
UNIT 1 BACKGROUND TO INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit I propose to give you an overview of the birth, growth, and development of Indian English poetry from the earliest times to the present. This will include a description of its historical, social and cultural backgrounds. The first section will discuss the origin of Indian English poetry. After that, I intend to explore, briefly, the impact of British colonization on Indian society. Then on to the vexed question of the identity of Indian English poetry. It would also be useful to see if the periodization and growth of Indian English poetry can be mapped out. Finally, I would like to speculate on its future possibilities. This, then, is the plan of this unit. The origin of Indian English poetry

1.1 INTRODUCTION

How did Indians suddenly begin to write poetry in English, which was a foreign language? This question cannot but strike anyone who goes looking for the origins of Indian English poetry. Today, in the 1990s, English seems to have a very stable, even natural, place in India's social and cultural life. But even today, when we step out of our cities and go deep into the interiors of the hinterland, the foreignness of English at once becomes clear. Hardly anyone can really understand the language and if a few do, their command over it is questionable. That is why English, Americans and other native speakers of English continue to speak loudly, haltingly, or through interpreters when they are in India. But about 200 years ago, when British paramountcy was far from established in India, when the sight of Englishmen was a great novelty in the streets of Indian cities, the English language was very much a foreign tongue. Yet, the fact remains that nearly a quarter of a century before English education was institutionalised or the first Indian universities were founded, there was already a growing crop of Indians who chose English to write their poetry in. How or why did this happen?

1.2 THE ORIGIN OF INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY

The first Indian English poet, by common consent, is Henry Derozio, who published his collection of *Poems* in Calcutta in 1827. But, perhaps, even this was neither as sudden nor dramatic as it may seem today. Indians had begun to learn English in earnest at least twenty-five years prior to that and some had even begun to write it.

M. K. Naik in his extremely useful *History of Indian English Literature* (1982) refers to Cavelley Venkata Boriah's "Account of the Jains" published in *Asiatic Researches* (London, 1809) as the first substantial published composition in English by an Indian. This essay was actually written even earlier, probably in 1803. Boriah's essay, twenty-eight pages in length, was a translation, yet it retains a historical importance as the first sizeable piece of writing in Indian English. The credit for the first original English composition by an Indian goes to Raja Rammohun Roy, for his essay, *A Defence of Hindu Theism* (1817). I will come back to Roy later, but what I wanted to emphasise is that Indian English poetry did not emerge suddenly, without any prior preparation; a community of Indians who knew and used English was necessary before it could be born.

Indeed, in my *Introduction to Indian Poetry in English* (1993), I observed: "Before Indians could write poetry in English, two related preconditions had to be met. First, the English language had to be sufficiently Indianized to be able to express the reality of the Indian situation; secondly, Indians had to be sufficiently Anglicized to use the English language to express themselves" (1). Perhaps, we should spend some time trying to examine and understand these two preconditions. After Vasco da Gama came to Kerala in 1498, the trade routes to India over the high seas opened up. With trade, several Indian words made their way into Portuguese, thence into English, especially after the charter of the East India Company in 1600. The British presence in India, however, remained marginal for another hundred or 150 years. But towards the end of the 18th century, after the East Indian Company transformed itself from a trading company into an incipient empire, a number of Englishmen and women began to use the English language to express Indian themes and subject matter. It was the Battle of Plassey of 1757 which was the turning point in early colonial history because it gave the British virtual control of one of the richest and most populous provinces of India, Bengal. Soon, the revenue administration also passed into the hands of the British. This forced them to undertake a systematic study of land records and other official documents so that they could rule more effectively. This, coupled with a curiosity to understand a culture as rich and ancient as India's, gave rise to a whole tradition of British Orientalist scholarship. Many of these scholars who were high-ranking British officials, well-trained in British universities, were assisted by native pundits and scribes in their efforts to understand and interpret Indian texts and traditions. Perhaps, the most significant and outstanding of these British Orientalists, was Sir William Jones (1746-1794). Jones became a judge in the Supreme Court in Calcutta, but was actually a poet, scholar, and man of letters, deeply committed to research in Indian literatures. He founded the Asiatic Society in 1784, translated Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* in 1789, and demonstrated the remarkable similarities between Indian and European languages. Jones may also be considered as the "pitamaha" if not "father" of Indian English poetry because he published in 1785 a series of hymns to Hindu gods and goddesses in English, thereby showing that the English language was suitable to express even such traditional Indian themes. These hymns to Camdeo, Prakriti, Indra, Surya, Lakshmi, Narayana, Saraswathy, and Ganga, though they sound quaint, bookish, and artificial today, may be considered as the real precursors to Indian English poetry.

The Anglicization of the Indians or, at any rate, of a certain section of the Indians which came into direct contact with the British, was an ongoing process, which grew in direct proportion to the rise of British power in India. In the beginning, the British tried to encourage traditional scholarship in India. Warren Hastings, the Governor General of Bengal, founded the Calcutta Madrasa for the teaching of Arabic and Persian in 1781. Similarly, Jonathan Duncan started the Sanskrit College in Benares in 1782. Those who favoured the promotion of native education in the classical languages of India came to be called the Orientalists. But, by the turn of the century, the tide of public opinion had changed in England. The Conservatives lost power to the Liberals; utilitarian ideas were in the air. Ironically, Conservatives like Edmund Burke had a higher opinion of Indian civilization than Liberals like Macaulay. There was also a rise in Evangelical movements, which aimed at spreading Christianity in

India. The Liberals and the Evangelists, then, became unlikely allies in the mission of revamping Indian civilization. Both attacked Indian civilization and Hinduism, from secular and religious considerations respectively. Schools set up by the missionaries were already teaching English by the beginning of the 19th century; now the imperialists too began to champion the cause of English education in India. English was seen as an aid to establishing the empire. In the end, the tussle between the Orientalists and the Anglicists resulted in the victory of the latter, signed, sealed and delivered, as it were, in the famous Minute of Macaulay of 1835.

Let us look, briefly, at the background and the content of the Minute. In 1813 the British Parliament passed an Act by which a sum of Rs. 1 lac was to be set aside "for the revival and promotion of literature and the encouragement of the learned natives of India, and for the introduction and promotion of a knowledge of the sciences among the inhabitants of the British territories." Thomas Babington Macaulay, as Member of the Council of India, headed the committee, which looked into the question of how this money was to be spent. His Minute of 2 February 1833 was decisive in tilting the scale in favour of English education. Macaulay shows his poor opinion of Eastern civilization by declaring that "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia." Macaulay, quite truthfully, admitted that he had himself had no knowledge of Sanskrit or Arabic, but that he had formed this opinion, on the basis of the translations he had read and the learned experts he had consulted. At any rate, Macaulay's assertion reflects not only imperial arrogance and self-assurance on an astonishing scale, but also his faith in the transformative role of English in India. He says that English can do for India what the revival of classical learning did for Europe during the renaissance or what the languages of Western Europe did for Russia. For him, English had civilizing and modernizing mission in India. Macaulay was already aware of the growing power and spread of the English language and almost anticipated its present eminence. He also observed that Indians seemed to have a special affinity for English, a language they mastered more easily than other Europeans themselves. He hoped that the new education system would "form a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, morals, and in intellect." Macaulay was also an extremely practical man, who noted how scholars of Arabic and Sanskrit had to be paid to study these languages, while the demand for English was actually increasing day by day.



- Raja Rammohun Roy (1772-1833)

Macaulay, despite his imperial agenda, in fact had a good deal of support from Indians themselves. Rammohun Roy, one of the leading intellectuals and social reformers, had helped establish an Association to promote European learning and science as far back as 1816. The next year, the Hindu College, the first modern institution of higher education in India, was founded. When the debate over the future of education in India was raging, Roy wrote a letter to Lord Amherst, the then governor-general. In this letter of 11 December 1823, Roy protested against the establishment of a Sanskrit College in Calcutta and pleaded instead for "a more liberal and enlightened system of instruction, embracing mathematics, natural philosophy, chemistry and anatomy, with other useful sciences." Roy's letter, no doubt, had a profound and far-reaching effect because we find distorted echoes of his letter in Macaulay's minute itself. But a careful reading of Roy's submission shows that what he wanted was modern, technical education, not necessarily English literary education. Roy, in fact, favoured primary and secondary education in the vernaculars, but also wanted Indians to learn English and progress in modern learning. What Macaulay delivered instead was a more textual and literary type of education, with very little emphasis on practical arts and technical subjects.

In 1857 the three universities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras, one in each of the three presidencies of the Empire, were established. With that, English education became deeply entrenched in India. As Macaulay had desired, a new class was created who were perfectly at home both in the English language and English culture. Naturally, it was from this class that Indian English writers came.

1.3 THE IMPACT OF BRITISH COLONIZATION

I have been suggesting that Indian English literature and Indian English poetry more specifically--since the latter was the first literary genre to emerge--were the products of a larger cultural or civilizational encounter between Britain and India. Let us try to understand this encounter in some depth before we focus more directly on Indian English poetry. The first thing that I'd like to say is that Britain was not the first European country to impact upon India. Of course, I don't refer to the much, much earlier and much vaunted "conquest" of India by Alexander the Great. That occurred way back in 326 BC. Actually, Alexander succeeded in defeating only one Indian ruler, Paurava or Porus, the king of Punjab. This defeat, in fact, was achieved at a tremendous cost from which, arguably, Alexander and his armies never recovered. Within twenty years of his death much of the territory that he had acquired was reconquered by one of the most powerful Indian emperors, Chandragupta Maurya. Even prior to Alexander's raid on India, India had commercial and cultural ties with ancient Europe, mainly Greece and Rome, but these were more or less on an equal and reciprocal footing. In other words, ancient India was more than able to hold its own against Europe and the two were not antagonists in any obvious sense of the word.

It took nearly another 1800 years for Europe to register its next significant clash with India. In the intervening years, trade and cultural exchange did take place, but after the rise of Islam, not as freely as before. The Arabs began to rule most of the Middle East and Asia Minor, with the result that the European urgency to discover new sea routes to India increased in the middle ages. In 1498 Vasco da Gama, another soldier and empire-builder, landed on the shores of South India, near Cochin. The Indo-Portuguese encounter is little discussed today outside specialist circles, partly because it was so totally eclipsed and overtaken by the Indo-British encounter. But it is useful to go back to this, earlier Indo-European clash for two reasons: a comparison of Portuguese and British imperialisms not only reveals two faces of Europe, but the Indian response to them reveals two faces of India.

The Portuguese intervention in India was essentially different from the British because it was, informed by a different type of imperial ideology. Military conquest, conversion, and profit--in that order--were its motivations. In other words, it was a more traditional form of imperialism. In areas such as Goa where Portuguese rule was consolidated, the native culture was altered more radically than where British colonization thrived. The Portuguese conquest of Indian territories was accomplished with much more bloodshed and naked violence than the British. What the Portuguese sought to do was to impose their own religion and culture on the Indians, so as to create a new kind of society in the East. In the ultimate analysis, their impact was limited when compared with the astonishing success of the British Empire that followed it.

One reason for this is that the conquest of India could not be effected merely through an assertion of cultural or military superiority. When Britain conquered India later, it was not just another country or culture defeating ours; that is, it was not just the triumph of Britain or Europe, but of modernity. Britain won because it was, powered by a different kind of engine and a different kind of energy. Ascendant Europe had learned to capture the hidden powers of nature itself; the Industrial Revolution of the 1780s and the years of preparation which preceded it, gave Britain a technological, military, and therefore cultural, advantage over India which was, perhaps, unprecedented.

Though Portuguese rule gave way to British rule, it did make a significant impact on the mind of India and Europe. For nearly a 100 years, things Eastern in general came to Europe mediated through the Portuguese language and people. I have already told you how this was true of most early Indian lexical borrowings in European languages, including English. That is, the first Indian words in English came via the Portuguese language. But on the Indian side too, Europe, especially Roman Catholicism, came to be nativised in a unique new community in Goa. This community of Indian Christians played an important role in the modernization of India. Our first Indian English poet himself, Henry Derozio, belonged to this community. Derozio is probably a shortened version of Derozario, a common Portuguese surname, which several converted Hindus adopted. Francis Derozio, Henry's father, is referred to as "a native Protestant" in Church records and also as a Portuguese merchant. Both these clues suggest that Derozio's father was a product of the Indo-Portuguese encounter. Other Indian English poets such as Dom Moraes, Eunice de Souza, and Charmayne D'Souza also belong to this community of Goan Christians.

As I have suggested above, Portuguese colonialism in India failed, or at any rate succeeded only partially. One reason for this was that it was very narrow-minded and limited in its approach and methods. In a sense, then, it represented the conservative face of Europe. In Europe itself, the hegemony of the Roman Catholic Church, which had conspired to divide the vast territories of the New World, between two countries, Spain and Portugal, was being challenged. Both the Dutch and the English were challenging Spain, as the rising tide of Protestantism was challenging the Roman Catholic Church itself. The charter of the East India Company took place during the reign of one of Britain's greatest monarchs, Queen Elizabeth, as did the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 by Britain, which marked a decisive point in the rise of British power. Over the next 250 years, Britain would emerge as the greatest power not only in Europe, but also in the whole world.

British imperialism backed as it was by a more modern and secular outlook, started by concentrating on trade. It had a policy of non-interference with the religious and cultural traditions of the people it conquered. Conquest itself was not the aim to begin with but was almost thrust upon the East India Company in its fight to protect its trade interests. The volatile political situation after the fall of the Mogul empire gave John Company (as the East India Company was popularly known) a unique

opportunity to meddle in the affairs of the warring Indian princes. The Company used its leverage as a seemingly neutral outsider to its advantage. After its trading settlements in Surat and Hoogly were attacked, it began to fortify them and to arm itself. It raised an army mostly by recruiting local mercenaries and training them in modern, European methods of warfare. The Battle of Plassey in 1757 in which a small but well-trained army of Indians, led by a small band of British officers under Robert Clive, defeated the huge but divided army of Siraj-ud-Daula, the Nawab of Bengal. The model of this battle can be seen in that uniquely Indian tribute to the Raj, the Victoria Memorial, in Calcutta. I have already mentioned how the Battle of Plassey inaugurated a series of military victories for the British, culminating in an almost unprecedented paramountcy over the whole of the Indian sub-continent.

It was through this conquest that India bore the full brunt of Western or, more properly, modern culture. This impact was so extensive and thoroughgoing as entirely to transform Indian society. Such an upheaval, perhaps, had no parallel in Indian history. Even the impact of Muslim rule in India had arguably been less far-reaching. It is not for us to analyse or describe this impact in great detail. That would not only be outside the scope of such a course, but also somewhat tangential to our central concern, which is with Indian English poetry. After all, you may say that Indian English poetry does not really engage directly with British colonialism or with several of its effects, which we have been trying to understand just now. True, there may be few poems exclusively about racism, imperialism, nationalism or what we may call the "master narratives" of our times. But nearly every poem in our course will deal with these issues, either directly or indirectly. For instance, there are a great number of contemporary poems on poverty, violence, the urban condition, and so on. Well, these realities arise partly out of our colonial heritage. In fact, the condition of India, which was and remains a major preoccupation of our thinkers, scholars, intellectuals, and artists, was very much on the mind of our first Indian English poet, Derozio. He wrote sonnets lamenting the fall of India. It is precisely this fall, from which we have yet to recover fully and which was the major outcome of the colonial intervention.

Let me clarify that to regard colonialism from such a standpoint is by no means innocent. It is informed by its own politics, which to some may seem outdated or even dangerous. For a variety of reasons, it has become difficult to espouse a simplistic nationalism in these days. Indeed, that is not my intent. What is, however, my intent is to offer a clearly anti-colonial reading of our recent history and literature. It is very important, in other words, to be clear in our minds what sort of stand we shall take on colonialism. In those days, there were many who agreed with the British that colonialism was a civilizing and modernizing force and therefore, ultimately, beneficial. In fact, there were many that tended to see in it not just a blessing in disguise but an act of providence. Some Hindu nationalists, for instance, were of the view that British rule saved Hindus from the domination of Muslims, allowed them to recoup their strength, and eventually regain their lost nation. There were and are what we may term as modernizers who also believed that British rule ushered in liberal values and helped us reform a corrupt and decadent traditional order. I would not like to endorse such positions, though I can see that they are not entirely devoid of truth or merit.

My position on British colonialism follows that of M. K. Gandhi. Gandhi believed that traditional Indian civilization, at least in its basic orientation, was not just sound and therefore worth conserving, but, in many ways, superior to modern civilization. Gandhi argued that our traditional civilization was essentially moral, or to use a more apt term, Dharmic, as such it gave its adherents a coherent way of life. Modern civilization, on the other hand, is inherently violent and materialistic. According to Gandhi, it encourages vice and selfishness. From such a viewpoint, Indian civilization was self-sufficient. Furthermore, it had the capacity for renewal and regeneration. As opposed to this, Rammohun Roy, in his letter to Lord Amherst, which I've mentioned earlier, advanced the view that traditional knowledge was not

just defunct and outdated, but harmful; that, in fact, India was badly in need for modern, especially technical know-how from the West. While Roy's and Gandhi's views are not necessarily antithetical or mutually exclusive, clearly they show a different emphasis. For Gandhi, the primary yardstick of measuring the success or the merit of a civilization was the extent to which its inhabitants had achieved a high moral stature. Roy was more concerned with economic and technological advancement of the modern sort, what came to be known as development in 20th century parlance. The members of "Young Bengal," a radical group, mostly composed of students of Hindu College, many of whom, incidentally, were also pupils of Derozio, advocated the destruction of the older order, that is of Hinduism itself, before anything new could come up in India. They saw India as totally insufficient if she had to rely only on her native sources. Rabindranath Tagore offers yet another perspective in this debate. He advocated a more liberal, even cosmopolitan or universalist approach. His views are often thought of as an endorsement of a synthesis between the best of the East and the West. However, as Sri Aurobindo clearly shows in *Foundations of Indian Culture*, a half-baked or weak-kneed synthesis is tantamount to capitulation. Later, of course, as British imperialism became more and more repressive, Tagore revised his opinions somewhat. Though he supported the national struggle for independence led by Gandhi, he differed with the latter on key issues. Both often aired their differences in public but never lost their love and respect for one another.

Whatever view we may take on the Indo-British encounter, it is important to bear in mind that British rule in India was not just oppressive, but highly exploitative. It was an iniquitous system in which India's surplus wealth was systematically extracted and expropriated by Britain. The enormous inflow of capital from the colonies, arguably, helped in Britain's own process of rapid industrialisation and development. India, as we know from our own personal experience, was impoverished, became within the space of 200 years, one of the poorest and most backward countries in the world. Not too long ago, it was one of the richest and most advanced. There may have been a variety of other factors, which contributed to India's impoverishment, but colonialism was the chief of these. A simple proof of the horrors of colonialism is the fact that throughout the history of British rule, famines struck the country with predictable regularity, almost once in ten years. The most devastating of these, of course, is the great Bengal famine of 1943 in which more than 3 million people died. Ironically, this famine was not caused by drought or crop failure, but was entirely man-made. It was caused by the British war policies. Amartya Sen, the Nobel-prize winning economist, was growing up at that time; what he saw and experienced then influenced his career choice and work later on.

