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