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An Exploration of the Aesthetic Tension in Selected Indian English Poetry

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Abstract— *Indian poetry in English has undergone multiple transformations since its inception. It has evolved from its imitative phase of Western poetry to a position where it would be a serious scholarly error to not judge it on its own merits. This paper explores the selected poetry of Indian English poets and highlights how from an aesthetic point of view the poetry has metamorphosed to a position where it redefines the standards of Western aesthetics and demands judgement that requires the consideration of native socio-economic, political and cultural factors. The paper does so by questioning the fundamental ideas about aesthetics that have gone unchallenged for centuries by bringing in the question of postcoloniality that is specific to Indian English writing in general, and Indian poetry in English in particular. A paradigm of postcolonial aesthetics is imagined from the critical ideas of theorists like Bill Ashcroft, Adam Chemeielwski, Ayyappa Paniker and Keki N. Daruwalla which are then imposed on the selected poetry of Sarojni Naidu, A. K Ramanujan, Kamala Das, Rajagopal Parthasarathy, Jayanta Mahapatra etc to point out that the aesthetics of Indian English poetry lies in its giving "value" to the subjects beyond "beautiful" and "sublime" through the "materiality of the language."*

Keywords— ***Aesthetics, Beauty, Postcolonialism, Transculturalism, Value***

Introduction: On Marginality and "Indianness"

"An Indian writing poetry in English was an exile in his own country," says the Akademi award-winning writer Keki N. Daruwalla (1995) in his essay *The Decolonised Muse: A Personal Statement*. It is a true cliché that all writers writing in their second language have to grapple with the existentialist dilemma of writing in an alien language and then have to navigate on the scale of both personal and political to aim at writing that is considered "truthful" or "authentic", but the fact remains that every new generation of Indian English writers have consciously or unconsciously deliberated upon the problem in their writing. Salman Rushdie (1983) in his seminal essay *'Commonwealth' Literature Does not Exist* adopts a farcical attitude to the obsession with terms like "authenticity" arguing that they ghettoise the writers in the categories of genre and nationalities leading to misinterpretation of works and boxing of creative outpourings. But the views Rushdie holds in his essay can be accused for discounting the nativistic ontology of the creative process itself, plus the opinion also is likely to have come from his cosmopolitan belonging that he so ardently advocates for in *Imaginary Homelands* (1991). As to the nature of Indian poetry in English, it is multicultural, and even when it is not cosmopolitan it is transnational. The position it holds in the overall oeuvre of Indian poetry is marginal. Hence, it becomes imperative at this juncture to establish what is "Indian" in Indian poetry in English, the association of "Indianness" with it and where does this whole discourse sit in reference to the aesthetic dimensions in Indian poetry in English.

Smita Agarwal (2014) in the introduction of her book *Marginalized: Indian Poetry in English* asserts that Indian poetry in English holds a marginal position not only in context of the huge ball of Indian poetry that is not in English language but also in context of the overall canon of

Indian English Writing. She argues, without discrediting the quality of Indian poetry in English, that by virtue of various factors which are literary, social, political and technological in nature the prose writing in English from India, especially fiction, has far exceeded Indian poetry in English. However, the idea of "marginality" in focus here is Indian poetry in English with reference to the rest of the non-English poetry produced in India. The position of Indian poetry in English, it can be argued, is no longer marginal owing to the less volume of verse produced compared to other languages. It may well be that the production of verse in English far more exceeds the production of verse in other individual Indian languages. However, the position of marginality holds because the origin of the language is not Indian. There is a question about the expression and representation of experience as to whether that can be considered "authentic" and aesthetically Indian. Shantinath K. Desai (1991) commenting on this says, "one of the characteristics of a marginal or peripheral body of literature is that it is such a loose entity that it can easily become part of other intersecting circles. Thus Indian Writing in English could easily become a part of Anglo-Saxon Writing, then of English literature, then of Commonwealth literature, and of course it is always part of Indian literature – though marginal" (qtd in Paniker 11). On the same issue Bruce King (1987) argues that "the poets as a group tend to be marginal to traditional Hindu society not only by being alienated by their English-language education, but also, more significantly, by coming from such communities as the Parsis, Jews, and Christians, or by being rebel from Hinduism and Islam, or by living abroad". This argument is significant in opening for us the idea that the association of marginality with Indian English writing comes also from the perceived cultural and religious distance that English education results in. The marginality is thus to a certain degree definitive of the cultural and religious claustrophobia that marks Indian society and the exclusion to the periphery of the groups that do not have a genealogical link to the Hindu past in India. As to whether Indian Writing in English should continue to be a marginal field the argument that presents itself is that the marginality of Indian Writing in English is accepted as given by most critics and not questioned. The ones who have deliberated on it have argued in favour of the writing to be considered marginal.