Apart from the drain of India's economic resources, which resulted in a number of other side effects, British imperialism almost destroyed India's belief in itself, its self-confidence. It was as if the backbone of this ancient civilization was broken; it began to see itself as a hopeless failure, a miserable wretch. A good deal of this inferiority complex persists to this day. India's poverty and cultural "cringe" also encouraged some of the worst traditions and practices to gather strength. The best example, perhaps, is Sati, which reached epidemic proportions in Bengal, precisely during British rule. Now, it is often thought that the British took great pains to abolish this evil and that we must be grateful to them for this. That is, the abolition of Sati is seen as the triumph of benevolent modernity, with its notions of human rights and equality, exemplified by British rule, over the irrational and inhuman customs of the Hindus, who therefore are superstitious and barbaric. But such a view begs the more fundamental question of which the incidence of Sati rose to such unprecedented proportions during the benevolent rule of the British. Nowhere else in India did the numbers even remotely resemble those of British Bengal. Again, before British ascendancy, Sati was not so prevalent even in Bengal itself. It stands to reason that British rule had something to do with its flare up.

In fact, it was during British rule that a number of other social evils suddenly became noticeable, entering the realm of public debate for the first time. These included child marriage, female infanticide, and the position of widows in Hindu society. If you take the case of child marriage, you will notice that this was in itself a response to another social and political problem, probably the attitude to women during Islamic rule. There were no doubt other reasons, economic, social, and cultural for the prevalence of this custom. But, with British rule, these social circumstances were once again altered. What might have been a necessary evil became merely an evil. Just as the modern consumer culture encourages the demands for dowry, even if this is illegal, during British rule, a number of contradictions and problems in Indian society came to the fore. Both the supposedly secular British ruling class as well as European missionaries were interested in undermining traditional Indian society so that they could establish their hegemony. This pressure from above coupled with desperate economic conditions exposed, so to speak, the faultiness of our culture.

Besides these economic and social effects, there were major political and ecological consequences of British colonialism too. Indians lost their freedom, their liberty, their sovereignty; they were reduced to a subject people, second class citizens or non-citizens in their own country. The ancient system of autonomous or semi-autonomous and largely self-sufficient village communities was gradually broken down, mainly to facilitate an easier access to revenues. Forests were cleared; the natural resources of the country were used up to fund imperialistic expansion, both in India and abroad. Gradually but surely, India was integrated into a world system of capitalism. Its native industries and technologies were destroyed to be replaced by mass-produced British goods. Large numbers of artisans and craftsmen were de-skilled. Many poor and land less peasants, on the verge of starvation, were shipped abroad as indentured labourers, to work in some other part of the British Empire. India suddenly lost its complacent isolation and entered the maelstrom of world events.

Of course, the British also build the railways and developed the post and telegraph system. They built canals and developed Indian infrastructure in some areas. Indians began to access the rich trove of knowledge, both the humanities and social sciences and in science and technology, which the West had. India, also, in turn, gave much to Europe, almost spurring a second renaissance with the "discovery" by Europe of its classical languages and literatures. The work of European Indologists was to have a lasting impact on the growth of the post-Enlightenment world. Finally, as a by-product of this encounter, a new class of nationalists was created who, eventually, succeeded in overthrowing British imperialism. As a result of this struggle, two new nations were born, India and Pakistan. Moreover, it is as citizens of one of these nations that we are studying the growth and development of Indian English poetry in an institution funded by an agency of the Indian State.

Throughout this section, I have tried to suggest that Indian English poetry should not be seen in isolation to the broader process of the evolution of modern India. This evolution is closely linked with the meeting of two civilizations under the sign of colonialism. It was like the mythical churning of the seas in which the Devas and the Asuras struggled for supremacy. A number of things, in other words, came out of the struggle between Indians and the British; not the least of them was Indian English poetry, which we are endeavouring to study and understand.

1.4 THE IDENTITY OF INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY

There is a great deal of confusion and ambiguity over the identity and scope of Indian English poetry, especially when we view its evolution historically. The earliest of our poets, as I hinted earlier, were considered as curiosities and usually listed in the

appendices of collections of verse by Anglo-Indians. No wonder, Indian English poetry was first called Anglo-Indian poetry. In fact, the earliest collection of Indian English poems is to be found in a remarkable anthology called *Selections from the British Poets from the Time of Chaucer to the Present Day with Biographical and Critical Notes* edited by David Lester Richardson and published by the Committee of Public Instruction, Calcutta, in 1840. This was probably the first text used to teach English literature anywhere in the world. I had the good fortune to examining this book, which luckily was in very good condition, at the British Library. Richardson included poets from Chaucer to the Romantics. But what is more interesting to our concerns is a forty-six-page supplement that he provided to the main body of his text. In this section he included several "British Indian" poets such as Henry Derozio and Kasiprasad Ghose.

So, though the term "Anglo-Indian" persisted for some time, Richardson was already sensitive to the difference between Indians who wrote English and Britishers who wrote about India. That's why he used the term "British Indian." But in the first serious scholarly study of this body of writing, F. Oaten's *Sketch of Anglo-Indian Literature* (1908), Indian English poetry is still seen as an appendage to the then more prolific Anglo-Indian writing. Oaten's book was originally a prize-winning undergraduate essay at Cambridge University, a revised and abridged version of which finds a place in *The Cambridge History of English Literature (1907-1914)*. "Anglo-Indian," with the passage of time, clearly proved inadequate to describe the work of Indians. Therefore, the inversion of the phrase, "Indo-Anglian," came into vogue. This phrase was popularised by K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar in a book by the same title published in 1943, though James Cousins in a book called *Specimen Compositions from Native Students* (1883) coined it much earlier. Though "Indo-Anglian" does not sound very elegant, it has, as Iyengar observed, the advantage of being considered both as a noun and as an adjective. Indeed, the term has persisted even though others, such as Indian Writing in English (IWE) or Indian English literature, have generally come to substitute it. It must be noted that "Indian English" has been accorded the stamp of approval by the Sahitya Akademi, the Indian national academy of letters, itself and that therefore it has a special legitimacy. The Sahitya Akademi, moreover, considers Indian English literature as one of the literatures of India and awards an annual prize for the best book in this subject.

You may wonder why I've spent so much time talking about the various names by which this literature is known. The simple reason for this is that the shifting nomenclature suggests a shifting, or at any rate, an unstable identity. I've already pointed out how this literature born under the star of colonialism, coming of age between two cultures, displays dual cultural loyalties. Is it Indian? Is it English? How authentic is it? Can Indians really write creative works in English? These questions, understandably, have plagued this literature since its very inception. Should we take these questions seriously or simply brush them aside as most Indian English writers tend to do? The writers argue that it is not their business to ponder over such mysteries as to whether Indians can write meaningfully in English or not. Instead, they want to let their writing do the talking for them so to speak. Similarly, those connected with the book trade are laughing all the way to the bank while engaged scholars or literary critics debate this issue. The fact is the Indian English writers command the highest royalties of any language writers in India. Naturally, their publishers couldn't care less about possible lack of authenticity of these writers.

Yet, for students of this literature, we do need to keep this question of the identity and worth of Indian English literature in mind. There are no easy answers and each one of us will have to come to our conclusions, but there are some ground realities that we shall have to contend with. The first of these is the fact that Indian English has been around for nearly 175 years. Secondly, that it is growing in quantity, if not in quality. Indeed, over the last two decades, its growth has been phenomenal, so much so that it is today an easily recognizable element of a global literary marketplace, more in demand than any other literature from India. Thirdly, it follows therefore,

that this literature cannot be dismissed, but must be taken seriously. And yet, we must be careful to avoid the distortions that the market forces cause and be able to make independent judgements. So, I think a profitable approach to this issue would be to avoid both extremes of outright rejection or fawning adulation and, instead, to attempt a critical interrogation. While we do this, we would do well to remember that poetry, as a matter of fact, enjoys very little prestige and power when compared to prose. This reversal has been rather ironic because, it was Indian English poetry that dominated the creativity in this language for the first 100 years of its existence.

To conclude this section, we might say that Indian English poetry, like Indian English literature in general, does suffer from a sort of identity problem. This problem or duality arises out of the clash between its medium of expression, which is English, and its experiential milieu, which presumably, is Indian. This peculiar situation makes it by its very birth a hybrid creature, with mixed parentage and characteristics. Gordon Bottomley, an English critic, once called it "Matthew Arnold in a *sari*." But over the years, it is its very hybridity and complex identity, which has added to its appeal. Questions of "Indianness" and "authenticity," on the other hand, need not be dismissed either. They are important and will persist. Especially for those of us who live in this country, the politics of representation in Indian English literature will continue to hold interest.

1.5 THE GROWTH AND PERIODIZATION OF INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY

Before we get into this section properly, it may be useful to speak briefly about periodization. Periodization refers to the practice of dividing long literary traditions into more convenient phases or time-slots. For instance, when you examine the history of English literature, you'll find that it usually proceeds along certain set periods such as "The Elizabethan Age," "The 17th Century," "The Augustans," "The Romantics," and so on. Usually, there is more than one way of classifying the history of a literature. English literature used to be identified with the reigning monarch. Thus you had Victorian literature, Georgian literature, Edwardian literature, and so on. Sometimes, if the monarch was weak or if a literary movement was sufficiently distinctive, then a literary period could be known by a different name such as "The Metaphysical Poets," or "The Romantics," and so on. Nowadays, it is less fashionable to identify literature with the reigning monarch. This reflects not just the declining importance of the British monarchy, but also the changing relationships between the state and literary production. I'll come back to this point later. Right now, I want you to understand that periodization is essentially a convenient device to help us understand and study a large body of texts. That is, it helps us *organize* a literary tradition.

But, you might ask, when it comes to a relatively young literature like Indian English literature, how useful or necessary is periodization? This is a valid question but does not obviate the challenge of having to periodize our literatures. For instance, we all know that there was a sea of change in literary styles and tastes in the early decades of this century. I am of course referring to the eruption of modernism in Europe and elsewhere. Now this was a widespread and multifaceted transformation cutting across several arts and practices. So, it is clear that there is a marked change in the poetry written by modernists like Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot and that of their predecessors. Invoking the term modernism will help us understand and explain this change; the term also helps us to periodize the tradition of English poetry. Now, a similar change in taste is discernible in Indian English poetry when we move from, say, Sarojini Naidu, to Nissim Ezekiel. How are we to account for and describe this change without resorting to some sort of periodization for the entire tradition of Indian English poetry? So you can easily see the uses and imperatives of periodization.

But, even if you were simply to go by what I just said a little while ago, you will at once notice the complications that arise when we deal with Indian English literature. For instance, though there seems to be a parallel in our literature to what happened in English literature--that is, the change that occurred with modernism--there is such a large time lag? The shift in poetic idiom in Europe took place in the 1920s, but in India it happened only so late as the 1950s. Two questions arise immediately: what accounts for this time lag? And, given this time lag, can we really use the same terms as are used in English poetry to periodize Indian English poetry?

There are no simple answers to these questions. In fact, they throw up very complex issues of literary influences and cross-cultural interactions. Yet, let me resort to some "easification" here so as to suggest a useful way of approaching these questions. Once your approach is right, you can always explore all kinds of complexities. I would submit that there is a fundamental fact that we have to bear in mind when we study Indian English poetry. Indian English poetry is at once similar to and different from English poetry. That is, it is similar in certain ways and different in certain other ways. Our understanding will be enriched in direct proportion to how acutely we can identify these similarities and differences. Moreover, when we do so, we should bear in mind that what's true for Indian English poetry is also true, in varying degrees, for other colonial and postcolonial literatures. Let's consider briefly the example of American Literature. Now, though America ceased to be a colony of Britain with its famous Declaration of Independence of 1775, the fact was that American literature continued to be influenced by literary trends from Britain for more than a century afterwards; in fact, we might argue that it still continues to have that symbiotic relationship with Europe. What we see in American literature then is reflection of major trends in British and European literature. So, just as you have Puritan literature in Britain, you have Puritan literature in America; just as you have neo-classical literature in Britain, you have neo-classical literature in America; just as you have Romantic literature in Britain, you have Romantic literature in America. I used the phrase "just as" a little while ago. Actually, that is deceptive. The point is that though American puritanism, neo-classicism, or romanticism is similar to that of Britain, it is not identical. The two are actually quite different, but, in a sense, you cannot properly understand what happened in American literature without being aware of the goings-on in British literature. Thus, the Americanness of American literature is seen in the way in which it adapts, adopts, or resists the dominant influences from Europe, not just the manner in which it imitates or reproduces them.

Similarly, in Indian English poetry we find this tendency to reflect the dominant idiom of English or, later, of American, poetry, without totally losing its individuality. Some critics, of course, have gone so far as to say that all of Indian English poetry is totally derivative. An extreme example of this is Rajiv Patke who makes such a case in *Canons and Canon-Making in Indian Poetry in English*. A more reasonable view is found in M. K. Naik's "*Echo and Voice....*". We need not get into all the fine points of these essays here, but we do need to be aware that Indian English poetry was, to a large extent, shaped by forces from outside this culture, but forces which were anterior to the literary and cultural milieu of the language itself, that is, English. It is but natural for Indian English poets to be influenced by British poets and poetry. Some of our poets did not go much beyond imitation, but others did develop a strong, distinctive voice of their own. It is important to see the complexity of this relationship between the Indian English poetry and British poetry. It is not just a relationship of inequality and dominance in which British sensibility shaped its Indian counterpart, but also one of exploration, mutuality, and even resistance. Indeed, there are things in Indian English poetry which cannot be found anywhere else--the best example of this is perhaps Sri Aurobindo's epic *Savitri*, which we shall have occasion to talk about later.

From the foregoing discussion it will be clear that one way to periodize Indian English poetry is to find our equivalents for the major trends and movements in British poetry. This is always a useful exercise, but one which has not yet been done

in as much detail as it needs to. Perhaps, one of you may feel impelled to take it on for your research work. The usual course of British poetry from the early 19th century is as follows: neo-classicism, romanticism, late-romantic or Victorian poetry, and modern poetry. But all these phases are not formed in a full blown manner in Indian English poetry. That is because there was so little of it in volume in the first place. But the other important reason was that Indian English poets were responding not only to literary trends from Britain but political and cultural trends in our own country. That is why I had said earlier that the relationship of poetry and the state is very important.

At this juncture, it might be useful to bring in another angle to this debate on periodization. We will discover that a lot depends on who is asking the questions and attempting the periodization. In other words, what is the politics of the periodizer? The modernists, for instance, have only two periods of Indian English poetry: themselves and those who went before them. These modernists, starting with Ezekiel and going on to nearly all the major poets living today, such as Adil Jussawalla, P. Lal, Shiv K. Kumar, Keki N. Daruwalla, Saleem Peeradina, R. Parthasarathy, Eunice de Souza, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, and so on, make one basic claim: Indian English poetry really begins with the modernists in the 1950s. Poetry that was written before that, from Derozio to Sri Aurobindo was not worth studying. In a sense such poetry was akin to the juvenilia of a poet, interesting only for biographical reasons; similarly, older Indian English poetry was the juvenilia of the genre itself, fit only for historical records and interest. The real poetry of any worth was that of the modernists.

What the modernists achieved, effectively, was to divide all of Indian English poetry into two periods: the pre-modernist or traditionalist and the modernist. They did this by flattening out the similarities between themselves and their predecessors; by emphasizing a certain kind of poetry as representative of modernism; and, more recently, by appropriating the "best" of the poets who came after them into the modernist "camp." The result, then, is two groups of poets in whom all the older poets are "Othered" and all the non-modernist contemporaries, rejected.

I have myself engaged with these views in great detail and depth and do not wish to repeat myself here. I can, of course, point to the relevant articles for you to look at yourself. But here I would suggest that there is a more useful way of periodizing Indian English poetry which does not rely so much on the poetics, but instead on the politics of Indian English poetry. As I mentioned earlier, this periodization depends more on the relationship between the poetry and the processes of state formation. I have elaborated upon this in a long essay called "The State of Poetry." According to that essay, all of Indian English poetry can be divided into three broad phases: proto-nationalist; nationalist; and post-nationalist. The first phase, starting with Derozio and going up to the end of the 19th century corresponds to the period in Indian history in which nationalism was being consolidated. Then, in the nationalist phase, from 1900 to 1950, we have poets like Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, and Sarojini Naidu, who are engaging in the battle against colonialism. Finally, the post-nationalist phase, which begins in the 1950s, with poets like Nissim Ezekiel, goes on not only to question nationalism, but retreats from large, public themes, to individual and private agonies. Of course this phase also corresponds with literary modernism. Post-nationalism itself can be divided into two phases, 1950-1980 and 1980 onwards. In the latter phase, inaugurated by Vikram Seth, we find a new, diasporic consciousness dominating Indian English poetry.

In my anthology *Indian Poetry in English* I proposed a slightly different periodization: 1825-1900: Colonialism; 1900-1950: Nationalism; 1950-1980: Modernism; and 1980- present: Post-modernism. As you can see, there is here a mixture of both poetic and political criteria; but there is also an overlap in dates with the earlier periodization that I'd suggested.

You need not be confused or alarmed by all the arguments and counter-arguments that I might have flung at you or what you might yourself encounter in the secondary readings on this topic. What is more important is for you to be aware of some major trends in Indian English poetry and how these are linked to certain historical periods. As you read more and more Indian English poetry, you will be able to identify quite easily which period a poem might belong to. What is more, you will become more aware of the unfolding dynamics of this genre, especially in relation to the complex web of cultural and political forces, which impinge on it.

In any case, you can take comfort in the knowledge that there is no one acknowledged and accepted way of periodizing Indian English poetry. You can follow the method that most appeals and satisfies you, as long as you are able to defend your choice. What I have offered is just one of the many ways of approaching this subject.

1.6 THE FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

Had I been writing this section a few years ago, I would have been much more optimistic. I would have said that the 1990s are an exciting time for Indian English poetry. I would have pointed out that in 1991-1992 more than fifteen new poets were published in India. The only other year of such intense activity for Indian English poetry was 1976-1977 when more than a dozen poetry books were published by Oxford University Press, Clearing House, and other publishers. I would even have said that the present decade is exciting because there are two generations of living poets in your midst, the modernists and those of us who were born in 1950s or 1960s and after. I would even have urged you to study the work of the younger poets though they were not included in your course just so that you could see the dynamics of this inter-generational poetic dialogue.

But now, I am not so optimistic. As this decade and century draws to a close, Indian English poetry seems to have hit the rock bottom of market gloom. Simply speaking, no one wishes to publish Indian English poetry any more. The earlier publishing boom of Oxford, Penguin, Rupa, HarperCollins, Disha Books, and others seems to have run out of steam. Poetry, it seems, does not sell. It has been all but eclipsed by its more glamorous cousin, fiction. The latter, with huge royalties and huge publicity binges, rules the literary roost.

No doubt, modernist poets have made it into most Indian English courses in Indian Universities, but the future of the genre seems to be threatened by the current crisis. The same old anthologies are prescribed with the same old poems. This has now been going on for more than twenty years. Our own reading list is a little different in that we have included the older poets too, but what about the continued growth of the field? What about newer poets or newer ways of studying older ones? Without such innovations, the study of Indian English poetry might become sterile, if not counter-productive.

Unfortunately, the academy, which sets the standards, is not always the first to respond to a cultural crisis. This energy must come from the reading public at large, in fact, from readers like you. You have to show an interest outside your immediate syllabus, to explore this genre more independently. Eventually, the academy will be forced to respond to the pressures that you exert. I said all this to give you a sense of your own power as makers of Indian English literature, but even if you are more modest in your aims, the course of action that I have suggested will certainly enrich your understanding and make your studies more worthwhile.

