



ETHNICITY IN INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY

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Modern Indian English-language poetry is one of the many “new literatures”,’ writes Bruce King in his introduction to the revised paperback edition of Modern Indian Poetry published by Oxford University Press, New Delhi in 2006 on Page 1, ‘which began to emerge at the end of the Second World War after the end of colonialism.’ In contrast to the creative writing of Africa and the Caribbean, Indian poetry written in English has been neglected by most critics, foreign readers and intellectuals because it has no relationship to the cultural movement that prompted the British into quitting India, leaving Indians to themselves rule India in 1947. But by this year the situation had drastically changed and to cope with the changing of the situation the new poets who have started writing since 1947 concerned themselves with their relationship to and alienation from the realities of their societies and found themselves facing a challenge from older nationalist intellectuals who held out for a renaissance of the culture of pre-colonial languages of India.

The challenge flung at the new poets writing in the English in which they had been educated to write poetry as good as that of British, American and Irish poets was to write, poetry about Indian lives and conditions. The conflict still persists, since conservatives, that is, nationalists and political radicals insisted on a literature about traditional culture or the poor, particularly about rural masses. This challenge seemed difficult for the poets to face, because most of the poets, if not all, were all well-educated middle-class and more or less influenced by westernized culture obtaining in cities and universities. They had imbibed love for English and its language, as they had been raised in families where English was one of the languages spoken and attended English-language schools. In fact they had been brought up in a cultured environment that nourished their love for English language and literature.. In course of time they had grown disillusioned of their tradition.

This paper tries to search for ethnicity and identity in the contemporary Indian English poetry. I have touched in the previous paragraph upon the problem of identity in Indian English poetry. But it is quite difficult, I think, to trace the ethnicity in the contemporary Indian English poetry. How will Indian English poets identify themselves when they find themselves confronted with the question who are they? This question calls forth a brief discussion on ethnicity.

Ethnicity is a noun form of ‘Ethnic’. Another noun form is ethnicism. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary says of ‘Ethnic’ that it, as an adjective, pertains to nations not Christian and rather is used to mean ‘Gentile, heathen or pagan’ .Its noun form is ‘Ethnicism’; it has not approved of the noun form ‘ethnicity’. But the meaning envisioned in the word ‘ethnicity’



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comes closer to the meaning in Webster Comprehensive Dictionary, that is, 'Of, or pertaining to race or races, or peoples.' We shall stick on to this definition in dealing with ethnicity here.

Ethnicity as a term has been used increasingly since the 1960s to account for human variation in terms of culture, tradition, language, social patterns and ancestry; it eschews the age-old practice of generalizing a race with its assumption of a humanity divided into fixed genetically determined biological types. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffits and Helen Tiffin in their book 'Post-Colonial Studies' published by Routledge, UK (Indian edition 2009) quotes R.A. Schermerhorn, reference his article Ethnicity in the Perspective of the Sociology of Knowledge { Ethnicity(I) I, April 1974) to say that ethnicity 'refers to the fusion of many traits that belong to the nature of any ethnic group: a composite of shared values, beliefs, norms, tastes, behaviours, experiences, consciousness of kind, memories and royalties.' (P. 80). A person's ethnic group asserts itself as such an identifier that its identity cannot be denied, rejected or taken away by others only when he or she chooses to remain in it. 'Whereas race emerged,' say Bill Ashcroft et al. 'as a way of establishing a hierarchical division between Europe and its "others", identifying people according to fixed genetic criteria, ethnicity is usually deployed as an expression of a positive self-perception that offers certain advantages to its members.(P.80). Membership of an ethnic group is subject to certain agreed criteria, taking into account the fact that 'the nature, the combination and the importance of these criteria may be debated or may change over time' (P.80).

Ethnic groups, even though socially defined, are distinguished from inside and outside the group on the basis of cultural criteria so that the defining characteristics of a particular ethnicity have usually hinged on the various purposes for which the group has been identified.

Now let us acquaint ourselves with how the word 'ethnic' comes into the modern use. This word comes from the Greek *ethnos*, meaning 'nation'. In the earliest use the word *ethic* pertains, as says The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, to 'nations not Christian', or rather to 'heathen' or 'pagan' nations, a sense that has still lingered as a connotation. The first modern use of ethnic group in terms of modern origin developed in 'the period of heavy migration from Southern and Eastern European nations to the USA in the early twentieth century.' The name that identifies a particular ethnic group remains still as the name of an organizing nation, no matter whether that nation still exists or not. The term 'ethnicity', however, 'really only achieves wide currency when these "national" groups find themselves as minorities within a larger national grouping, as occurs in the aftermath of colonization, either through immigration to settled colonies such as USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, or by the migration of colonized peoples to the colonizing nations' (P.81).