The question about the "Indianness" of Indian poetry in English, or Indian English Writing in general, is again primarily linguistic in nature. The fundamental concern is, can the foreign language give a realistic expression to the native experience? Deliberating on the use of language as a mode of poetic expression K. Ayyappa Paniker states that the language used has an "intrinsic value" to the writer. He rejects the physical form of the language and argues that any writer can be rootless or "cosmopolitan" if there are no "regional features" in their writing. "To be Indian he (the writer) has to be rooted somewhere in India – geographically, historically, socially or psychologically" (Paniker 15). He rejects the idea that a language of foreign origin cannot capture the native essence. Rushdie in *Imaginary Homelands* argues for a similar point by saying that it does not matter where the writer comes from or the language he uses as long as the place he writes about is sincere and worthwhile. But Paniker uses the word cosmopolitan opposite to how Rushdie uses it. For Paniker a cosmopolitan belongs to nowhere.

It has been seen that Indian poetry in English has from the start been rooted in Indian sensibility even in the initial phase when form and diction were imitated from Western literature. "On the surface one may find elements of vocabulary or preoccupation with formal features which originate from a foreign source. Indian English poetry from the time of Henry Derozio has maintained a strong interest in the indigenous tradition" (Paniker 14). Paniker further argues that like all literatures Indian literature in English has a definite tradition that connects its present to its past. This tradition is multi-faceted, Indian in experience and sensibility, regional in affiliation and English in medium. That Indian English literature is "legitimately a part of Indian literature, since its differentia is the expression in it of an Indian ethos" (Naik 1982, 4). Thus, through content and the slow indigenisation of language Indian writing in English has always voiced and represented Indianness.

From "Beauty" to "Value": a Case of Postcolonial Aesthetics

While the debate surrounding the "marginality" and "Indianness" in Indian English Writing still continues today, the writings in the language have only flourished. This article, hence, after a brief survey of these terms above will mainly cogitate over the aesthetic dimensions of Indian poetry in English. Although Indian poetry in English has since its inception been regionally and nationally rooted, the problem of using the language of erstwhile masters for the native representational and creative processes, and the new developments in aesthetic theory make revision from the aesthetic paradigm into this area promising. This article by employing the ideas on New Aesthetics by Bill Ashcroft, Jacques Ranciere and Adam Chemlewski and by employing close reading technique will focus on the poetry of some Indian poets writing in English to arrive at the conclusion that the rational and interested "value" instead of "disinterested beauty" was always present in Indian poetry in English independent of the hegemonic aesthetics of the West with its disregard for political engagement. The

arguments presented will follow, in a formalistic fashion, a plot of their own and do not necessarily require adhering to the chronology of the primary works used. A tangible reason for this is that aesthetics of value did not occur as a systemic movement in Indian writing in English like the Renaissance in the second half of the twentieth century but happened to come into being as a direct consequence of writing that is sincerely Indian in a language that has become Indian.

Consider the following lines from Agha Shahid Ali's *The Wolf's Postscript to 'Little Red Riding Hood,*

"First, grant me my sense of history:" ...