1.7 GLOSSARY

Periodization:	division according to a specific period or time
Paramountcy:	superiority
Institutionalize:	To establish properly
Precursor:	forerunner
Utilitarian:	designed to be useful rather than be decorative or luxurious
Entrench:	establish, firmly
Antagonists:	opponents
Ideology:	ideas that form the basis of a political or economic theory
Leverage:	action or power of a lever; power, influence
Mercenaries:	professional soldier hired by a foreign country
Protestant:	member of one of the western churches that are separated from the Roman Catholic Church
Adherent:	one who continues to give one's support
Defunct:	dead, no longer existing or functioning
Iniquitous:	unfair, unjust
Realm:	field of activity or interest
Indenture:	written contract, especially of apprenticeship
Maelstrom:	great whirlpool
Ambiguity:	Uncertainty
Nomenclature:	system of names
Fawning:	showing affection or try to win favour by obsequiousness
Millieu:	environment, surroundings
Obviate:	make necessary
Discernible:	perceive with the mind or senses
Akin:	related, similar
Incipient:	beginning in an early stage

Orientalist:	person who studies the languages, arts etc of Oriental countries (countries east of the Mediterranean)	Background
Pitamaha:	grand father	
Conservatives:	those opposed to great or sudden changes	
Liberals:	open minded, free from prejudice, in favour of progress	
Evangelical:	belief according to the teachings of the Gospel	
Transformative:	changed in appearance or character	
Vernaculars:	language, word or dialect of a country or district	
Civilizational:	concerning civilized or cultured social Development	
Modernity:	relating to the present	
Nativised:	accepted as native or belonging to	
Armada:	naval fleet	
Imperialism:	policy of controlling other nations	
Volatile:	that which easily changes into gas or vapour	
Tangential:	abrupt change of course or direction	
Racism:	discrimination based on the belief that some races are by nature superior	
Master narratives:	great narratives	
Intervention:	coming between	
Espouse:	give one's support to a cause, theory etc	
Providence:	act of God	
Expropriated:	take away one's property or belongings	
Cringe:	move back in fear	
Hegemony:	preponderant influence over others	
Autonomous:	self-governing	
Dharmic:	pertaining to Dharma or righteousness	
Indologists:	Those who study classical Indian texts and cultures	
Devas:	gods	
Asuras:	demons	

	treasure
Faultiness:	imperfect or defective
Ecological:	dealing with the relationships of human groups with their geographical environment
Enlightenment:	An 18 th century European philosophical movement characterized by rationalism, an impetus toward learning
Hybridity:	having the nature of a hybrid i.e. anything of mixed origin
Sovereignty:	the state or quality of being supreme and independent
Modernism:	a movement, which seeks to find new forms of expression and rejects traditional or accepted ideas

1.8 QUESTIONS

Please attempt all the following questions. These will help you to understand the Unit in a much better way and face the exam with full confidence.

1. What is your understanding of the origin of Indian English Poetry?
2. What is your opinion regarding my view that Indian English poets had to have "the English language sufficiently Indianized" and "Indians had to be sufficiently Anglicized to use the English language"?
3. What is the famous Minute of Macaulay and what is its significance in the literary history of India?
4. What is your understanding of the history of the colonization of India?
5. How did the Portuguese and British invasion affect India in its formative years?
6. What was the contribution of Gandhi, Rammohun Roy and Tagore to the development of India's culture and nationalism?
7. What was the economic, social, religious and cultural scene in India during British Imperialism?
8. Did these social and cultural differences affect the evolution and scope of Indian English Poetry? Does Indian English Literature in general suffer from an identity problem? Give reasons with proper examples for your answer.
9. How do you periodize Indian English Poetry?
10. Where in your opinion lies the future of Indian English Poetry?

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UNIT 2 HENRY DEROZIO AND TORU DUTT

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Henry Derozio--A Brief Life Sketch
- 2.2 An Overview of Derozio's Poetry
 - 2.2.1 "The Harp of India"
 - 2.2.2 "My country! in thy day of glory past"
- 2.3 Toru Dutt--A Brief Life Sketch
- 2.4 An Overview of Toru Dutt's Poetry
 - 2.4.1 "Sita"
 - 2.4.2 "The Lotus"
 - 2.4.3 "Our Casuarina Tree"
- 2.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.6 Glossary
- 2.7 Questions
- 2.8 Suggested Reading

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit we shall look at two poets, Henry Derozio and Toru Dutt. Both these are important poets of the first phase of Indian English poetry, that is why studying them together is convenient. We shall begin with a brief life sketch of Derozio, followed by an overview of his poetry. We shall then look more closely at two poems, "The Harp of India" and "My Country! In Thy Day of Glory Past". With Toru Dutt too, we'll follow basically the same pattern, beginning with a life-sketch and an overview of her literary career, followed by a more detailed discussion of the three prescribed poems, "Sita," the "The Lotus" and "Our Casuarina Tree."

2.1 HENRY DEROZIO--A BRIEF LIFE SKETCH

We have already referred to Henry Louis Vivian Derozio earlier, in Unit 1, especially to his Portuguese connection. Derozio (1809-1831), our first Indian English poet, is, paradoxically, remembered today as a "Forgotten Anglo-Indian Poet" (which is the subtitle of the only available collection of his works, *Poems of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio* published by Oxford University Press). Derozio's brief, but brilliant, career is a fascinating subject of study. He achieved great renown during his short stint as a teacher at Hindu College. Hardly twenty himself, he was remarkably influential, bringing several new, largely European ideas, to his upper caste Hindu pupils. Considered too dangerous by his opponents, many of whom were the Managers of the College, he was forced to resign his post. Clearly, the Hindu orthodoxy was alarmed that rationalism and free-thinking might upset their young wards and lead them to question several decadent Hindu traditions. A conspiracy was thus hatched to effect his removal. Among other things, he was accused of inciting his students to atheism, disobedience, and incest. No charges were formally leveled against him, nor was he given an opportunity to defend himself. His correspondence with H.H. Wilson on the subject of his removal is both moving and revealing. It shows a colonial culture in the making as the real impact of British rule is beginning to be felt.

Racially, Derozio was an Anglo-Indian, born of an Indo-Portuguese father and English mother. He received an English education at David Drummond's Academy

until the age of fourteen. Afterwards, he worked for two years as an accountant in a mercantile firm, before he was sent by his father to his uncle's house in Bhagalpur. This uncle, who had married his mother's sister, worked as a manager in an indigo plantation. There, Derozio gathered the experiences which went into the *Faqueer of Jungheera* (1828), his long narrative poem about the rescue of a would-be Sati, among other things. At the age of sixteen, Derozio was already contributing to the *India Gazette*. At the age of eighteen, in 1827, his first collection, *Poems*, was published. This made him famous in the small literary circle of Calcutta. He began to work as the Assistant Editor of the *India Gazette*, also contributing regularly to *The Bengal Annual*, the *Calcutta Magazine*, the *Kaleidoscope*, and the *Indian Magazine*. A few months later, at the age of twenty, he started his own paper, the *Calcutta Gazette*, of which he was both the editor and chief contributor.

That is when the offer of the Assistant Mastership at the Hindu College came up. Founded in 1817, this was, in a sense, the first modern institution of higher learning in India. It was later re-christened the Presidency College, and integrated into the Calcutta University in 1857. While teaching at the Hindu College, Derozio founded the Academic Association, which was probably India's first intellectual club, a forum in which ideas and issues could be discussed freely. Frequented by the educated upper crust of Indian society, it was the predecessor of many such associations to come, including the Indian National Congress. Derozio's growing influence made him controversial. No wonder, his removal from Hindu College was discussed prominently in every major newspaper of the time.

After leaving Hindu College, Derozio reverted to journalism. He founded *The East Indian*, the first newspaper devoted to the cause of the Anglo-Indian community. Derozio was throughout his career a champion of liberal causes. He was also against racial and caste separations and argued that Anglo-Indians should mix freely with Indians. Derozio died soon after, on 26 December 1831. He was hardly twenty-two. His will, with an inventory of his possessions, shows that he had established himself in Calcutta as a person of considerable means. He not only owned a carriage and four horses, but a printing press, and a considerable library.

2.2 AN OVERVIEW OF DEROZIO'S POETRY

As mentioned earlier, Derozio published two volumes of verse: *Poems* (1827) and *The Fakeer of Jungheera: A Metrical Tale and Other Poems* (1828). Most of these poems today appear either juvenile or half-finished. There are no doubt good lines, even stanzas, here and there, but there is scant evidence of sustained poetic excellence. Of course, we should not be too harsh or hasty in judging Derozio; after all, he was barely twenty-one when he died. Had he lived even for another eight or nine years as did Keats, perhaps we might have had many more poems of higher quality and maturity. At present, however, most of Derozio's longer poems are too uneven and inconsistent really to impress. The *Fakeer of Jungheera* is a long poem about Nuleeni, a high-caste Hindu widow, who is about to be burnt on the funeral pyre of her husband. A robber-chieftan rescues her from becoming a forced sati. The story is rather romantic and narrated in rhyming iambic tetrameter. But, to be honest, I cannot say that I was moved by it. It is not easy to get hold of this poem nowadays, so instead of saying that we can afford to ignore it, I would say the opposite: even to reject it, we shall have to read it again and again.

It is in his shorter poems that Derozio's forte as a poet lies. Many of these are sonnets with somewhat unconventional rhyme schemes. We ourselves are going to look at two of these sonnets. M. K. Naik commenting on Derozio's verse says that it bears a strong impress of British romantic poetry, especially that of Byron. In any case, several features of romanticism are easily evident in his poetry. This is not the place

to discuss romanticism but, briefly, it refers to a wide-ranging movement in the arts which may be considered to have flourished from the 1789 (the outbreak of the French Revolution) to approximately the 1830s. Romanticism, if we were to consider William Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (1800) as a sort of manifesto, emphasized common language and materials taken from common life as fit for poetry; it also emphasized emotion and authentic feeling over artificiality of thought and diction; it looked to nature for inspiration and used organic as opposed to mechanical models of poetic structure; it was strongly autobiographical and explored the whole range of subjective experience which was hitherto excluded from poetry; it was idealistic, expressive, and, at times, even prophetic. If you have occasion to read more of Derozio's poems see if you can find some of these features in his work.

What is perhaps more interesting for our purposes is that Derozio is the first Indian nationalist poet of any language. No contemporary Indian poet, to the best of my knowledge, has written a single poem about India as a nation in the modern sense of the term. Bengali poets of his time, for example, were writing in the tradition of Shakta and Vaishnava bhakti about the relationship between the human and the Divine. Madhusudan Dutt, Bengal's first modern poet, follows Derozio by a quarter of a century, and Madhusudan, too, is not known for any nationalist poems. Elsewhere in India, the poetry written took no cognizance of the notion of the nation. All these factors make Derozio rather special and invite a careful study of his life and works.

2.2.1 *The Harp of India and My Country! In Thy Day of Glory Past*

For reasons of convenience, I propose to take up these poems together, rather than separately.

The two poems of Derozio, both of them sonnets, eminently qualify to be considered nationalist. An interesting aside on the titles of the poems--"The Harp of India" and "To India--My Native Land": from a comparison with the first edition in the British Library, I discovered that the titles were given by the editor, F. D. Bradley-Birt; in the original, the sonnets are untitled. The harp itself and the associated images of the wreath of Fame and the minstrel's grave are derived from the traditions of European poetry. Yet, the subject of the poem is clearly India. The octave describes the sorry condition of the harp, which lies unstrung on a lonely, withered bough, bound in the fatal chain of silence. At the turn from the octave to the sestet, the poet invokes the musicians of the past whose worthier hands once played many sweet melodies on the harp. At the end of the poem, the speaker wonders if those notes can be revived once again; if they can be, he wishes to be the one to do so: "but if thy notes divine/ May be by mortal wakened once again,/ Harp of my country, let me strike the strain!" (1).

The "harp" in the first poem is obviously a symbol, but of what? The poet himself calls it "Harp of my country" in the last line. Clearly, the reference is not just to a poetic tradition, but to the enterprise of an entire civilization. Derozio's poem is suffused with the sense of lost glory and the consciousness of debilitating cultural decline. The withered bough, the unstrung harp, the ruined monument, the cold hands of the dead poets--all these images suggest the sorry condition of the country at present. Yet, the poet is not entirely without hope. If the divine notes of the harp can be revived once again, he wishes to strike the first note. The poem, then, ends with the hope of renewal, but more importantly, on the personal note of the poet's sense of his own role in that revival. Derozio is aware of his being a front runner in this process.

These themes of the fact of decline, the possibilities of renewal, and the poet's own role in it recur in the other sonnet, "To India-My Native Land" too. Here, the ideology of nationalism is quite direct and unambiguous: "My country! in thy day of glory past/ A beauteous halo circled round thy brow,/ And worshipped as a deity thou

wast./ Where is that glory, where that reverence now?" (2). Derozio's approach to his subject clearly shows the influence of the Orientalist literature which was being published at this time. The work of William Jones, H. H. Wilson, Thomas Munro and others had established that ancient India had a great civilization. Derozio, however, uses this idea of past glory only to stress the present decay: "Thy eagle pinion is chained down at last,/ And grovelling in the lowly dust art thou" (2). Such images underscore the loss of freedom and dignity, both being Enlightenment values, which had come to India in their present garb through the Western impact.

At the turn from the octave to the sestet, Derozio foregrounds himself and the possibilities of his own role as a poet. He says that because he cannot sing of anything but the country's misery at present, he would like to "dive into the depths of time,/ And bring from out the ages that have rolled/ A few fragments of those wrecks sublime,/ Which human eye may never more behold" (2). For this service, he expects nothing from his "fallen country" except a "kind wish" (2). Derozio, of course, died young, so it is impossible to judge if he, too, would have gone the way of the Orientalists, retrieving a few fragments of those "wrecks sublime" from the past. At any rate, we know that he did not live to fulfil the promise that he makes in this poem. More poignantly, the "kind wish" that he expects from his countrymen has been given him only partially. We shall repay our debt to this pioneer by reading and appreciating his work better.

Coming back to the poems, in both of them, three assumptions about India are clearly evident: first, that India was a great civilization; secondly, that she is now fallen; and, finally, that her greatness may be revived. Also common to both poems is the role of the poet in this process of renewal. Both poems, also, share a forward-looking, inspirational aspect, which was to be so common to the nationalist literature of the later years. Of course, the tone of these poems is not buoyant and optimistic, but rather pathetic and gloomy; the sense of defeat hangs heavily over them. The fuller possibilities of the re-emergence of the Indian nation were not available to the poet, yet there is a brave attempt to face the future with hope. What is most remarkable about these poems is not so much their enunciation of the pattern of past glory, present decline, and future revival of India, but their very formulation of the idea of India as a unified, coherent entity with a past, present, and future. It is this vision that makes them aligned to the agenda of nationalism, which brought such an imagined community into existence. In my attempts to reclaim Derozio from a nationalist perspective, I am aware that I may be accused of suppressing several other, perhaps equally important aspects of his life and career. Yet, what is so interesting is that he himself wished to be thus reclaimed and integrated; this essay, then, at least partially, answers request for a kind word as a token reward from his fallen country for all his efforts on its behalf.

Though my concern here is not with the text of Derozio's life but of his poems, the life itself, as we have seen, is a very interesting and illustrative one. The central question is what made Derozio throw his lot with the Indians rather than with the English? We know that later, the Anglo-Indian community, by and large, adopted a supportive, if subservient role, in the Raj. They maintained very clearly their distance from the natives. Derozio, then, could have done the same. He was racially more European than Indian; all his education and training were, moreover, on modern English lines. He achieved fame as an advocate of liberal European values and as a writer in English. Most of the other members of his family were totally Europeanised. Claude, a younger brother, was sent to Scotland to study. The family lived in a spacious bungalow on Lower Circular Road, a part of the European quarter. After the death of his mother, his father again married an Englishwoman, who was called Anna Maria Rivers. Despite a predominance of English and European influences, Derozio's concerns both as a teacher and a writer were closer to Indians. How can this be explained?

I would argue that Derozio was a genuine *Indian* liberal, living during a time when the social and intellectual conditions were still fluid. This was a period of transition, when the social and cultural interactions between the English and the natives were still open and full of possibilities. The oppressive and racially exclusive colonial regime which followed later was not yet instituted. British paramountcy, itself, was still being established. But, in addition to possibilities of the period, what is more important to recognize is that Derozio was not only an independent and fearless individual, but somebody who truly believed in liberal values. Indian liberalism was still in its formative stage, but Derozio was clearly one of its proponents. There was scarcely a progressive cause of his times which he did not support or espouse. It was out of such a liberalism that the whole struggle for Independence began. The birth of Indian nationalism, too, can be traced to this same source. When European ideas penetrated the educated native classes, an elite was born which became the vanguard in the formation of this new national consciousness. Later, certain distinct strands and positions in this native elite would emerge, but right now it was in its earliest stages of inception. Those who shaped India were all of them inheritors of dual traditions, the Indian and the European. They all shared a common intellectual and ideological outlook. And Derozio, one of the architects of Young Bengal, was amongst the first of them.

The complexity of Derozio's own racial, social, intellectual, and cultural position, combined with the uncertainty of the times in which he lived, makes it difficult to define his place easily. Because the polarity between the colonizers and the colonized was itself not so sharply etched during his times, it would be unfair to attempt to fix him in that grid. What is clear is that Derozio was not a part of the traditional India of Sanskrit and Persian, nor was he a part of the emergent vernacular India of Bengali or Hindi. Yet, it is also clear that he was not a part of British India, though he was related to it because of the language he wrote in and because his racial status debarred him from higher Government jobs. These eliminations left Derozio in a rather precarious intermediate and inchoate zone, which we may term Indian English India. Indian English India is neither British India nor is it native India, but it is something in-between, a hybrid, a liminal territory, whose identity is still being contested and debated. From this somewhat insecure location, Derozio nonetheless managed to write India's first nationalist poems, and thereby contribution to the making of the Indian nation.

2.3 TORU DUTT--A BRIEF LIFE SKETCH

Toru Dutt, like Derozio, also died young; moreover, she died of that disease, consumption or tuberculosis, which claimed so many precocious and talented artists and poets in the 19th century. Born in 1856 in a well-known Westernised family in Calcutta, Toru had the advantages of good education and happy family environment. Both these factors were to play a crucial role in her artistic development. Govin Chunder Dutt, her father, was a well-to-do Bengali gentleman, given to literary pursuits. Some of his poems were included in an extraordinary family anthology of Indian English poems called *The Dutt Family Album* (1870). This was a collection of 187 poems by three Dutt brothers, Govin Chunder, Hur Chunder and Greece (or Girish) Chunder, a cousin of theirs, Oomesh.