As we have got to know from the above discussion that 'ethnicity' comes into what we may term greatest contemporary currency in the context of immigration, we can take the liberty of construing 'ethnicity' in an alternative definition in the words of W.W. Isajaw, reference 'Definitions of Ethnicity (published in 'Ethnicity' (I), 2, 1974). Ethnicity is a group or category of persons who have a common ancestral origin and the same cultural traits, who have a sense of peoplehood and of a group belonging, who are of immigrant background and have either minority or majority status within a larger society. (P. 118)

I think it is worthwhile to deal with the term 'ethno-psychiatry' and/or 'ethno-psychology', a significant development in classic ethnography. This development that occurred from the 1920s onwards exercised a negative influence on the representation of colonized



peoples. These psychiatric and psychological theories were applied to constructing models of the so-called ‘native mind’ or ‘native personality’. Just as ethnography could be made use of to control the colonized through creation of scientific models of culture that laid an emphasis on those features suited to their purposes, so ethno-psychiatry could suggest there being certain eradicable mental ‘sets’ that prevented ‘natives’ from exercising the same degree of control or responsibility as the colonial settlers. This form of pseudo-scientific construction stood, it seems, deeply rammed into the assumptions underlying the notion of race that physical characteristics pointed to deeply embedded psychological, intellectual and behavioural differences between racial groups.

A pertinent question asserts itself in this context. The question is: how far ‘ethnicity’ can be applied to poets writing in English, since most of the poets left India to travel and study abroad. In most cases their disillusionment and dissatisfaction pushed them out of India over to foreign lands. In this they were no different from previous generations of Indian intellectuals and writers. Similar to previous generations some of the writers chose to settle abroad as permanent exiles., while others returned, ‘having made a significant choice which would be central to their subsequent history and the development of Indian poetry in English.’ (Bruce King, P. 2). Among the early poets who returned were Nissim Ezekiel, Keshav Malik, Kersey Katrak and Srinivas Rayaprol.

Despite continuing attacks on them, Indian English poets succeeded in getting their place recognized in modern Indian culture by making their poetry part of the progress of modernization that encompass urbanization, industrialization, mobility, independence, social change and so on. Until a new radical change takes place Indian social and economic progress will remain, as it does now, linked to the same process of modernization which have, for historical and political reasons, been wedded to the spread of English language and the evolution of the English-language culture alongside Hindi, Bengali and other regional languages, notwithstanding that English spoken and written by a little above four per cent of the population still remains the language of those who govern, communicate and make decision at the national level. On account of its being the language of upward mobility and modern consumer tastes, English has its use spread further and is subject to a gradual process of Indianization. In course of time the English written and spoken in India has taken on the name Indian English and this signifies a change in mentality and consequently English is no longer regarded as the language of colonial rulers; it is a language of moder India with no mean number of words and expressions typically Indian intruding into it. The words and expressions that have already intruded into ‘Indian English’ allude to local realities, traditions and ways of feeling.

The poets as a group is apt to be marginal to the traditional society not only because of their being alienated by their English-language education but also because of being rebels from Hinduism and Islam and particularly owing to their living abroad

The rapidity with which Indian English poetry has become a self-sustaining tradition embroidered with recognizable models, periods and influences is more significant than the achievements of individual poets. There are identifiable periods when Indian poetry took on new directions by focusing on the actuality of personal and family life as evident in the poetry of Kamala Das and Ezekiel in the early 1960’s or on experimentalism as evident in the poetry of Mehota, Kolatkar, Nandi, Chitre and Mahapatra spanning later 1960’s and early 1970’s



Though Indian English poetry written in the pre-independence period smacked of the influence of the British and European influences, it started, close on the heels of the achievement of independence, reforming itself as a modern literature by having recourse to the techniques and themes of such major twentieth-century modernist as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. The great body of French experimental poetry from the nineteenth-century Rimbaud and Lautreamont to the twentieth-century dadaist and surrealists. The political poetry of Neruda and others exercise their influences on Indian English poetry.

Indian English poets have played an active role in popularizing and developing regional-language poetry in a new direction and, in addition to playing this role, have been active in translating regional-language poetry into English. There is crop of English translations made by Ramanujan from classical and mediaeval Tamil and modern kannada, by Mahapatra from Modern Oriya, by Kolatkar from marathi, by Chitre from modern and mediaeval Marathi, by Patel from Gujarati, by Mehrotra from Hindi, by P. Lal from Sanskrit, by Nandi from Bengali, Urdu and other languages. P. Lal and Nandi, besides translating regional-language poetry into English, have also promoted the translating of them by publishing them.

Indian English poets interested themselves in writing devotional verse. During the period spanning the 1950s and early 1960s, the poets confined themselves to writing personal lyrics, mostly confessional and argumentative; in the mid sixties the poets discovered new modes of expression. Poets like Ramanujan and Ezekiel were already acquainted with American poetry and partly through them American influence permeated into the Indian English poetry written in the mid-sixties, when Daruwalla, Shiv Kumar and others stressed formal, direct personal voice and distinction in their poetry and their ordinary experience in recognizable locations. ‘The man-alone-in-a hostile world attitude,’ I quote Bruce King as saying (P. 6), ‘with its sense of opposition, cynicism and the ironies of life, found in the poetry of Daruwalla, has its affinities in American literature, as does Daruwalla’s trust in the speaking voice.’

Workcited

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