And then grant me my generous sense of plot:"

(Ali 1-2)

A perspective interpretation of the poem apart from the common one tells us that the "wolf" is the postcolonial subject; the jungle that he lives in is the post colony. The wolf still has not gained control over his history and by impact of that is still unable to narrate his story. It is an obvious fact that the colonial legacy built over centuries and having entrenched its viciousness to the deepest cultural and psychological recesses of its subjects could not be undone in just more than half a century after the independence that Agha Shahid Ali lived until. But the word "grant" that figures in the initial lines of the first two stanzas of the poem demands deeper diligence. Who grants, one may ask? Of all the possible scenarios one can think of, could it be the language? That colonial residue in whose absence the free nation is unable, impossible perhaps, to function. It might well be. Shahid deliberates over the dominance of language over the writer in his poem *Language Games,*

I went mad in your house of words

purposely mad, so you would

give me asylum.

(Ali 1-3)

The contrast between the two poems lie in their approach in dealing with the language. In the former there is a will, though not strong enough as demonstrated by the word "grant" which signifies a seeking of permission, to regain control over one's narrative in the aftermath, but the latter poem accepts the power and dominance of language over a poet or writer. However, in both the situations there is an engagement with the language. The subsequent question that follows is what role does language assume in such a scenario? Whose language does it become? It will not be the language of the erstwhile masters but at the same time the language will never totally become native. A possible scenario of duality is begotten in the language which belongs to both at the same time. Bill Ashcroft (2015) calls it a "contact zone"; a place where cultural exchange takes place and Rajeev S. Patke (2006) calls the poetry emerging out of this "transcultural space" as the "poetry [that] bears witness to the residual force of colonial histories", on one hand, and "on the other, it shows how that force may be turned to new forms of linguistic and cultural empowerment" (7). It is important to mention here that this transculturation "posits the contact zone as a constructive rather than contestatory space, one of intersubjective contact and mutual change" (Ashcroft 2). And though, it may be some time before the "Big Bad Wolf" (colonised) is restored his dignity that the "huntsman" (coloniser) robbed him of, but a contestation is initiated for the aesthetics which is not "beautiful" or "sublime" – "a *bête-noir* of postcolonialism – but engages in "the opposition to the established dogmas and authorities" like Kamala Das does in the following lines of her poem *An Introduction* (Chmielewski 30).

"I speak three languages, write in

Two, dream in one.

…The language I speak,

Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses

All mine, mine alone.

It is half English, halfIndian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,

It is as human as I am human, don't

You see?"

(Das 5-6, 11-16)

The transculturalism arising out of the "contact zone" is also evident from what Bruce King said of Ramanujan that he is the "hyphen in Indian-American", or in the inter-state multiculturalism of the multilingual India as a whole where cultures are mutually altered by their unavoidable interaction with each other. Shantinath K. Desai points to this interface by arguing that the regional literatures are intellectually moulded by the Indian English literature because that is where the inter-cultural exchange of ideas takes place which then trickles down to intra-cultural. On the other hand, the emotion and sentimentality to the writing, especially poetry, is opulent in the regional because it is closest to the soil and then exported to the Indian writing in English and abroad. It would be shallow and needless of a reader to criticise Desai based on the inference that by devising a binary he is giving an intellectual edge to writings in English and emotional to the regional writing. The truth is that most major erudition takes place and is disseminated in English because of the widespread colonial past of England and strong neo-

colonial and neo-imperialist dominance of the United States which have made English the default lingua franca for discourses and cultural exchange.