In 1862, when Toru was six, the entire family embraced Christianity. This did lead to a temporary estrangement between Toru's parents, the mother finding it difficult to leave her ancestral religion, but later going on to become an ardent Christian herself. This act of conversion, though it was not necessarily extremely wrenching or traumatic in the case of the Dutt, is of great importance when we try to understand the cultural history of modern India. Many upper-caste Hindus converted to Christianity during this period of reform and revival. Their motivations, however

different, had a common ground: there were many ills plaguing Hindu society. Some of these included caste oppression, religious superstition, inhuman treatment of women, especially widows, child marriage, female infanticide, sati, and so on. But the problems of Hinduism were not the only reason for these conversions. There was also the added allure of assuming the religion and culture of the colonizer. This was a very conscious motive in the famous case of Michael Madhusudan Dutt, reputed to be Bengal's, and indeed India's first modern poet. But in many other cases, matters of faith seemed to be more important. And yet, the very fact of colonialism, the unequal relations between the rulers and the ruled, the declared agenda of the missionaries to proselytize, and the overall attack on Indian society at the hands of both modernists and missionaries make the issue of conversion more complex. I have brought this topic up because the late 19th century was known for several conversion narratives including Baba Padmanji's Marathi novel *Yamuna Paryatan* (1857), one of the earliest examples of the genre in India, two novels by Krupabai Sattianathan, *Kamla* and *Saguna*, and two autobiographical narratives by Ramabai Tilak and Ramabai Ranade. Conversion became an act of extreme rebellion against a decadent and immoral system. It was a part of the auto-critique of Hinduism, as it groped to reshape itself anew under a new challenge. At the same time, the convert was also in a unique position to point out the flaws of the newly adopted religion. Luckily, in Toru's case, the conversion to Christianity was neither violent nor did it result in an automatic rejection of Hindu culture. Indeed, Toru may be credited with being the first Indian English poet extensively to use Indian myths. Occasionally, her Christianity does surface in her renderings, but by and large, it is as a sympathetic insider to Indian culture that she writes.



Toru Dutt (1856-1877)

In 1869, the Dutt family left for Europe, intending never to return to India. Toru and her elder sister Aru were sent to a French school at Nice. They had already lost their

brother Abju in 1865; Abju had been only 14. The three siblings feature in the poem "Sita" that you will study. The family moved to London in 1870. Soon afterwards, the *Dutt Family Album* was published. The next year, the Dutt family moved to Cambridge, where the girls attended lectures. Toru befriended Mary Martin, who became the recipient of her letters later. These letters are an invaluable record of the growth of the artist's mind. In 1873 the family finally returned to India against their original intention. They divided their time between their Calcutta residence on Maniktolla Street and their "country" house at Baugmaree. A few months after their return, Aru died in 1874. Toru, all alone, turned her attention to her literary ambitions. In 1875 she published *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields*, largely a rendering of French verse into English. The book, well received in India, found its way to London. There Edmund Gosse and Arthur Symonds both admired it. The latter wrote a Foreword to an English edition published by Kegan Paul. By now Toru had begun to learn Sanskrit. Within a year, she was so proficient in it as to begin composing English poems based on the stories she had read. These were collected posthumously as *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (1882), with an Introduction by Edmund Gosse. Toru died in 1877 but not before she had finished a French novel, *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers* (1879). She also left an unfinished novel in English called *Bianca, or the Young Spanish Maiden*. This manuscript was later published in the *Bengal Magazine* in 1878. As you can see, though Toru lived for less than twenty-two years, she had a remarkably productive and creative life. Had she lived longer, there is no telling what heights of literary achievement she would have scaled.

2.4 OVERVIEW OF TORU DUTT'S WORK

The rise of nationalism in India is, doubtless, a complex phenomenon. A very important dimension to it is that of politics of cultural identity. It is in that politics that poets like Toru Dutt (1856-1877) and Romesh Chandra Dutt (1848-1909), India's first ICS officer and Toru's cousin, made an important contribution. Though neither wrote poems to or about contemporary India as Derozio did, they did attempt to validate present by supplying its past. Toru's *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* is an example of translation of ancient myths into the late 19th century Indian English. Again, a complex dynamics of self-formation is evident in these poems. Toru's entire family converted to Christianity, thus moving out of their traditional Bengali filiations to move closer culturally to English.

Again, as with Derozio, there is a bit of a cultural mismatch in her work as Toru tried to bring these Indian themes into English verse. Certainly, the originals were neither ballads nor legends, but more properly *Itihasa*, *purana*, and *smriti*. Also, Toru's own Christian beliefs are introduced into the text once or twice. She also apologizes to her English readers for the contents of some of the poems, attempting to justify or criticize their contents by her own modern standards. A complex relationship with traditional India, thus, emerges in these poems. They are quite different, on the one hand, from the work of Orientalist translators; yet, they are not "Indian" in the way vernacular renderings of our classical texts are wont to be. Again, I would say that they are Indian English--neither British nor native. The politics of these poems is proto-nationalist in that they help construct a modern Indian identity in terms of a continuity with its past. The past is revived, repackaged, even distorted, but all to serve the interest of the present. The interest of the present is, of course, to forge a new Indian identity which can withstand and resist colonial aggression.

2.4.1 *Sita*

The three happy children in the darkened room are obviously Abju, Toru, and Aru. So, the very first line of the poem clarifies that the poem is not so much about Sita

directly as about three children listening to the story of Sita. What is the difference between these two situations? Well, in the first case, the attention would be exclusively on the subject of the poem, Sita, but in the other case it is, willy-nilly, on the act of narration, on telling and listening. It is as if the three children were seeing a movie about Sita. There is, of course, no movie, but the mother's story-telling is so powerful that the whole scene inside the forest comes alive and is projected in the mind's eye.

So the children sit in the darkened room, gazing with wide-open eyes at the picture that unfolds. There is a dense forest and at its very centre, in a secluded spot, is the hermitage where Sita has found her refuge. All of you know that Sita was banished by Rama on suspicion of impurity. This is after her *agni pariksha* or trial by fire in which she emerges victorious and virtuous. But Rama banishes her anyway. Sita finds shelter at the ashram of the great sage Valmiki. There her two sons, Luv and Kush, are born. Valmiki, who composed the Ramayan, tells the saga of Rama to Luv and Kush, who eventually recite it to Rama himself. We may note that this story of Sita's banishment figures in the *Uttararamacharitra*, which is considered an interpolation. That is, it is not a part of the original Ramayana of Valmiki. In this text, Sita and Rama live happily after Rama's return from Lanka.

Anyway, coming back to the poem, we will notice that it contains a very rich and textured description of the forest clearing. It is indeed a magical world in which all of nature is one glorious harmony. There are gigantic flowers here, a lucid lake, gliding swans, springing peacocks, and so on. A truly enchanted world. The poet anchorite is, of course, Valmiki, the *adi-kavi* or the first poet of India. The fair lady is Sita, the sorrowful Sita, weeping in her solitude. But does she weep alone? No, for, as the poet tells us, three pairs of eyes weep with her. Whose are these three pairs of weeping eyes? Abju's, Toru's, and Aru's--of course. At the end of the story, the vision is hushed away. The poem ends with a question: when will those children gather once again at their mother's side? The question is rhetorical because by the time of its writing, the two siblings of Toru, as is the mother in the poem, are already dead.

This is a poem about memory and the power of poetry or the imagination to heal sorrow. In that sense, it is a profound reenactment of what Valmiki himself does in the Ramayana. You may recall that it was the sorrow of the bereaved *krauncha* bird, mourning the loss of his mate, that impelled Valmiki to compose his first verse; it was, literally, *shoka* or grief being transmuted to *shloka* or verse. This is exactly what this poem does. Toru conjures up the evocative story of Sita to mourn her own loss of a happy childhood, but in so doing she also overcomes it by transforming it into poetry. The poem, then, is self-reflexive and precocious in a very postmodern way in that its subject is actually the power of narration itself.

2.4.2 The Lotus

"The Lotus" is a perfectly crafted poem with profound cultural implications. This may seem like a very grand claim to make at the very outset of our discussion, but let me tell you that even if you don't agree with the latter part of my statement, the first part of it has the approval of the greatest authorities on Indian English literature such as C. D. Narasimhiah. "The Lotus," then, has been admired for its fine craftsmanship, its sensitive handling of language and sound, its balance of ideas, its felicitous use of the sonnet form, and so on. So let's take a moment to appreciate some of these features. The sonnet, as you know, is a fourteen line poem with a certain rhyme scheme. I would like you to identify the rhyme scheme of this poem. You can do this quite easily by marking the rhyming lines by letters of the alphabet. You will see that the rhyme scheme of the poem is abbaabbacdcdee. This makes the poem a variation of the Petrarchan sonnet. In English poetry, Wyatt, Milton, Wordsworth, and other famous poets used this form. You can compare this sonnet with Derozio's two poems to see the differences and similarities in their form and

technique. The sonnet, as I've indicated earlier, usually contains a debate. The issue here is which flower is lovelier, the lily or the rose? The octave sets forth the problem which is then resolved in the sextet. How is the matter resolved? Flora, the goddess of flowers, offers the solution to Psyche, the soul--a lotus, which combines the qualities of both the rose and the lily, both passion and purity.

This poem, as I said earlier, is really an important cultural statement in my opinion. It is as if the long tradition of Western civilization is unable to reconcile and balance the two tendencies that have contended for supremacy within it. You may call these the Dionysian and the Apollonian, the ecstatic, the irrational, the passionate on the one hand, and the rational, the orderly, the intellectual on the other. Freud called these the id and the superego but you can think of them as emotion vs. intellect, right brain vs. left brain, romanticism vs. classicism, imagination and reason, and so on. In the endless strife between these two no clear or satisfactory outcome seems to emerge. The theme of this strife surfaces in practically all major texts in the Western canon. What Toru's great little poem suggests is that India has found the answer. The lotus, the most venerated flower in Eastern civilizations, is a symbol of so many things, just as the rose and the lily are in Western civilization. But the lotus for us represents the unfolding of higher consciousness, the gnostic state in which the dualities and contradictions of the mind are resolved.

You may consider this a far-fetched, even eccentrically culturalist interpretation of this seemingly simple poem, but then I think I have given my reasons for reading this poem in such a manner. You are welcome to your own interpretation, provided you can back it up with sufficient textual and extra-textual evidence.

2.4.3 *Our Casuarina Tree*

This, in my opinion, is clearly the most impressive of Toru Dutt's poems. It is like a romantic ode, a long lyrical poem, serious, meditative, and intense, with a well-crafted stanzaic structure, and lofty style. In this case, there are five stanzas of eleven lines each. Try to compare these with the other odes that you may have read by poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and so on. I would urge you to read the text carefully, mark the rhyme scheme, the metrical patterns, the difficult words and allusions, and so on. Most of these you will be able to understand and explicate with the use of a good dictionary. There is one literary allusion, which needs some extra glossing. The deathless trees in Borrowdale in the last stanza refer to Wordsworth's "Micahel." Try to read that poem and relate it to this one. Try to locate the picture of a Casuarina tree so that you know what it looks like. Make a list of all the images used to describe the tree. Also note all the birds and animals that live in its sanctuary.

What is this poem about? Ostensibly, it is about a tree, the Casuarina tree, in the poet's Baughmaree house. But, as the poem develops, we see that it is about much more than just a tree. You will notice that the tree expands in both time and space, acquiring almost supernatural dimensions. It begins to represent a whole cosmos becoming, in a sense, the tree of life itself. It is seen as sheltering a whole ecosystem. But most important, it comes to symbolise some very special memories to the poet (stanza three). These memories are the very stuff of her being. It is these images that the poet wishes to preserve. Memory, which seems fickle and fleeting, is sought to be strengthened through its association with a more substantial and long-lasting object such as the tree. The tree, then, represents the very essence of the poet's self, an anchor to her subjectivity, something which stabilizes her notion of who she is when she is far away. The poet wants the tree to be eternal because she wants her own experiences to be saved from the ravages of time.

Ultimately, what, according to the poet saves the things we hold dear from "oblivion's curse"? It is love, the greatest of all forces. This love of the poet empowers her imagination to bestow the tree with an eternal significance. Notice that in Toru's

poem, the carrier of the longings for immortality is a supremely romantic icon of the tree, not a man-made object like a grecian urn.

K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar admired this poem too: "In the organization of the poem as a whole and in the finish of the individual stanzas, in the mastery of phrase and rhythm, in its music of sound and ideas, *Our Casuarina Tree* is a superb piece of writing...." (*Indian Writing in English* 73). I agree with this assessment. I myself have called it a poem about "memory, imagination, and transcendence," in which the tree becomes "a symbol not only of the poet's joyous childhood but also, through an extension in time and space, of the poet's longing for permanence and eternity" (*Indian Poetry in English* 11).

2.5 LET US SUM UP

I have been arguing in this unit that Derozio and his poetry occupy a middle ground between British imperialism and native resistance. Overall, it seems to me that he is more aligned to the latter than to the former. But it should not be surprising if he displays patterns of both collusion and collision with the dominant colonialist culture of his times. This culture, of course, was still in the making as was a well-articulated resistance to it. During this intermediate phase, this cusp of history, Derozio appears to play his brief, but crucial role. A full-blown nationalism is, no doubt, yet to emerge, but its first faint stirrings are to be seen. As usual, the poet, the creative artist, precedes the politician, prophesying the shape of things to come. More than sixty years prior to the formation of the Indian National Congress, the notion of the Indian nation has begun to take root in the fertile soil of the delta of the Ganges in Calcutta.

As you have seen, I have looked at Derozio's poetry from a specific, rather politico-cultural perspective. You may or may not find such an approach interesting. Personally, I believe that literary studies is not just about analysing and enjoying individual works of art so that we treat them as autonomous objects, totally cut-off from their larger social contexts. However, you are free to explore these and the other poems included from other, more conventionally "literary" approaches as well.

Coming back to Toru Dutt, she exemplifies in the context of the rise of Indian nationalism a search for cultural identity. At the same time her own Christian beliefs make her aware of a complex relationship with traditional India. Her very Indian themes forge a new Indian identity which can withstand and resist colonial aggression. Her poems *Sita*, *The Lotus*, *Our Casuarina Tree* are poems of memory, cultural affiliation and the power of imagination to heal sorrow. Her poetry is superbly crafted in the way she organises individual stanzas, phrases, rhythm and music - all juxtaposing with her ideas. Both Derozio and Toru Dutt, because of the racial status in Derozio's case and Christian beliefs in Toru Dutt's, have not found a firm footing in the vortex of Indian English Literature, but their strong nationalist strains have kept the debate of their place alive and hence their contribution in the making of the Indian nation.

2.6 GLOSSARY

Paradox:	statement that seems self contradictory, but contains a truth.
Stint:	limitation of effort or allotted amount of work.

Atheism:	not to believe in the existence of God or Gods
Mercantile:	trading of trade or merchants
Juvenile:	youthful, childish
Pyre:	pile of wood etc for burning a dead body as part of a funeral rite
Forte:	person's strong point
Cognizance:	to be aware, to have knowledge
Deity:	God, Goddess
Pinion:	bird's wing
Garb:	clothing
Coherent:	connected logically
Vanguard:	foremost part of an advancing army
Inception:	beginning
Grid:	network of lines
Precarious:	unsafe, not secure
Inchoate:	just begun, undeveloped
Hybrid:	offspring of two different species or varieties, things made by combination of different elements
Cusp:	pointed part where curves meet
Ardent:	full of ardour, enthusiastic
Allure:	entice, attract
Proselytize:	Gentile conversion to Jewish faith
Posthumously:	published or awarded after a person's death
Precocious:	having developed abilities earlier than is usual
Octave:	the space between two musical notes which are eight musical notes apart.
Validate:	to make something officially acceptable or approved after checking it first.
Filiations:	the duties of a son or daughter
Itihasa:	history
Purana:	medieval Indian narrative, encyclopaedic, usually devoted to a major deity

Smriti:	sacred texts continuing the memory of a whole people such as the <i>Ramayana</i> , the <i>Mahabhart</i> and the <i>Purans</i>
Proto-nationalist:	that which is precursor to nationalism, incipient national consciousness
Transmuted:	to change from one form unto another
Felicitous:	aptly chosen or appropriate
Gnostic:	of or having knowledge
Eccentric:	out of the ordinary, or unconventional
Ostensibly:	clearly evident
Icon:	an image, figure, representation
Grecian Urn:	Greek vase to hold the ashes of the cremated

2.7 QUESTIONS

1. How did Derozio's personal life and background affect his literary or creative development?
2. What was the social and cultural situation in India during Derozio's time?
3. What kind of a poet was Derozio? Which aspect of his poetry did you find interesting?
4. What is the poet trying to convey in *The Harp of India*, and *My Country in Thy Days of Glory Past*? Please restrict the answer to your own interpretation and understanding of the poems.
5. Why does the poet feel that silence has bound the *Harp of India* with her fatal chain?
6. How far 'fallen' is India in Derozio's poems? What solutions does he propose to this fall of India?
7. Write a short essay on your conception of the glorious past of India and her present situation.
8. Why does the poet wish to 'dive into the depths of time'?
9. The poet at the end of the poem *My Country in Thy Glorious Past* asks for a 'kind wish'. What should be that 'kind wish', in your opinion?
10. What were the main events in Toru Dutt's life that inspired her to express herself through poetry?
11. How did conversion affect the social set up of late 19th century India?
12. What is your estimate of Toru Dutt's poetry, set at the crucial moment of the emergence of Modern India?

13. Describe the picturesque narration in *Sita*. How powerful is this poem? Why are the three young heads bowed in sorrow?
14. What is Toru Dutt trying to convey in *Lotus*? What does it say about culture and civilization?
15. Describe the allusions to the various mythical characters in the poem *Lotus*, and what in your opinion do these allusions stand for?
16. Give your interpretation of the *Casuarina Tree*. How far symbolic is the poem to Toru Dutt's childhood and memories?
17. What is unique about the *Casuarina Tree* that makes it different from other trees and dear to the poet's soul?
18. Annotate the following:
 - i. Silence hath bound thee with her fatal chain;
Neglected, mute, and desolate art thou,
Like ruined monument on desert plane:
O! many a hand more worthy far than mine
Once thy harmonious chords to sweetness gave
 - ii. Thy eagle pinion is chained down at last,
And grovelling in the lowly dust art thou:
Thy minstrel hath no wreath to weave for thee
Save the sad story of thy misery!
Well-let me dive into the depths of time
 - iii. Which human eye may never more behold;
And let the guerdon of my labour be
My fallen country! One-kind wish from thee!
19. Annotate the following:
 - i. There, blue smoke from strange altars rises light,
There dwells in peace the poet-anchorite.
But who is this fair lady? Not in vain
She weeps,-for lo! at every tear she sheds
Tears from three pairs of young eyes fall amain
 - ii. Yet shall they dream of it until the day!
When shall those children by their mother's side
Gather, ah me! As erst at eventide?
 - iii. "But of what colour?"-"Rose-red", love first chose,
Then prayed,-"No, lily-white,-or,both provide";
And Flora gave the lotus, "rose red"dyed,
And "lily-white", queenliest flower that blows.
 - iv. What is that dirge like murmur that I hear
Like the sea breaking on a shingle-beach?
It is the tree's lament, an eerie speech,
That haply to the unknown land may reach
 - v. With deathless trees-like those in Borrowdale,
Under whose awful branches lingered pale
"Fear, trembling Hope and Death, the Skeleton,
And Time the shadow";and though weak the verse
That would thy beauty fain, oh fain rehearse,
May love defend thee from Oblivion's curse.

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UNIT 3 SRI AUROBINDO AND SAROJINI NAIDU

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 A Brief Life-Sketch of Sri Aurobindo
- 3.2 An Introduction to Sri Aurobindo's Works
- 3.3 Issues in Sri Aurobindo's poetry
 - 3.3.1 "A Tree"
 - 3.3.2 "Life and Death"
 - 3.3.3 "Bride of Fire"
 - 3.3.4 "The Golden Light"
- 3.4 A Brief Life-Sketch of Sarojini Naidu
- 3.5 An Overview of Sarojini Naidu's Poetry
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3.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit is on two important figures in our recent history, Sri Aurobindo and Sarojini Naidu. Though we are studying them as poets, they were both much more than that, as I shall show in the brief life sketches that are a part of this Unit. Both were, really speaking, leaders of modern India. Here we will try to appreciate their overall contribution to the country and to our literature before focusing on individual poems. When considering a multi-faceted genius like Sri Aurobindo, it is useful to have an introduction to his works and to the central issues in his poetry. After that, we will read four poems, *A Tree*, *Life and Death*, *Bride of Fire*, and *The Golden Light*. With Sarojini Naidu too, we will start with a brief life-sketch, followed by an overview of her poetry, before going on to discuss "Indian Dancers," "Love and Death," and "The Old Woman." We will of course have a brief summing up at the end and, as usual, the Glossary, Questions, and Suggested Reading.

3.1 A BRIEF LIFE-SKETCH OF SRI AUROBINDO



Sri Aurobindo (Aurobindo Ghosh) (1872-1950)

Sri Aurobindo ranks among the greatest personalities of modern India. He was a multi-faceted genius. As a political revolutionary, social reformer, historian, educationist, philosopher, yogi, and above all, man of letters, his range is truly staggering. He was a journalist, editor, literary critic, linguist, translator, essayist, short-story writer, dramatist, and, more than all of these, *mahakavi*, or great poet. His was an extraordinarily supple intellect, a breadth of mind so extensive that there is scarcely an important field of human endeavor which escaped his notice. His collected works, numbering thirty quartos, are ample testimony of his stupendous achievement. He was truly a Renaissance Man, not only in the traditional sense of the term, but also befitting its application to the Indian context—a man who stands with the likes of Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore.

Sri Aurobindo's life may be conveniently divided into four periods based on the major location of residence: namely, England, Baroda, Calcutta, and Pondicherry. He was born on August 15, 1872 into a Westernized upper-middle class Bengali family, the son of Krishnadhan and Swarnalata Ghose. In 1879, at the age of seven, he was taken to England to be educated there with his brothers. He lived first in Manchester, then in London, where he attended St. Paul's school from 1884-1890, and finally at Cambridge, where he held a senior classical fellowship at King's College, Cambridge University. A brilliant student, he was especially proficient in Classics, securing a first division in the Classical Tripos. He also passed with distinction the written entrance exam to the prestigious Indian Civil Service, but did not enter the service because he repeatedly failed to appear for the riding test. Clearly, his heart was not set on serving the British Government in India. Instead, he obtained an appointment with the Maharaja of Baroda and set sail to return to India in January 1893. That marked the end of phase one of Sri Aurobindo's life. When he returned to India he hardly knew any Indian language, though he was proficient in Greek and Latin, acquainted with French, and, of course, expert in English, having written a volume of poetry in it.

The Baroda period lasts for thirteen years, until 1906. This is generally considered a phase of preparation and growth for his later work. Sri Aurobindo held various posts in the Baroda Service including Professor of English and Vice-Principal of Baroda College. Here he tried to regain contact with his Indian heritage through a program of rigorous scholarship. He studied Sanskrit and several modern Indian languages including Bengali, his mother tongue, and gained a deep insight into Indian culture and civilization. The publication of some of his early poetry such as *Songs to Myrtilla* (1895) and *Urvashi* (c. 1896) took place during this period. Towards the end of the Baroda stint, Sri Aurobindo began participating in two activities that would be crucial to his later life, namely politics and yoga. A particularly important year was 1901 in which he was married to Mrinalini Bose. During this year he also experienced his first definite spiritual realizations, which are reflected in some of poems and reminiscences. These transforming experiences came to a head in 1908 when, under the guidance of a yogi called Vishnu Bhaskar Lele, Sri Aurobindo achieved the silencing of his mind.

In 1906 Sri Aurobindo left Baroda to join the newly formed National College in Calcutta, thus inaugurating his briefer, but crucial, Calcutta phase. His political activities which had begun as early as 1902, when he met Lokmanya Tilak at the Ahmedabad session of Congress, continued most vigorously in Calcutta where in *Bande Mataram*, his influential periodical, he attacked British imperialism vehemently. In 1907 he was prosecuted for sedition, but acquitted. The next year, 1908, was in many ways, one of the most important in his life. That year, he was arrested and detained on suspicion of revolutionary activities. During these twelve months, he underwent further spiritual experiences, including the experience of cosmic consciousness. After a year in detention, he was acquitted following a stormy and celebrated trial, in which he was defended free of charge by the famous lawyer and politician Chittaranjan Das. In 1910 he retired to French Chandranagore, and on hearing that a third prosecution was to be launched against him, set sail for

Pondicherry in the South. Eventually this prosecution, too, failed and Sri Aurobindo found himself a free man. Though, initially, he had not entirely given up political activity, he was never again to return to British India or to politics. He continued living in Pondicherry, until his death in 1950. In 1914, on 15th August, his birthday, he began the publication of *Arya*, a periodical in which the original versions of most of his famous works such as *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, *The Secret of the Veda*, and so on, appeared. He also wrote poetry, criticism, drama, and translated extensively from Sanskrit and other Indian languages during these early years in Pondicherry. For all these first ten years or so, Sri Aurobindo lived in a small rented house with only a few disciples, but the arrival in 1920 of Mirra Richard, or the Mother as she was known afterwards, changed that. The Mother took charge of Sri Aurobindo's household, gradually building up the extensive and superbly organized Sri Aurobindo Ashram, which is internationally renowned today. In November 1926, after some decisive spiritual experiences, Sri Aurobindo withdrew almost totally into solitude. His aim was to hasten the evolution of human consciousness by bringing "down" the Supermind, the higher plane of consciousness, so that all of humankind could benefit. Sri Aurobindo's seclusion ended twelve years later in 1938 after he suffered an accident. Thereafter, he saw a select group of people, including some doctors. For the next fourteen years or so, Sri Aurobindo continued his literary and spiritual activities, living mostly in seclusion, but guiding his rapidly growing number of disciples through yearly *darshans* (public appearances), and an extensive correspondence. Sri Aurobindo died on December 5, 1950, three years after India achieved its independence in 1947--on August 15--his birthday.

3.2 AN INTRODUCTION TO SRI AUROBINDO'S WORKS

Sri Aurobindo's complete works were collected and edited in the thirty volume Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library (or SABCL for short). The bibliography of primary works in Vol. 30 lists 101 books by Sri Aurobindo in English, published during his lifetime and afterwards. Out of these, the following, in chronological order, are collections of poems, written originally in English (works marked with asteriks are fragments or incomplete poems):

Songs to Myrtilla (1895; rpt. 1925)
Urvashi: A Poem (c. 1896)
Baji Prabhou (1910)
Chitrangada (1910)*
Ahana and Other Poems (1915)
Love and Death (1921)
Six Poems of Sri Aurobindo (1934)
Poems (1941)
Collected Poems and Plays (1942)
Poems Past and Present (1946)
Last Poems (1952)
Savitri (1954)
More Poems (1957)
Ilion (1957)*

All these except *Savitri* are included in Volume 5, SABCL, and *Savitri*, with Sri Aurobindo's letters on it appended, is contained in Volumes 28 and 29. A new edition, *The Collected Works of Sri Aurobindo* (CWSA) is now underway. More ambitious and accurate than SABCL, this edition is expected to run into thirty-five volumes.

3.3 ISSUES IN SRI AUROBINDO'S POETRY

Clearly, Sri Aurobindo is not an easy poet to comprehend. A lot of work needs to go into trying to come to terms with him. The modernist poets have consistently attacked his poetry. P. Lal divided readers into those who liked Sri Aurobindo and those who can't stand him. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra in his anthology says words to the effect that Sri Aurobindo spent most of his life composing a "worthless" epic of 24,000 lines! On the other hand there are devoted readers of Sri Aurobindo, who read his works as they would a sacred text. I know of people who don't leave home without reading a few lines from *Savitri* each day. Moreover, in terms of critical responses, no other poet has attracted as much attention as Sri Aurobindo. I would therefore like you to steer clear of the extremes of adulation and antipathy. Try, instead, to come to your own judgement of Sri Aurobindo's worth as a poet. But for this, you will need to take yourself seriously as a reader. And how can you do this without engaging seriously with the poet's extensive corpus? For this course, we have selected four short poems of Sri Aurobindo. This may give you the briefest glimpse of his orientation as a poet, but let us read at least these four poems carefully.

3.3.1 *A Tree*

This is one of Sri Aurobindo's early poems. It is only six lines long, with two stanzas. The first is a quatrain, with the rhyme scheme abab, followed by a couplet. Though deceptively simple, I believe that this poem contains the quintessence of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy. What does the poem say? It says that a tree, beside a sandy bank, stretches its branches heaven-wards. It is "Earth-bound, heaven-amorous" that is though it is fixed to the ground, with its roots in the soil, it actually reaches upwards, towards the skies. The couplet drives home the significance of the image: the human soul is just like this tree. Our body and brain are so grounded, so earthy, that they detain our heavenly flight. Notice the slight difference in the manner in which the tree and the human being are portrayed. While the tree is seen in positive terms, in terms of its aspiration, the human being is seen somewhat negatively, his body and brain *detaining* his upward rise. Unlike the tree, the human being is almost being blamed for this urge to remain bound and limited. I said earlier that this poem contains the seed of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy. Can you guess what it might be? Sri Aurobindo sees us as divided beings, one part of us happy with our present attainments, another thirsting for higher things.

3.3.2 *Life and Death*

This is another short poem with a structure that is similar to *A Tree*. You have a quatrain and a couplet, but the latter is not separated or set off from the former. The rhyme scheme is also similar: ababcc. And similar is the attempt to reconcile two opposites, in this case, life and death. Sri Aurobindo says that the two have been regarded as antinomies for ages, thus shaping our thought; but now he has access to new wisdom, as it were, "long-hidden pages/ Are opened, liberating truths undreamed."

What is this long hidden-truth that Sri Aurobindo has discovered? It is this: "Life only is, or death is life disguised,--". I think we should pause a bit at the first part of the statement, "Life only is," because this idea is somewhat easier to understand. In this part of the line, Sri Aurobindo asserts that there is no death at all; everything is only life. Then he qualifies himself a little by admitting that if there is death at all, it is merely life disguised, life itself masquerading as death.

This is a profound utterance because it will, if taken seriously, altogether change our attitude to life. If there is no death at all, then all of us are immortal. Clearly, this would seem to go against our normal experience. We do see people dying; they are,

to all appearances, taken away from our midst for ever. But is this really true? How do we know that they are really dead? Perhaps, they have passed from one kind of life to another. That is what the second half of the line implies. Death is life disguised; that what appears to be death is another kind of life. In *Savitri* too at the climactic moment in the epic, it is Death itself which reveals its true face as the Supreme Lord of Life and Delight.

But in this brief poem, it is really the last line that packs the punch. It contains a radical reversal of the relationship between life and death. Earlier, it was death which was sought to be banished or, rather, redefined in terms of life. Now the life that we consider to be the ultimate reality is itself seen as a sort of death, a short one, until we are surprised by another kind of life. That is, what we might consider the after-life (and the before-life) is much vaster and greater than this short duration on earth that we know as life. If our visions were so to expand, surely we might discover that eternity which nestles in the bosom of time—this, at any rate, is what the poem says to me.

3.3.3 *Bride of Fire*

Another short poem of four quatrains, *Bride of Fire* is quite like a chant, don't you think? The rhyme scheme is abab, but it is the rhythm that really powers the poem. The first and third lines are longer, composed of four somewhat irregular feet, with the more ponderous dactyls and anapests alternating with trochees and iambs. The second and fourth lines have only two feet each, one of which is an anapest and the other, You'll have to scan the poem slowly to unravel its structure.

The poem is an address to the Bride of Fire. The first line of each stanza begins with a request to it: "clasp me now close," "surround my life," "thrill and enlance," and "sound in my heart." The poet supplicates this bride to do all this to him. The third and fourth lines of each stanza show, as it were, the poet's credentials, what he has done to qualify him for the granting of his wishes. They establish not just his preparation, but also his dedication. In other words, no aspiration can be mounted except on the strong foundation of the readiness that comes from renunciation. But there is a paradox running through the poem. The addressee is a bride whom the poet desires, but he claims that he has slain desire to qualify himself for this bride's embrace. The entire language of the poem, then, suggests the attainment of higher ecstasies for which the lower ones have to be sacrificed.

Obviously, the key question in the poem is who is the strange bride that the poet addresses? Clearly, it is no earthly or ordinary bride, because it is described as the bride of fire. What might happen if one were really to clasp a bride whose body is fire? One would be burnt to ashes, no? Well, the clasp of this bride too is not devoid of a similar danger. But it is the sort of dying which releases one into a higher life, as the earlier poem implied. Only when the dross of lower instincts and desires is purified through the furnace of askesis does the higher self awaken. The bride of fire brings about this alchemy by transforming the poet through her immortalizing embrace.

I'd said that this poem is like a chant. Indeed, if you read it aloud that is what it is, but its content is that of a prayer. Sri Aurobindo believed that the highest form of poetic expression was the mantra. When you read this poem aloud, do you detect in it a mantric quality? The sound and sense combine so as to create an elevating reverberation with your consciousness.

3.3.4 *The Golden Light*

Sri Aurobindo wrote a remarkable series of sonnets during his poetic career. No other poet in the English language attempted a sonnet series on spiritual topics. So Sri Aurobindo's series is unique. Each sonnet is a brief, but clear description of a

spiritual state or experience or mood. This sonnet is Shakespearean in structure, consisting of three quatrains, followed by a couplet. If you notice the central movement of the poem, it is suggestive of a descent. From the crown of the brain, the seventh chakra of the kundalini, the thousand-petalled lotus of the *sahasrara*, this descent moves lower and lower through the being, enlightening, purifying, and transforming as it courses through the system. Again, we see how important the idea of divine descent is in Sri Aurobindo's thought. The aspiring devotee's urge to fly upwards has to be met by the answering descent of the Divine. Without this meeting of the ascending and descending triangles, the Yoga of Sri Aurobindo cannot find fruition. You will see that Sri Aurobindo's symbol, too, consists of two intersecting triangles, one pointing upwards, the other downwards. In the middle is the square which represents the supermind, in the midst of which blooms the lotus of consciousness—*arvind*, incidentally, also means lotus. The idea of avatarhood, likewise, is an idea of descent, of the divine coming down to the earth. In this poem, the light descends from the top and touches the mind, the throat, the heart, and finally the feet. These four levels also symbolize the four planes of consciousness—the mental, the psychic, the vital, and the physical which are important in Sri Aurobindo's yoga. All of them, even down to the physical, have to be divinized before "earthly life becomes the life Divine."

In this poem, the culmination is the whole of the earth becoming the Divine's play field after the transformation of the physical (represented by the feet). Once again, I urge you to compare this sonnet with the others you've read so far in the course. How is it different from them?

3.4 A BRIEF LIFE-SKETCH OF SAROJINI NAIDU



Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949)

Sarojini Naidu was born on 13 February 1879 in Hyderabad. Her parents were Dr. Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya and Varada Sundari Devi. She was the eldest of several children of which eight survived. Aghorenath was a remarkable man. A DSc from Edinburgh, he had been excommunicated from his caste for his radical views. His wife, Varada Sundari Devi, had to be schooled in a Brahmo Samaj home for women during his absence. On his return, Aghorenath took up service with the Nizam of Hyderabad. He not only founded the modern system of education in Hyderabad but was well-known as a reformer, thinker, scientist, and alchemist. If you go to Hyderabad, you can visit the home of the Chattopadhyayas. It is on Jawaharlal Nehru Rd, just ahead of the General Post Office, Abids. It now houses the Sarojini Naidu Memorial Trust.

Sarojini was a precocious child who began composing poetry at an early age. She passed the Madras Matriculation exam when she was thirteen. At fourteen, she fell in love with Dr. M. Govindarajulu Naidu, who was a widower nine years her senior, besides being from a different caste. Perhaps, fearing for the future of his daughter, her father arranged to send her to England on a scholarship from the Nizam. She was in England from 1895 to 1898, of which she spent over two years at Girton College, Cambridge. That environment, however, did not suit her. She failed to make a mark in her studies or in sports, but instead got to know some of the leading English poets of her time. Edmund Gosse became her patron and encouraged her to write. She returned to India in 1898 to marry her beau, Dr. Naidu. The marriage caused a sensation and was solemnized in a Brahmo ceremony, under the provisions of the Special Marriages Act, by Pandit Veerasalingam Garu. Sarojini was already a celebrity in India.

Soon after, she had four children in quick succession, but could not be contented with the life of a housewife. She plunged into public life and public service, publishing her poems alongside her other activities. Before long, she became an important member of the Congress Party. Influenced first by Gopal Krishna Gokhale and then by Mahatma Gandhi, she rose to be one of the best known freedom fighters of her times. She traveled widely, both in India and overseas, as a spokesperson for the Congress and for the cause of India. Already famous as a poet, she now became known as one of the front-ranking national leaders. She was the first Indian woman to become the President of the Congress in 1925 and also served as the President of the All India Women's Committee. She was jailed four times during the struggle for freedom and became the first woman Governor of India's largest state, United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh) after independence. Clearly, Sarojini was one of the most talented, visible, colourful, and dynamic Indian women of this century.

3.5 AN OVERVIEW OF SAROJINI NAIDU'S POETRY

Sarojini's poetic career began when she was just eleven. Arthur Symonds quotes her in his Introduction to *The Golden Threshold*:

One day, when I was eleven, I was sighing over a sum in algebra: it *wouldn't* come right; but instead a whole poem came to me suddenly. I wrote it down. From that day my 'poetic career' began. At thirteen I wrote a long poem *a la* 'Lady of the Lake'--1300 lines in six days. At thirteen I wrote a drama of 2000 lines.... I wrote a novel, I wrote fat volumes of journals. I took myself very seriously in those days.

Of these early works, only the first, the long poem *a la* "Lady of the Lake" survives today. It was actually published as *Mehir Muneer: A Poem in Three Cantos by a Brahmin Girl* in 1893, when Sarojini was fourteen. Perhaps, it was the presentation of this book to the Nizam which resulted in her being awarded a scholarship by him for higher studies in England.

Her next collection, *Songs by S. Chattopadhyaya* was printed privately by her father, Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya, in Hyderabad in 1896 and contains poems which she wrote from 1892-1896. The collection was, thus, published when she was in England. We know that she sent letters and poems to her would-be husband, Govindarajulu, from England. Some of these poems found their way into *Songs*, along with a number of older pieces. This collection is the weakest of all her books. In fact, I have not found a single poem in it which is worth including in my edition of the *Selected Poetry and Prose* of Sarojini Naidu. The publication of *Songs* was not supervised by her, though the printed copies of both *Mehir Muneer* and *Songs* show correction marks in her handwriting. Perhaps, she intended to republish both later, but then dropped the idea. The poems in these two juvenile collections are hardly ever discussed by critics.