The argument that presents itself next is that if language now is a transcultural space, where does the aesthetics of Indian English poetry lie? In its lexicon? In its transliteration? In its stylistics? Or, in its discourse analysis? The aesthetics of the postcolonial writing lies in "the materiality of the language" is what Bill Ashcroft argues in his essay *Towards Postcolonial Aesthetics*. So for Indian English Poetry, it must lie in all the above and more that Indian poetry in English is. Critics point out that the Indian English poetry was in the borrowing phase before independence, borrowing from Romantics and Victorians. It was majorly imitative, a "Mathew Arnold in saree" as George Bottomley put it. It is in the post-independence period that Indian English poetry underwent a metamorphosis when it began contemplating on the themes of identity, nationality, alienation, etc. However, this is not to say that the pre-independence poetry did not possess any originality or national or cultural rootedness, only the poetry was not distinctly Indian as can be argued for the post-independence poetry. Consider, for instance, a brief comparison of the following poems of Toru Dutt and Rajagopal Parthasarathy. In the poem *The Lotus* Toru Dutt personifies a dialogue on the supremacy of lily over rose by appealing to the Greek goddess of nature, Flora, by employing a borrowed rhyme scheme;

Love came to Flora asking for a flower
That would of flowers be undisputed queen,
The lily and the rose, long, long had been
Rivals of that high honour. Bards of power…

(Dutt 2-4)

In comparison, R Parthasarathy in his poem *Trial* writes,

the spoonfuls of English
brew never quite slaked your thirst.
Hand on chin, you grew up,
all agog, on the cook's succulent
folklore…

(Parthasarthy 11-15)

The two poems highlight on the shift of attitude from the aesthetic influences of the West back to the indigenous tradition, to questions about one's identity, nationalism and the axiological relevance of the creative production, that has distrust for "muse", but the inspiration comes from the native. Toru Dutt's writing could easily be mistaken as European if one was to remove his name from the poem as the formalists did. On the contrary, Parthasarathy depicts a distance from the English education, that is almost natural, and expresses a desire for the "the cook's succulent folklore." In another of his poems, *Homecoming*, Rajagopal Parthasarathy deliberates upon coming back home after spending some time in a foreign land with guilt and shame for he discovers that his unfamiliarity with the richness of his native language made him lean towards the foreign one.

My tongue in English chains,
I return after a generation, to you.
…
I falter. I stumble.
Sleep a tired language,
Wrenched from its sleep in the Kural

(Parthasarathy 1-2, 6-8)

A major theme in postcolonial writing, which is true of Indian poetry in English as well, is the nostalgia for a happy and perfect past. A pre-colonial utopia of some sort that poets allude to time and again. The yearning for return to this pre-colonial state of affairs may seem ideal but it could be irrationally delusional; a retrotopic yearning for "the past as the future" (Bauman 17). In this context Indian English poetry has not resorted to a radical reclaiming of the past, although, the negotiation with the past for learning and belonging continuously happens.

But where is the "beautiful" in all this? Where is the pleasure that aesthetics of an art promises? Is Indian poetry in English not art after all? The fundamental thing to consider in attempting the answer to these questions is that the tension in Indian poetry in English is a postcolonial tension; it is a political tension since writing in the language of erstwhile masters is in itself a political act. So the concepts of "beauty", "sublime" and "pleasure" in case of Indian poetry in English will have to be done away with because they essentially believe in the "disinterested judgement" with no ulterior motive. The disinterested aesthetics serves no purpose, has no aim or moral motive but to provide pleasure for its own sake. Immanuel Kant who was the first one to write elaborately on aesthetics in his book *Critique of Judgement* (1790) also argued that aesthetics has a "universal subjectivity". An ironical coinage which he resolved by saying that all humans possess, a *sensus communis* which helps them in registering the beauty in things (62). However, "the revaluation of the tasks of the arts... encourages a revision of traditional aesthetic categories and the demystification of a number of accompanying notions, including the ideas of pure beauty, the status of artwork, the social position of the artist" (Chemielewski 31).

The Indian poetry in English can of course be read from the perspectivism of beauty, like the following lines from the poem *All the Poetry There Is* by Jayanta Mahapatra, one of the founding fathers of the modern Indian English poetry,

All the poetry there is in the world
appears to rise out of the ashes
the ash sits between us
and puts its arms across our shoulders.
It makes the world so emptily quiet.
for there is nothing like the ashes
to remind us how little there is to say.