It was with *The Golden Threshold* in 1905 that Sarojini's career as a poet really took off. Arthur Symons was responsible for the publication of this book. The poems in it belong almost wholly to two periods: 1896 and 1904. Sarojini had sent Symons some new poems in 1904 and he had already seen her earlier work in 1896. Symons says, "As they seemed to me to have an individual beauty of their own, I thought they ought to be published." (*Sarojini Naidu: Selected Poetry and Prose* 9). Sarojini then wrote to Edmund Gosse asking for his advice and permission in publishing the collection. Sarojini's dedication of the book to "Edmund Gosse who first showed me the way to the Golden Threshold" shows how deeply she was influenced by him. Ironically, when Gosse had seen many of these very poems in 1896, he had been disappointed as he tells us in his Introduction to *The Bird of Time*. Now, thanks to Symons they were being published anyway. There was, however, yet another difficulty which no biographer or critic to my knowledge has mentioned. William Heinemann was unwilling to risk his money on the book, though it was recommended by Gosse and Symons, and would carry an Introduction by the latter. The poet had to actually pay the publisher a tidy sum in pounds sterling to cover the printing costs. This is revealed in Sarojini's letters to Gosse at the National Archives. The book, of course, went on to be a huge success; the first edition was sold out by the end of 1905 and a new edition was published and quickly snapped up in 1906.

The book was reviewed favourably both in the Indian and, especially, in the British press. There were reviews in *The Times* (London), *The Manchester Guardian*, *The Review of Reviews*, *The Morning Post*, *Athenaeum*, *Daily Chronicle*, *Spectator*, and *T.P.'s Weekly* (see Sengupta, 1966, 57-59). *The Golden Threshold* made Sarojini a celebrity in both India and England. Never before had a book of poems by an Indian caused such an impact abroad. *The Golden Threshold* remains Sarojini's best and most popular books. She never quite exceeded what she achieved in it. *The Bird of Time* was published by William Heinemann in 1912 with an introduction by Edmund Gosse; it was also published simultaneously in New York by John Lane. This book, too, was reviewed widely in India and in England. By now, Sarojini was an established poet. Her readers in England expected both beauty and oriental glamour from her and she did not disappoint them.

The Broken Wing, her third collection, was published by Heinemann in 1917. By now, however, the praise had become lukewarm. There was also considerable criticism of her limitations as a poet. In Europe, the first wave of modernism was beginning to gather momentum. There was about to be a cataclysmic change in poetic fashion. Sarojini was swept aside by this tide. She never published another collection in her lifetime. By the time Padmaja published *The Feather of the Dawn* in 1961, modernism was the ruling mode in Indian poetry. The book was panned by Nissim Ezekiel, among others. Sarojini had been all but consigned to poetic oblivion.

Thus, the graph of her career shows that her reputation was at its highest from 1905 to 1917 and then declined afterwards. In India she continued to have a readership and following until her death. But in the 1950's when modernism became the dominant mode of Indian English poetry, her reputation as a poet sunk to its lowest. This contempt for her poetry persists in an entire generation of poets and critics who are now in their fifties and sixties. Perhaps, the time is now ripe for a reinterpretation, if not revival of her works.

As a writer of prose, Sarojini was never well known. Except for a few booklets, she never published a sustained piece of prose in her lifetime. Her collected speeches are uneven in quality and lacking in well-developed or original thinking. In fact, most of the thousands of speeches she delivered were extempore.

In the sections that follow we will look more closely at some of Sarojini's well-known poems.

3.5.1 Indian Dancers

Sri Aurobindo
and Sarojini
Naidu

This poem, from Sarojini's first collection, *The Golden Threshold*, is perhaps the best example of her aesthetic of excess. Every sense is pushed to a point beyond satiety in this poem through an overabundance of lush and overripe imagery. The overall effect is to create a hazy and entranced mood, as might be induced by a narcotic or opiate. The images suggest a lack of sharpness, clarity, and visibility. Sarojini's idea of sensuality is hedonistic glut.

I wonder how this poem has been arranged typographically in your textbook. Actually, it should be in three stanzas of four lines each with the rhyme scheme, abab. Can you guess why it looks different, at least at first sight, from what I've described it to be? That's because the lines are inordinately long. Let's try to scan them. To do so, you must identify the dominant metrical foot. Can you guess what it is? Read the lines aloud a couple of times so that you get a feel for the rhythm. The main foot is the anapest, that is two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable. The opening foot of each line is an iamb. There is also an extra, weak stress at the end of each line: "-ire," "-ght," "-ire," "-ght," and so on. How many feet are there to a line? There are eight strong stresses, so there are eight feet. Each line naturally breaks into two units of four feet each—so each line of this poem is actually like a couplet. You can tell by its design that the poet has been quite innovative here. The lines are long enough to make you breathless, quite like the dancers themselves, but yet Sarojini provides you with a breather half-way, after one beat of four feet. Sarojini was quite a master of metre. Especially, she achieved some wonderful results with the anapest, a longish, feminine foot, which makes her lines sound very sensuous and oriental.

Now, what do these three stanzas convey? They are, as you notice, mainly descriptive, piling on image after image. But does a very clear picture of the dancers emerge at the end of the poem? Not really. There's a strong impression, an experience, an atmosphere, but no clear vision. That is because the light is dim in this poem. Everything is hazy and languorous. Sarojini wishes to create a certain effect of super-sensuality. The boundaries between various senses get blurred. There is a controlled, but rather deliberate creation of excess, conveyed by words such as "ravished," "rapture," "celestially panting," "passionate bosoms," "aflaming with fire"—just to go by the first line.

If you were to critique the aesthetic that informs this poem, you would call it decadent and escapist. The sorrow, the labour, the degradation, the sweat, the toil of the dancers is all but elided. Their subjectivity is lost. Questions of sexual exploitation are also pushed into the background. Instead, we are invited to dope ourselves into an unthinking stupor as we admire these dancers into the "voluptuous watches of the night." And yet, the very excess with which these dancers are depicted should alert us against facile or dismissive judgements. The excess implies that Sarojini was aware of what she was doing, so much that the picture is almost a caricature. Like the other "folk" in her poetry, the bangle-sellers, the palanquin-bearers, the coromandel fishers, the corn-grinders, and so on, Sarojini prettifies these dancers not to turn them into living ghosts but to invest their lives with some sort of dignity and charm, even if in the process she ends up exoticising them. That's why, in the ultimate analysis, I consider these poems to be forms of resistance and protest against colonialism and modernity, both of which were robbing the common people of India of their self-respect and autonomy.

3.5.2 Love and Death

This sonnet from *The Bird of Time* can easily be rated as one of Sarojini's finest poems, though few critics have considered it so. Its form is Petrarchan, with the rhyme scheme abbaabba cdeed. The octave depicts the ideal of love; like Savitri,

the poet dreams that her love has freed her beloved from death. But the sestet reveals the hard and cruel reality which forces the poet to accept that her love hasn't been able to mitigate even one throe of pain, let alone bring the beloved back from death. The poem is modern in spirit in that it refutes the ideal represented by Savitri. You will recall that in the latter story, Savitri manages to win back life for her dead husband Satyavan. Sarojini's poem makes an interesting comparison with Toru Dutt's "Sita" and Sri Aurobindo's Savitri.

Like all good sonnets, *Love and Death* contains an argument, a debate. The debate is between a certain idea of love, which asserts that love conquers all odds, even triumphing over death. The speaker imagines that her love gives her beloved the matchless dowry of immortality which engirds him from the cruel hands of overmastering Fate. She dreams that her love has ransomed him from Death itself, like Savitri had saved Satyavan. On the 9th line, the poem turns. Dream over, the poet wakes up to the harsh reality: her love has been unable to annul even one throe of predestined pain, to prolong her lover's breath even by one heart-beat. To all appearances, then, this is a sad, pessimistic, even brutally realistic poem. It shows that Sarojini was capable of some hard-headed, even heart-rending, engagement with reality. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, in his characteristically brutal fashion, dismissed Sarojini's poetry as "mellifluous drivel," but when we read this poem, we get a different impression. Instead of regarding her as an incurable romantic or light-hearted warbler of innocent rhymes, we are invited by poems such as these to reassess our understanding of her poetic oeuvre, indeed to take her more seriously as a poet who was actively engaged with the real world in which she lived.

3.5.3 The Old Woman

Another fine poem, again from *The Bird of Time*, *The Old Woman* evokes *karuna* or compassion. The refrain, which is the first article of faith for a Muslim, works very effectively, underscoring the woman's stoicism and fortitude born of her faith. Sarojini gives us a possible history of the old woman, how she once was a wife and mother, but is now reduced to begging in the street. The second stanza is probably one of the most realistic pieces of verse Sarojini ever wrote; there is very little ornamentation or prettification in it. Again, we see her confronting reality with a sober and unblinking gaze.

Each stanza consists of fourteen lines, with the last four constituting the refrain. How well the Arabic blends into the English, a fine example of code mixing through quotation. The other eight lines in each stanza have the rhyme scheme: abaabccdeed. Again, the dominant foot, as you might have noticed is the anapest.

A good project would be to compare the old woman with the dancers in the first poem. You'll notice how the former is very sharply etched, while the latter are hazy and blurred. The image of women in Sarojini's poems, similarly, alternates between enormous clarity about their oppression but also tends to endow them with a beguiling or bewitching glamour and sensual appeal, which blunt her critical gaze at times.

3.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have discussed two important figures in the realm of Indian English literature - Sri Aurobindo and Sarojini Naidu. The quintessence of Sri Aurobindo's poetry is the duality of the self - the body/mind duality that he highlights, the physical urges of the body to remain bound and limited and the other being thirsting for higher things - "Earth-bound, heaven-amorous". Further, Sri Aurobindo reconciles life and death in his profound utterance: "Life only is, or death is life disguised". What this

line hints at is that death is another kind of life and that the 'after life' is much vaster and greater than the 'before life' on earth.

**Sri Aurobindo
and Sarojini
Naidu**

The epitome of Aurobindo's poetry is the 'Mantra' or the poetic chant. Indeed Aurobindo's poetry both in form and content is like a prayer.

To end this section, let me go back to the title of Sarojini's first collection, *The Golden Threshold*. Obviously, the title is significant, hinting at the kind of romanticism Sarojini practiced. After all, she gave her home the same name too, even shifting the name when she shifted residence. So, the question arises, what is the book a threshold to? Does it refer to a key theme in the collection, that of growing up, bidding goodbye to one's dreams, and of maturing a person and woman? Or is it a threshold to her poetic career, which she hopes will be golden? Or, yet again, is the collection a sort of threshold or passage to India itself for Western readers? And as a nationalistic poet, she would want to introduce her readers not to an earthen or clayey India, but a magnificent, golden India, embellished by her imagination and carefully ornamented so as to be pleasing and delectable to her foreign readers? At any rate, the title foregrounds the problem of representation which is at the heart of Sarojini's poetic project. It would help you at this point to look at Malashri Lal's *The Law of the Threshold*, one of the few original pieces of feminist theorising to come out of India. Lal argues that most texts by and about women in India demonstrate what she calls "the law of the threshold." This law states that Indian women, in their growth, always encounter this "Lakshman rekha," a visible or invisible boundary, overstep which they might at their own peril. What happens to those who remain within its confines, step out, or step back in is analysed in the book. See if you can apply some of these ideas to Sarojini's poetry as well.

3.7 GLOSSARY

Stupendous:	astounding, wonderful
Reminiscences:	some past experience or event that is recalled
Sedition:	an offense that tends to undermine the authority of a state
Antipathy:	a feeling of dislike or hostility
Antinomies:	contradiction existing between laws or principles or views
Masquerading:	to participate in a masquerade ie. a party or gathering at which guests come in disguise
Climactic:	involving or causing a climax
Ponderous:	heavy, huge
Alchemist:	a person who practices alchemy
Languor:	pleasant mental or physical tiredness or lack of activity. adj: languorous
Palanquin:	in East Asia, a covered litter, usually for one person, carried by poles on the shoulders of two or more men

Engirt:	to encircle, or encompass
Annul:	to make void, abolish
Beguiling:	to mislead by cheating or tricking, deceive
Dactyl:	a metrical foot of three syllables, the first accented and the others unaccented as in English verse
<i>Anapest:</i>	a metrical foot of two unaccented syllables followed by an accented one
Trochee:	a metrical foot of two syllables, the first accented and the other unaccented
Iamb:	a metrical foot of two syllables, the first unaccented and the other accented
Credentials:	that which entitles to credit, confidence etc
Mantra:	hymn or portion of text, esp from the Veda chanted as a prayer
Reverberation:	a reechoing or reflection
Kundalini:	energy or Shakti residing in a coiled form at the base of the spine in human beings. When awakened, the process of spiritual evolution begins
Sahasrara:	thousand pettaled lotus at the crown of the head, the highest <i>chakra</i> which the Kundalini reaches on its upward ascent
Avatarhood:	incarnation
Innovative:	to bring in an innovation or new ideas
Aesthetic:	sensitive to art and beauty
Elided:	to ignore, omit or strike out
Subjectivity:	determined by and emphasizing the ideas of the artist or writer
Caricature:	satirical picture
Throe:	pain, affliction, strong yearning
Oeuvre:	the lifetime work of a particular writer or artist or composer
Stoicism:	indifference to pleasure or pain, stoical behaviour
Embellished:	improved by adding detail, ornament

3.8 QUESTIONS

Sri Aurobindo
and Sarojini
Naidu

1. Give a brief life sketch of Sri Aurobindo and his contribution to the literary scenario in India.
2. What are the major issues in the poetry of Sri Aurobindo?
3. What is the philosophy inherent in the poem 'A tree'? Explain with examples.
4. What is Sri Aurobindo trying to convey through the poem, 'Life and Death'?
5. What is your own interpretation of the poem?
6. What does the "Bride of Fire" stand for? Give a critical analysis of the poem.
7. Describe the poetic structure of the sonnet, "The Golden Light". How is this poem different from the other poems you have studied?
8. Give a detailed sketch of the life of Sarojini Naidu. Do you consider her to be a rebel or a conformist?
9. Describe briefly the poetic career and achievement of Sarojini Naidu.
10. Critically analyse the poem, "Indian Dancers". Describe the rhyme scheme and the poetic structure?
11. What is the poet trying to convey through the poem, "Indian Dancers"?
12. Compare the poem, "Love and Death", with Toru Dutt's 'Sita', and with the Savitri story as it is conventionally known.
13. What is your interpretation of the poem, 'The Old Woman'?
14. Compare and analyse the two poems, 'The Old Woman' and 'Indian Dancers'.
15. What in your opinion does 'The Golden Threshold' stand for?
16. Annotate the following:
 - i. This is the soul of man. Body and brain
Hungry for earth our heavenly flight detain.
 - ii. Life only is, or death is life disguised,-
Life a short death until by life we are surprised.
 - iii. Voice of infinity, sound in my heart,-
Call of the One!
Stamp there thy radiance, never to part,
O living Sun.
 - iv. Thy golden light came down into my feet;
My earth is now Thy playfield and Thy seat.

17. Annotate the following:
 - i. Now silent, now singing and swaying and swinging like blossoms that bend to the breezes or showers
 - ii. I dreamed my love had set thy spirit free,
Enfranchised thee from Fate's O'ermastering power,
And girt thy being with a scatheless dower
Of rich and joyous immortality;
 - iii. And her withered, brave voice croons its paean of praise,
Be the gay world kind or unkind:

"La ilaha illa-l-Allah,
La ilaha illa-l-Allah,
Muhammad-ar-Rasul-Allah".

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UNIT 4 NISSIM EZEKIEL AND KAMALA DAS

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 A Brief Life-Sketch of Nissim Ezekiel
- 4.2 An Overview of His Poetry
 - 4.2.1 "Enterprise"
 - 4.2.2 "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher"
 - 4.2.3 "Background, Casually"
- 4.3 A Brief Life-Sketch of Kamala Das
- 4.4 An Overview of Her Poetry
 - 4.4.1 "An Introduction"
 - 4.4.2 "My Grandmother's House"
 - 4.4.3 "The Sunshine Cat"
- 4.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.6 Glossary
- 4.7 Questions
- 4.8 Suggested Reading

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall study two poets, Nissim Ezekiel and Kamala Das. We will follow the usual pattern of learning something about their lives and poetic careers, before studying individual poems in detail.

4.1 A BRIEF LIFE-SKETCH OF NISSIM EZEKIEL



Nissim Ezekiel (1924-)

Nissim Ezekiel was born in 1924 in Bombay in a Bene-Israeli family. The Bene-Israelis are a small community of Jewish people, most of whom speak the local Indian language, in this case, Marathi. Nissim studied English literature at Wilson College, Bombay, earning a B.A. and an M.A. He then went on to read philosophy at Birbeck College, University of London. After his return to India without taking a degree, he served as an editor with several journals including *Quest*, *Poetry-India*,

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The Illustrated Weekly, and *The Indian P.E.N.*. After short stints in journalism, advertising, and broadcasting, he taught for several years at Mithibai College, Bombay, and then at the University of Bombay, Department of English. He retired as the Professor of English, University of Bombay. Nissim also wrote a regular column on art for the *Times of India*. Besides being a pioneer in modern Indian English poetry, Nissim has discovered, encouraged, and published several of India's leading Indian English poets. He has also been an active translator, playwright, and reviewer. His impact on the Indian English literary scene is therefore very significant.

Nissim Ezekiel and
Kamala Das

4.2 AN OVERVIEW OF HIS POETRY

Nissim Ezekiel has published seven volumes of poetry: *A Time to Change and Other Poems* (1952), *Sixty Poems* (1953), *The Third* (1958), *The Unfinished Man* (1960), - *The Exact Name* (1965), *Hymns in Darkness* (1976), *Latter-Day Psalms* (1982); his - *Collected Poems* were published in 1989. He won the Sahitya Akademi award in 1983 for *Latter-Day Psalms* and has also been honoured with the title Padma Shri in 1988.

Nissim has often been called the father of modern Indian English poetry. Bruce King says: "Of the group of poets attempting to create a modern English poetry in India, Nissim Ezekiel soon emerged as the leader who advised others, set standards and created places of publication" (*Modern Indian Poetry in English* 91). In an earlier unit, I briefly spoke of how a complex set of factors promoted the creation of literary modernism in India in the 1950s and 1960s. There is no doubt that this modern idiom and sensibility were consciously created by a group of poets, editors, anthologists, and teachers. Some of these did form a literary *avant garde*. Of these it is clear that, over the decades, Nissim was probably the most influential.

Of course, as I've argued in my anthology *Indian Writing in English*, there was a whole pre-history to Indian modernism which is now almost forgotten. A poet like Shahid Suhrawardy, who went to Pakistan after independence, was already writing in the modernist mode long before Nissim. But he is forgotten today. Instead, a myth is being promoted that Nissim was India's first modern poet. In fact, Nissim's first collection, significantly titled, *A Time to Change*, reflects a deeply religious sensibility rather than a modernist bent of mind. This preoccupation with religion remains with Nissim through all his poetry. What I've been trying to suggest is that modernism itself is not a simple or unitary phenomenon, but a rather complex set of attitudes and idioms.

Perhaps, what distinguishes the Indian English modernists from their predecessors is their precise use of language, especially of well-crafted images, and their largely ironic stance. The modernist also brought a whole new range of subject matter into their poetry. Nissim's poetry, for example, focuses on life in Bombay, with all its difficulties, on human sexuality, on typically modern problems of alienation and identity, without giving up on a more traditional desire to find an answer to these problems. The recurring theme of sexuality and of the male-female relationship is also an important element in modern poetry. The earlier poets did not address these issues in quite so direct and blunt a fashion. Ezekiel's poetry displays a variety of styles and themes, but his strength is clearly the introspective, ironic, somewhat humorous poems of self-exploration and self-formation.

The Unfinished Man and *The Exact Name* have some of these best poems of Nissim's. Though he does not attempt a long poem as such, there are sequences of shorter poems as in *Latter-Day Psalms* and *Hymns in Darkness*. Nissim also wrote a number of very Indian poems in English, the only one to use Indian English for poetic effect

after Joseph Furtado. Some of these poems are satires, but they also show the poet's sympathy for the objects of satire.

4.2.1 *Enterprise*

This poem of thirty lines in six stanzas of five lines each is from *The Unfinished Man*. The dominant pattern is an iambic tetrameter, with the rhyme scheme of abaab. It shows at once Nissim's commitment to certain poetic values--regularity, orderliness of form, clarity of thought, and precision of diction. Reminiscent of Eliot's "Journey of the Magi," this poem is about the inevitable disillusionment which greets the conclusion of any grand enterprise. Some lines like "what the thunder meant," as well as several phrases, allude to Eliot's *Wasteland*.

The interpretation of the poem hinges on the meaning of "enterprise." What enterprise is being referred to in the poem? It seems to me that the word has a vast symbolic potential. It could refer to something as broad as the independence of India or it could even be a critique of romantic idealism. There is a gradual progression of moods in the poem, from hope, almost to despair at the end, but what gives the poem both coherence and strength is the detached realism of the speaker's voice. As the observer, witness, and narrator, he retains a grim commitment to the truth of the moment, never letting himself slide into rage or self-pity.

The poem is also a rewriting of the ancient Biblical story of the Exodus. In this poem, too, the journey is to a promised land across deserts, but after all the travails and hardships, isn't all that fulfilling at the end. Indeed, a question mark is placed on the very value of such ventures. The poet concludes: "Home is where we have to earn our grace." This longer line has a lot of narrative weight in it, coming as it does at the very conclusion of the poem. The attitude that the poet encourages, then, may be called "stay at home"--remain where you are and all things will come to you. No need to embark upon ambitious enterprises. So the poem also criticises all those who, like the great imperialists and colonialists, sought their fortunes upon distant shores. Or else, this is an interrogation of all grand narratives with their false promises.

Like other modern poems, there is a certain lack of clarity regarding the "plot" of the poem. Who are these people? Where are they going? What is their goal? Such questions are not answered precisely but enough information is provided to give us a *sense* of what they are about. It would be a good idea to make a careful inventory of all the information that is offered in the poem. How is this information controlled? What sort of gaps exist? How do these gaps enhance the richness of the text? As a modern poem, "Enterprise" offers rich dividends to the sort of close reading that New Critics recommend.

4.2.2 *Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher*

This poem of twenty lines in two stanzas is from *The Exact Name*. It is a rather popular poem, much-anthologised and studied. One reason for its popularity is that it outlines a sort of poetic credo. The message of the poem is clear: "The best poets wait for words." But this waiting is, by no means, simple. The poet cannot while away his time, but like the careful birdwatcher, has to remain ever alert. There is the eternal vigil that is the price for the gift of poetry. To stay poised in that tension is what Ezekiel recommends to poets. The whole meaning is enhanced and elaborated through the elaborate and extended comparison with bird watching.

Of course, there is a third element that is introduced too, that of lovemaking. Courtship, birdwatching, and poetry and thus related; in each case, the attitude that is recommended is of passive alertness, not of anxiety, hurry, aggression, or hyperactivity. The more one is agitated, the less one gains. The one who is loved is not chased like a quarry, but watched with such intensity that she risks surrendering.

Ultimately, the rewards of such worshipful patience are great: what is gained is not just "flesh and bone but myths of light/ With darkness at the core."

Nissim Ezekiel and
Kamala Das

Here we see that for Nissim, love and poetry are means to a special knowledge, wisdom, transcendence even. There is a major miracle that the two bring about: "The deaf can hear, the blind recover sight." Poetry, then, like love, is ultimately a different way of perceiving reality, of seeing, hearing, and experiencing it differently.

4.2.3 *Background, Casually*

Another well-known poem, first published in 1965 though collected in *Hymns in Darkness*, this longish narrative in 75 lines and three parts, is a sort of poetic autobiography. Yet, unlike Wordsworth's *Prelude*, there is no claim to high seriousness here. As the title itself suggests, Ezekiel wishes to be rather casual about his background. Each part of the poem has five stanzas of five lines each. The lines don't rhyme, but occasionally as in the first stanza, there are some half-rhymes: born-bone, eat-kite. The dominant foot, again, is the iamb.

Overall, the poem portrays the poet's uneasy relationship with India, his home. The very first line starts with a sort of summing-up of his personality: "poet-rascal-clown." He goes to a Catholic school, "a mugging Jew among the wolves," clearly despised by his Christian classmates. He doesn't get along any better with Muslims or Hindus either: "A Muslim sportsman boxed my ears" and "I grew up in terror of the strong/ But undernourished Hindu lads." Somewhere, the poet's spiritual quest also surfaces: "Could I, perhaps, be rabbi-saint?" But what prevails is the enduring skepticism that marks his poetry: "The more I searched, the less I found."

Then, the inevitable journey abroad with the three "Ps" for companionship: Philosophy, Poverty and Poetry. Not making much of a success of his academic career, he returns home, scrubbing decks to earn his passage. But the return is not without its tensions and questions: "How to feel it home, was the point." He even tries to read up on India to own it up, but not with too much success. The sense of otherness when it comes to the majority persists. Then the inevitable descent into the drudgery of marriage and earning a living.

Gradually, a sense of purpose unfolds. The poet begins to feel his place in the scheme of things, realizing where he comes from and where he is heading. He reclaims the memories of his ancestors but really finds meaning in dreams of words or in poetry. There is an acceptance of responsibilities and of one's limitations, a reconciliation even with a difficult environment: "The Indian landscape sears my eyes./ I have become a part of it." Finally, a clarity emerges:

I have made my commitments now.
This is one: to stay where I am,
As others choose to give themselves
In some remote and backward place.
My backward place is where I am.

The poet's attitude to his home, India, does not necessarily change; he doesn't regard it in positive terms. It is still a backward place, but there is a realization that he belongs to it and must consequently give himself to it. And this realization gives him the peace that he has sought. The resolution to Ezekiel's identity crisis is rather instructive when we compare it with that of others. While many other diasporic and expatriate writers have found themselves unable to commit themselves either to India or to their adopted country and, indeed, made maximum capital, literary or otherwise, of this in-between state, Ezekiel points to the opposite path of throwing in one's lot with one's immediate surroundings. It is not for us to make value judgements about which path is better, but to observe the dynamics of each.

4.3 A BRIEF LIFE-SKETCH OF KAMALA DAS



Kamala Das (1934-)

Kamala Das was born in Punnayurkulam, Kerala in 1934. Her mother, Balamani Amma, is a well-known poet and writer in Malayalam. Kamala spent several years in Calcutta, where she went to Catholic schools. She also spent some years in boarding school. She was married fairly early, before she finished her college, so she happens to be perhaps the only leading Indian English poet without a degree to her name. She began writing early and published her first poems in *The Indian P.E.N.* She was also published by C. R. Mandy in *The Illustrated Weekly of India*. Her collections include *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), and *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973). The first volume of her *Collected Poems* published in 1984 won her the Sahitya Akademi award for 1985. Besides poetry, she also writes short stories, some of which were collected in *The Doll for the Child Prostitute and Other Stories*, and novels. There are two of the latter, *Manas* (1975) and *Alphabet of Lust* (1976). Her controversial autobiography, *My Story* was published in 1974.

4.4 AN OVERVIEW OF HER POETRY

Kamala Das has been typecast as a confessional poet. There is no doubt that her poems are accounts of deeply personal experiences. But more than this confessional element, it is the brutal frankness of her verse that shocked and attracted readers. Kamala writes about sexual frustration and desire, of the suffocation of an arranged, love-less marriage, of numerous affairs, of the futility of lust, of the shame and sorrow of not finding love after repeated attempts, of the loneliness and neurosis that stalks women especially. As such, her poetry speaks not only of her personal distress, but of her outrage against the social norms of a patriarchal society. Kamala was featured in *Time* magazine for "breaking the sexual barrier." What she did was to bring new subject matter into Indian English poetry. A whole range of experiences which were never spoken of were introduced for the first time by her. As Bruce King says, "Rather than finding salvation in art, Kamala Das's poetry spoke of fantasies, many lovers and the continuing disappointments of love" (*Modern Indian Poetry in English* 20).

Equally important is Kamala's experimentation with language, as we shall see in "*An Introduction*." She began to use Indian English, not in the ironic and comic manner in which Ezekiel did, but unselfconsciously, unaffectedly, naturally. Not being a

foreign-returned English teacher, she had no qualms about using a language which she was comfortable and familiar with. Again, as King observes, "More important than its themes was the use of an Indian English without the concern for correctness and precision which characterised most earlier modern verse. Instead, it appeared unpremeditated, a direct expression of feelings as it shifted erratically through unpredictable emotions, creating its own form through its cadences and repetitions of phrases, symbols and refrains" (ibid).

While reading the poems, I would like you to pay close attention to the form. Does the form reflect something of the instability of the poetic persona?

4.4.1 *An Introduction*

This loosely structured poem of 59 lines is from *Summer in Calcutta*. There is no visible rhyme scheme nor is Das using metre consistently. Line breaks are dictated by natural pauses or breaks in meaning. There is a certain disjointedness in this poem which makes it more conversational and immediate. Again, I am reminded of what King said: "In Das's poetry the distance between the poet and poetry is collapsed" (ibid 21). This is how the "confessional" element in the poetry operates at the technical level.

I said that there is a certain disjointedness in this poem. Notice that the first sentence, "I don't know politics ... Nehru" has nothing to do with the second. The poem may as well have begun with "I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar...." But the first sentence has an oblique connection with the subject of the poem. The poet disclaims any special knowledge of politics so as to provide an artistic and autobiographical rationale for the language of her creative expression, English. In other words, this poem is a defense, if not an apology, for writing in English. Now, writing in English, as we all know, is more than just a cultural or artistic choice. It has its politics as well. Or, at any rate, the issue of writing in English has been politicised for more than a hundred years. To speak out against this, the first thing that Das does is to claim an apolitical position for herself. She couldn't care less about politics and politicians, she implies. This indifference then gets translated into a demand for artistic and personal freedom of expression:

Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Every one of you? Why not let me speak in
Any language I like?

There is a certain frustration, anger even, at attempts by others to control or restrict her.

The poem goes on to become an elaborate justification of the kind of poetry she writes and the kind of language she writes it in:

The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses,
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
It is human as I am human, don't
You see?

Indian English, both linguistically and culturally hybrid and half-caste, is defended passionately. In a society obsessed with hierarchy and purity, even something of privileged status such as English becomes subaltern when you begin to write poetry in it. Such an act is seen almost as a betrayal, an evidence of bad faith.

But the poem is a plea for more than artistic freedom or for expression in Indian English. There is a passion in the appeal which comes for a defiance of those who wish to silence the poet. I am a human being, the poet screams, and I have a right to my voice. No one should try to silence me. My voice is like the cawing of crows and the roaring of lions. If you don't deny them the right to their voices, why are you trying to silence me? The sub-text is clear: are you trying to gag me because I am a woman? The silencing of the voices of women and of the oppressed is a common fact of the history of all civilizations. It is the elites, the culture defining groups, which always speak on behalf of their less privileged fellows. Das wants to break this stranglehold. She says, let me speak; don't try to shut me up.

After she creates this space to speak, she begins to tell her story, as it were. What is this story? It is of a lonesome child, growing up on her own. In the background are "Incoherent mutterings of the blazing/ Funeral pyre" signifying the loss of loved ones. There is a quick growth into puberty, and suddenly, a terrible accident: marriage. When the poet asks for love, all she gets is versions of marital rape. I am using blunt words because the text warrants them. You must bear in mind here that the speaker is just sixteen years old, legally still a minor. At this stage she is perhaps totally unprepared for sex. But marriage gives the legal sanction to a man to impose his will on what in this case is a child's body. The aftermath is clearly spelled out, "He did not beat me/ But my sad woman-body felt so beaten." This experience seems to be a crucial one for the poet. It creates a wound in her psyche which never heals. It leads, as we see in the following stanzas, to immense self-loathing and attempts to escape from her self.

The poet tries to deny her femininity by dressing like a man, cutting her hair short, and so on. Actually, the revulsion seems to stem from what men do to women. Again, the imposition of social norms: "Dress in sarees, be girl/ Be wife, they said." The whole package is flung at her; embroider, keep house, quarrel with servants, but above all, "fit in." Clearly, however, the poet is a misfit, if there is one. She rebels, not consciously or deliberately, but compulsively, traumatically. The next stanza, shows a greater incoherence, suggestive of a breakdown in personality. Compulsive behaviour, schizophrenia, nymphomania, and then the inevitable reaching out to another man, the rejection that follows and a devastating indictment of the male sex: "he is every man/ Who wants a woman" and "It is I who drinks lonely/ Drinks at twelve, midnight, in hotels in strange towns." The poem ends on an uncertain note, the poet seeking not much more than to survive, to earn the right to simply be called "I."

4.4.2 *My Grandmother's House*

This well-known poem, again from *Summer in Calcutta*, speaks of what we might call the "pre-lapsarian" stage. It harks back to the childhood of the poet, the security of a grandmother's house, where the self of the poet attains some sort of integrity. In that sense, it refers to a time before the rupture, the dislocation that we've seen so vividly described in the previous poem.

The poem, sixteen lines long, is a sustained description, and thus more tightly knit. The main feature of the house is that the poet is loved there. That is what, as you may remember, the speaker wanted in the previous poem but was practically raped instead. It might be dangerous to see the poetic persona as one continuous self across different poems, but in Das's case this is possible, even useful. That the poems are from the same collection adds to the utility and justifiability of such an approach. But, of course, we shouldn't overdo this interpretative ploy. To revert to the poem, in addition to love, the security of being cared for, there is the whole world of books, suggestive of so many possibilities. The house in Malabar, thus, not only symbolizes security and integrity, but also imagination and youth. Here the poet, though somewhat lonely, is free to dream her own fantasies, to fulfil, albeit vicariously, her desires to be connected to a more interesting world.

The last part of the poem is actually an address to what might be considered the poet's husband. The clue is not just the endearment, "Darling," but the whole sense of explanation and justification that the poet offers. She says, can you believe that I was "proud, and loved ... I who have lost/ My way and beg now at strangers' doors to/ Receive love, at least in small change." The last two lines are terribly poignant. The speaker has been reduced to begging for love in small change at strangers' doors. What a contrast from the loved, protected, and proud child that we see in the first part of the poem.

As a critic or careful reader, however, you should never take any text at surface value. If I were in your shoes, I would at once ask if the poet is exaggerating both the idealization of the childhood as she does the degradation of the present. That way you will begin to pry open the hidden crevices of meaning lurking beneath the surface and, perhaps, even go on to deconstruct what appears to be the "official" meaning that the poem seeks to promote.

4.4.3 *The Sunshine Cat*

This is an extremely powerful poem of twenty-two lines from the same collection, - *Summer in Calcutta*. It is about the decline and disintegration of a woman. The protagonist seems to have suffered from a nervous breakdown. She is abused, locked up in a room, and is finally reduced to being "a cold and/ Half-dead woman, now of no use at all to men."

The "facts" of the situation should by now be familiar to us. Here is an attractive, sensitive, creative, but rebellious and misunderstood woman, trapped in a love-less marriage. The husband uses her sexually; she resists, strays, seeks love from other men; the husband retaliates by locking her up each day; she suffers a breakdown as quoted above.

But notice that in this poem, the indictment of men and thus of patriarchy is much more clearly spelled out. The very first line says, "They did this to her, the men who knew her..." Who are these men? First, there is someone she loves who out of cowardice and selfishness betrays. Perhaps, this is her first love, someone whom she was hoping to marry but could not. Then comes the husband, who is described as someone "who neither loved her nor/ Used her but was a ruthless watcher." This suggests that in fact her faced neglect in the marriage, neglect and, of course, jealousy. Then there is the "band/ Of cynics she turned to"--for what? "To forget,/ To forget, oh, to forget..." But to forget what? This is not clear, but a sorrow deeper than what is visible or obvious is implied. It is also clear that the solace she seeks in these men is sexual, "burrowing her/ Face into their smells and their young lusts...." What we see, then, is a pattern of compulsive behavior. Clearly pathological, it is suggestive of great addictions, as for gambling or alcohol. Each of these men is unable to love her, but can at best offer kindness. In the process, she slides down peg after peg of sanity. There is a powerful image of the speaker weeping, insomniac and utterly helpless. The poem ends with the poet's confinement, with only a sliver of sunshine line, a yellow cat, to keep her company. Again, the longing for sympathetic contact is stressed in the image of the sunshine being like a cat. But, by sundown, even this "cat" disappears, leaving her cold, and half-dead. This poem has no happy ending, only a grim statement of the speaker's uselessness to all men. The last line, once again, underscores her need to be loved, wanted, cherished, but her despair at not having this need fulfilled.

4.5 LET US SUM UP

We have seen how Nissim Ezekiel is probably the most influential of the group of poets, editors, anthologists and teachers who form a literary avant garde of

modernism in India in the 1950s and 1960s. He is modernist in his use of language, whole new range of new themes including problems of alienation and identity, sexuality and male-female relationship. Ezekiel's poetry also displays the introspective, ironic, humourous self-exploratory strains. Nissim also singles out for using Indian English for poetic effect.

As I suggested earlier, Das's poems work at least at two levels. On the one hand, they depict a personal, a very individual tragedy. This tragedy may have variations, but it is made up of the following ingredients: a bad marriage; a series of sexual flings; a collapse of personality; a sense of worthlessness at the end. But in addition to this personal tragedy, the poems also comment on larger topics, on the institution of marriage; on marital rape, marital neglect, marital jealousy; on extra-marital sexual forays and their unseemly consequences; on experiences and knowledge hard-won, but fragile. If we keep in mind the feminist slogan, "The personal is the political," then Das's poems are not about the private life of an unbalanced woman, but about all those forces of tradition, culture, and society which make her so. These poems are an attack on a whole way of life characterized by patriarchal norms which oppress and restrict women, reducing them to neurotic and pathetic creatures. The poems are also, ultimately, about struggle and survival.

I began this section by noticing how Das consciously attempts to distance herself from politics. By doing so what she is really signaling is the inauguration of a different kind of politics, not a retreat into apolitical passivity. Das's politics is not about the pursuit of power at the level of the state, but it is about personal empowerment and autonomy, it is about the politics of the integrity of the female self in male-dominated and sexually predatory world. It is, ultimately, the politics of the survival not of the fittest, but even of those who are unable to fit in, those who are unfits and misfits in our society.