(Mahapatra 1-7)

These lines point to the origin of poetry in a poignant sense of loss, from the "ashes" of what once was, and from the repository of melancholia that solves nothing but gives rise to poetry that is "supporting [on] the days too heavy for us". There is a subtle nudge in the poem towards the idea of poem being an act of understanding something whose genesis lies in loss or pain: "poetry simply wants to know that sort of thing/ war was, of a sunset, even a bizarre crime" (13-14). The aesthetics here lies in the origin and the role a poem performs for both its writer and reader, providing relief and eventually pleasure in making something understandable at first and bearable at last. The reader, however, is also at liberty to read the poem by expanding the scope of loss from personal to socio-cultural and historical events, unmistakably diversifying the meaning of "ashes" to cultural, national and their trans phenomenon. The poem further reads,

Poetry, I whisper, seeing a picture
of twenty persons gunned down without reason:
their crime, that they were merely in the way.
I could easily understand the crime of passion.

(Mahapatra 15-18)

What becomes of the poem here is that it connects the personal grief to a stimulus that lies beyond oneself, giving grief a wider resonance, of, for instance, the political loss, of colonial subjugation or the suspension of freedom. The poem in this scenario no longer just remains "beautiful", but becomes "valuable". Hence, the argument, that if read outside the context of socio-politics, culture and historicity Indian English poetry can be termed as "beautiful" and "sublime", but in grounding it in these unavoidable factors that form the language of Indianness according to Ayyappa Panniker, the aesthetics of the Indian poetry in English lies in giving "value to its subjects" and themes through "the materiality of the language".

The versification of Indian poetry in English also points to the trend of abandonment of metre and rhyme in favour of modernist free verse. The adherence to metre and rhyme was a Romantic and Victorian influence which rendered poetry as imitative and inauthentic. The walk away marks a sincere desire towards authenticity and cultural rootedness. Sarojni Naidu's poetry despite following some of the western conventions of versification had profound lyricism to it which was not borrowed from the West but adopted from the Persian and Urdu tradition of the land.

How shall I yield to the voice of thy pleading,
how shall I grant thy prayer,
Or give thee a rose-red silken tassel,
a scented leaf from my hair?

(Naidu 13-16)

These lines from her poem *An Indian Love Song* fairly prove the point. The diction employed is immaculately English but the cadence of the lines with an emotionalism and the nervous inertia in granting the wishes of the lover lyrically expressed are psychologically Indian.

CONCLUSION

What has been attempted in this article through various examples of poetry and support from criticism is to depict the tussle that exists between English as a medium of creative expression and the thoughts, ideas and emotions that comprise its content are in constant tension with each other, both aesthetically and otherwise. The old aesthetic notions of "beauty", "sublime" and "pleasure" do not hold for Indian English poetry in totality because they show an indifference to the engagement of the text to reality that reaches beyond itself. It could be argued then that the form and content of the Indian English poetry which had a chasm between them in the juvenile stage was eliminated by the abandonment of the imitative influences such that the two became organic. This is evident in the fact that both form and content of Indian English poetry engage with the postcoloniality of the writing exercise and the incorporation of transcultural essence that Indian poetry is essentially a phenomenon of. The stress on universalism is another aspect that becomes objectionable because hegemony of the canon places the Western art on the altar of "beautiful" and excludes the writings from the margins. The following statement of Bill Ashcroft becomes relevant in this case; "Just as some people's thinking is regarded as 'philosophy' while that of others is not, so some writing is considered 'literature' and other writing is not. The aesthetic judgement of the dominant class is regarded as a standard of 'taste'"(2). This tension gets resolved by thinking about Indian poetry in English on the plane of transcultural that does not rely on

the old aesthetic markers but focuses on the "value" that the writing provides to its subjects, ideas, thoughts and language. This New Aesthetics holds firm in understanding Indian English poetry as a whole in contexts of postcolonialism, politics and socio-cultural and historic factors. The existential fissure in personal and political that a writer falls victim to expressed by Agha Shahid Ali as "I went mad in your house of words" see a hopeful resolution.

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