4.6 GLOSSARY

Pioneer:	a person who is one of the first to explore a new region or Subject
Introspective:	examine one's own thoughts and feelings
Quarry:	intended prey or victim; thing sought or pursued
Transcendence:	go beyond the range of experience, belief etc. surpass
Drudgery:	to do laborious or menial work
Sear:	scorch or burn
Qualm:	feeling of doubt, especially about whether one is doing or has done right
Cadence:	rhythm in sound, the rise and fall of the voice in speaking
Hierarchy:	organisation with grades of authority from lowest to highest
Stranglehold:	deadly grip

Warrants:	justification, authority
Aftermath:	result, consequence
Schizophrenia:	type of mental disorder marked by lack of association between the intellectual processes and actions
Nymphomania:	abnormal and uncontrollable desire by a woman for sexual intercourse
Ploy:	undertaking
Protagonist:	chief person in a story or factual event
Cynic:	person who sees little or no good in anything and has no belief in human progress, and who shows this by being sarcastic
Empowerment:	to give power or authority
Autonomy:	the right of self-government

4.7 QUESTIONS

1. Did Ezekiel's religious background and upbringing influence his development as a poet? What is his contribution to Indian English Poetry?
2. How does modernism reflect in Indian Writing in English? Evaluate Nissim Ezekiel's role in the modernist period of Indian English Poetry.
3. Critically analyse the poem 'Enterprise'. What are the religious implications in the poem?
4. How significant is the title 'Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher', to the content of the poem? What is Ezekiel trying to convey to his readers?
5. Analyse the poem 'Background Casually' with reference to the religious strifes in India.
6. Does the poem 'Background Casually' relate to the 'identity' problem faced by the poet? Substantiate with examples.
7. Give a brief life sketch of Kamala Das
8. Do you think Kamla Das' works are autobiographical? Give examples to substantiate your answer.
9. In your view what kind of a poet is Kamala Das?
10. Do you think that the form in her poems reflects the instability of the poetic persona?
11. What did you understand by the poem, 'An Introduction'? What is the poet trying to convey?

12. Critically analyse the poem 'My Grandmother's House'.
13. Give your own interpretation and critical analysis of 'The Sunshine Cat' with reference to the issue of women, patriarchy, and empowerment.
14. Annotate the following:
 - i. But when the differences arose
On how to cross a desert patch,
We lost a friend whose stylish prose
Was quite the best of all our batch.
A shadow falls on us - and grows.
 - ii. When, finally we reached the place,
We hardly knew why we were there.
The trip had darkened every face,
Our deeds were neither great nor rare.
Home is where we have to earn our grace.
 - iii. Who never spoke before his spirit moved.
The slow movement seems, somehow, to say much more.
To watch the rarer birds, you have to go
Along deserted lanes and where the rivers flow
In silence near the source, or by a shore
 - iv. A poet-rascal-clown was born,
The frightened child who would not eat
Or, sleep, a boy of meagre bone.
He never learnt to fly a kite,
His borrowed top refused to spin.
 - v. In everything, a bitter thought.
So, in an English cargo-ship
Taking French guns and mortar shells
To Indo-China, scrubbed the decks,
And learned to laugh again at home.
 - vi. The song of my experience sung,
I knew that all was yet to sing.
My ancestors, among the castes,
Were aliens crushing the seed for bread
(The hooded bullock made his rounds).
 - vii. The Indian landscape sears my eyes.
I have become a part of it
To be observed by foreigners.
They say that I am singular,
Their letters overstate the case.
 - viii. One among them fought and taught,
A Major bearing British arms.
He told my father sad stories
Of the Boer War. I dreamed that
Fierce men had bound my feet and hands.
 - ix. I have made my commitments now.
This is one: to say where I am,
As others chose to give themselves
In some remote and backward place.
My backward place is where I am.

15. Annotate the following:

- i. ----I am Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one. Don't wrote in English, they said,
English is not your mother-tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Every one of you? Why not let me speak in
Any language I like?
- ii. You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my
Hopes, and it is useful to me as cawing
Is to the crows or roaring to the lions,
- iii. -----Fit in. oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers. Don't sit
On walls or peep in through our lace draped windows.
Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or better
Still, be Madhavikutty. It is time to
Choose a name, a role.
- iv. And then, feel shame, it is I who lie dying
With a rattle in my throat. I am sinner,
I am saint. I am the beloved and the
Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours, no
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I.
- v. -----you cannot believe, darling
Can you, that I lived in such a house and
Was proud, and loved...I who have lost
My way and beg now at strangers' doors to
Receive love, at least in small change?
- vi. Of cynics she turned to, clinging to their chests where
New hair sprouted like great-winged moths, burrowing her
Face into their smells and their young lusts to forget,
To forget, oh, to forget...and, they said, each of
Them, I do not love, I cannot love it is not
In my nature to love, but I can be kind to you...
- vii. Winter came and one day while locking her in, he
Noticed that the cat of sunshine was only a
Line, a hair-thin line, and in the evening when
He returned to take her out, she was a cold and
Half-dead woman, now of no use at all to men.

4.8 SUGGESTED READING

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UNIT 5 A.K.RAMUNUJAN, ARUN KOLATKAR, AND JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 A. K. Ramanujan: A Brief Life Sketch and an Overview of his Poetry
 - 5.1.1 Looking for a Cousin on a Swing
 - 5.1.2 Self-Portrait
 - 5.1.3 A River
 - 5.1.4 Love Poem for a Wife--I
- 5.2 Jayanta Mahapatra
 - 5.2.1 Dawn at Puri
 - 5.2.2 Indian Summer Poem
 - 5.2.3 Hunger
 - 5.2.4 Evening Landscape by the River
- 5.3 Arun Kolatkar: A Brief Life Sketch and an Overview of his Poetry
 - 5.3.1 The Bus
 - 5.3.2 The Low Temple
 - 5.3.3 Chaitanya
- 5.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.5 Glossary
- 5.6 Questions
- 5.7 Suggested Reading

5.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall study selections from three poets, A.K.Ramanujan, Arun Kolatkar, and Jayanta Mahapatra. There is no special reason to group them together, except that all three happen to be bilingual poets, that is, they write original poetry in English and in another Indian language. Of course, the phenomenon of bilingual creativity embraces, in one way or another, all Indian English writers. We have already seen how, in a sense, all Indian English writing is a kind of translation, because Indian experiences are conveyed through the medium of English. Many Indian English poets, therefore, consciously work in some Indian language or the other, either writing directly in it or translating from/into it. These activities no doubt enrich their English verse, bringing to it a dimension that monolingual English writing lacks.

Each of these writers, however, is different in the way in which he handles his native language. Ramanujan, for instance, is an Iyengar, a Tamil Brahmin, whose family were settled in Karnataka. While he translates from both Tamil and Kannada, he writes originally only in Kannada, not in Tamil. His Kannada writing, mostly fiction, is not regarded very highly, though. Kolatkar, on the other hand, is equally regarded in both Marathi, his native tongue, and in English. His Marathi verse, though not very extensive, is considered unique in both style and content. He has brought a new dimension to Marathi poetry with his modern rewriting of Bhakti metres and themes. Mahapatra, who taught Physics for several years at Ravenshaw College, Cuttack, began writing when he was nearly forty. He wrote in English, mostly poetry, going on to publish in many of the leading journals in U.K. and U.S.A. He began writing in Oriya quite late, when he was almost sixty years old. Earlier, he used to translate from Oriya into English, but now, I am told, his original Oriya poetry is also highly regarded.

So you can see how literary bi-lingualism and bi-creativity, so to speak, is a rather complex activity. At the root of it, though, is a sensibility which is at home in more than one cultural milieu. When you read these poems, I would like you to bear in mind this dual influence and heritage.

5.1 A. K. RAMANUJAN: A BRIEF LIFE SKETCH AND AN OVERVIEW OF HIS POETRY



A.K. Ramanujan (1929-1995)

Attipatt Krishnaswami Ramanujan was born in 1929 in Mysore, where he went to school and college. Later, he studied linguistics at Deccan College, Pune, and went on to do a PhD in linguistics at Indiana University on a Fulbright fellowship. Soon after he finished, he got a job at the University of Chicago, where he remained till his death in 1993. When he died he was the William E. Colvin Professor of South Asian Languages, Linguistics and Civilizations, and a member of the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago. Ramanujan wrote several books, including collections of verse in English and Kannada, but he is best known as a translator. *The Interior Landscape* (1967), *Speaking of Siva* (1972), *Hymns for the Drowning* (1981) and *Poems of Love and War* (1985) are some of his better known translated works. He also brought U.R. Anantha Murthy's *Samskara* international recognition by translating it into English in 1976. Towards the end of his life, Ramanujan turned his attention to another rich area of Indian life and culture, folklore. One of his last publications was *Folktales from India* (1994), a selection of oral narratives from twenty-two Indian languages.

What I find most persistent in Ramanujan's poetry is the element of hardened skepticism. I say "hardened" instead of healthy because, in the end, it is this lack of commitment which makes his poetry unsatisfactory to me. Ramanujan's use of tradition, too, is similarly ironic. In his much-acclaimed translations of Tamil and Kannada medieval mystical poetry, he turns the ecstatic utterances of the bhakti poets into clipped and understated modern poetry. The result is readable, but is it true to the spirit of the original? Ramanujan was against Sanskrit because he found it too ideologically loaded and therefore oppressive. From the grand narratives of great traditions, he turned to the more unaffected, homely, and unassuming wisdom of the folk, the vernacular, the local. There is, however, a certain anxiety that informs his poetry. Could this anxiety stem from his own emptiness within? Behind the mask, perhaps, there's a blank, not necessarily a recognizable face. His poetry abounds in the quotidian, the trivial even. But it does convey, with a certain dry precision, the consequences and conundrums of a profound displacement. "Ramanujan's poetry has been celebrated for its irony and ambiguity. He uses his experience as an expatriate to

interrogate the values of both the motherland, India, and the adopted country, USA. In the process, he gives us sensitive renderings of childhood experiences and remembered events. These are presented without sentimentality and nostalgia. While these qualities in Ramanujan are praiseworthy, I shall present a contrary interpretation. You are, of course, free to disagree with it and make your own, independent reading of this important poet."

**A.K.Ramanujan,
Arun Kolatkar and
Jayanta Mahapatra**

5.1.1 *Looking for a Cousin on a Swing*

This poem is from *Striders* (1966), Ramanujan's first, and I believe, best collection of poems. Throughout this collection, questions of memory and identity predominate. The poet remembers events from his past in India, while located abroad. He tries to reconstruct these events, to make sense of them, to rearrange them in such a manner as to help consolidate his present identity. But, in the process, his attitude to his past is revealed to be neither sentimental nor nostalgic, but coolly aloof and ironic. Somehow, as is usually the case in such reconstructions, the present self gains at the expense of the past, its own insecurities shored up by deflating or dissecting the memory that triggered off the reflection.

The poem, twenty-three lines long, is an irregular metre. There are two characters in this poem, a boy and his female cousin. And there is the narrator, who is most probably the boy himself. Note that this narrator does not say "I" when he refers to the boy, but "he." This is a clear sign of the kind of distancing and detachment that I spoke of earlier.

As in many of these memory poems, there is a "then" and "now," a "before" and "after" in this poem as well. A scene is described when the boy is six or seven and his cousin four or five. They are on a village swing, sitting against or facing each other, as children sometimes do when they double up on a small swing. There is an adult imposition of sexuality on this pre-pubescent scene. The children feel each other, but this is probably "innocent" as the poet says. The impact of the poem comes from what's happened to the cousin, the little girl who was "innocent" about feeling her cousin or climbing up a tree. The poet says that the girl, now a grown woman, is still looking for that experience, but its innocence is all gone. There is an air of disapproval in the poet's tone as he describes her forays in "cities with fifteen suburbs" and the clearly ironic repetition of "innocent" in line seventeen.

The poem actually deviates in the end, with more attention paid to the tree than to the cousin. The tree, a fig tree, becomes a magnified symbol of fertility, ready to "burst/ under every leaf/ into a brood of scarlet figs." The last line, "if someone suddenly sneezed" is set off and therefore attracts too much attention to itself. Do you think it succeeds? I am not sure. You are left on an inconclusive note, which is rather typical of Ramanujan. You wonder, at the end, what the point of the poem was. Perhaps, the point is not to make a big point at all.

5.1.2 *Self-Portrait*

This brief poem from *The Striders* conveys a pervasive theme not only in Ramanujan's poetry but in modernist poetry in general. The self-portrait is a popular device of modern painters in which the painter paints himself. It is the equivalent in painting of a literary autobiography. Self-portraits, as of Van Gogh, reveal a lot about the painter. Here Ramanujan uses this idea in his poetry to question the notion of self, not just to describe a self.

In Ramanujan's view, there is strangeness to oneself which is brought home when one suddenly encounters one's reflection, as in the glass windows of a shop. The poet says that he resembles anyone but himself. I don't think this line means that he really resembles other people but that he is a stranger to himself. Self-estrangement is a recurrent theme in modern literature. It occurs because of a variety of factors, but

all these involve some sort of displacement or dislocation. Modern life is characterised by displacement and dislocation. In Ramanujan's case, there is a move across countries, cultures, and languages, to say the least. And yet the poem's last line suggests, rather slyly, that this self-estrangement is not total. Instead, he marks the signature of his father in the corner of the portrait. The "author," thus, is the father; the portrait is undated. But this attribution of authorship to the father is more of a trick, because not only is the "real" author of the poem Ramanujan himself, but so is the putative author within the poem, the poet who perceives himself.

In the end, then, the poem ends up meaning something slightly different from what it states in the beginning. For instance, even to claim that one does not resemble oneself, one would have to know what one looks like; that is, self-recognition of another sort is implied even in the act of self-denial. Then, after having made his own portrait, as of someone not resembling himself, the poet attributes it to his father, thus suggesting not that he does not resemble himself so much as he is not really what his father scripted. The portrait of himself drawn by his father is that of a stranger; in other words, the "real" Ramanujan is different from what his father intended or even what Ramanujan's image in the glass suggests. The poem, to put it differently, is one that through its gesture of self-denial suggests a self-avowal of a different kind. What this self is, in the modernist fashion, never stated. Instead, through denials and evasions an escape from the "official" self is effected.

5.1.3 *A River*

This is a slightly longer and more complicated poem from the same collection. Here we see some of Ramanujan's erudition as a translator of Tamil versé. The poem is ostensibly about a river, in the ancient city of Madurai, in the heart of Tamil Nadu. Madurai is described as a "city of temples and poets"; but these are poets who sing of "cities and temples." There is thus a sort of circularity to these poets and their themes, a tautology even. In a city of temples and poets, the poets sing of cities and temples. There is, in other words, a self-absorption, a stagnation in their writing.

Now, the poem moves to the description of the river, which is the ostensible subject of the poem. The river "dries to a trickle/ in the sand," every summer. Obviously, it is not a very grand or impressive river, but what it exposes or leaves behind when it dries up is described in great detail, in very vivid language. The river's "sand ribs" are bared, its water gates are clogged with "straw and women's hair," and the wet stones thus exposed glisten "like sleepy crocodiles," while the dry ones look like "shaven water-buffaloes lounging in the sun." As you can see, these images, which are fresh, original, and memorable, constitute a different sort of idiom than what the poets of Madurai are writing about.

As if to confirm this suspicion, the poet says in the very next line, which is actually a stanza set off from the earlier one, "The poets sang only of the floods." The poet goes on to add that he visited the city for a day when they actually had the floods. Again, we are given some vivid images of the rising river, of the pregnant woman being carried away, and of the almost comical pair of cows called Gopi and Brinda. Now that the floods have actually come, what do the poets of Madura write about? "The new poets still quoted/ the old poets" he says. These poets ignored what all the people were talking about, but Ramanujan, like in the earlier poem, embellishes what happened during the floods by making the pregnant woman expect twins.

From these experiences, "he," that is the present poet, constructs his own poem. Again, there is a comic enhancement of the events, the drowned twin foetuses are "identical twins/ with no moles on their bodies, with different-coloured diapers." I'm not sure these lines work. Where do diapers come into the picture for the unborn twins of a drowned pregnant woman; moreover, one might ask, where do diapers come into the picture in Madurai? The setting does not seem to suggest the use of these items of Western hygiene, in different colours, to mark the difference in sex of

the babies. Is the poet being ironic at his own expense? That is, how poets make things up, bluff, and say ridiculous things? I'm not sure, but there is some irony and comedy here at the expense not only of the poets of Madurai, but, at least to my mind, of the present poet himself.

A.K.Ramanujan,
Arun Kolatkar and
Jayanta Mahapatra

One thing, however, seems to be clear. The poem is less about a river than about poetry itself. The river, which figures in the works of the poets of Madurai, is, to all appearances, not much to write about. It becomes a trickle during the summer, and floods rarely during the year. Instead of writing about the "reality" of the river, about its changing shape and size, of what is exposed when it dries up and what it carries away during the floods, the poets stick to literary conventions rather blindly. The new poets quote the old ones and still write only about the river in flood. But even when they do so, they don't talk about the pregnant woman who drowning (remember, her hair is discovered clogging the water-gates when the river dries up) or the cows carried away by the river.

This job of actually describing the river is left to the main character in the poem, the outsider, who like Ramanujan, is the dislocated poet, non-resident alien. But what does this poet achieve except a comic embellishment, which at times is suggestive of an insensitivity? Isn't there just this hint of tragedy, not just misfortune, about what happens to the pregnant woman? Perhaps, she commits suicide because she is pregnant. Men don't seem to drown in this river. If the woman is or could be a suicide who wants to hide her "shame" by drowning herself, it's not very nice, is it, to joke about her unborn twins? I don't wish to make too fine a point of it, but once again, here is comedy and humour that is, arguably, misdirected. The NRI poet does not emerge in very good light in his treatment of Indian material.

5.1.4 *Love Poem for a Wife--I*

This is the first of two poems of the same title. It's taken from *Relations* (1971), Ramanujan's second collection. This eighty-four line poem is, in my opinion, one of the poet's strongest. It is an exploration of a marital relationship which can be described as uneasy, if not difficult.

The first stanza begins with a clear thesis statement: "Really what keeps us apart/ at the end of the years is unshared/ childhood." The rest of the poem, it would seem, goes on to illustrate this statement, to work it out with examples and instances. At the end, once again, the poet reverts to this theme by saying that the only way out, perhaps, was the Egyptian one, wherein brothers and sisters married one another.

On the face of it, though, this thesis is not tenable. How can a shared childhood be necessary for a couple to have a successful marriage? If this were the requirement, then no marriage could possibly be happy, even that of the Egyptian Pharaohs. After all, even brothers and sisters have different experiences, often growing up not together, but worlds apart.

Something like this is illustrated in the next couple of stanzas in which the poet shows how the wife is enthusiastic about the husband's childhood and vice-versa, though each has got it second-hand. Notice, as a contrast, how the poet uses the first person, "I" in this poem, not his usual "he" when he speaks of the couple. The title confirms the autobiographical element by affirming that the poem is for the poet's wife. In the process of debating their childhood, the poem exposes a rich lode of images quarried from the pasts of both the poet and his wife. Note the images carefully. See if there is a hidden story in them.

Here, let us concentrate on the poem's argument. As the descriptions of the past start to get more and more detailed, we notice a certain unpleasantness, a drifting apart even. Clearly, the past is never easy to conjure up; we are likely to disagree with other people's reconstructions of it. It is impossible, it would seem, to discover

exactly what happened, let alone agree on it. Inevitably, the wife reduces the husband's entire career to some remark his father made in his diary. "Smilesian" refers to Samuel Smiles, a writer much admired by a certain class of Indian gentleman a couple of generations ago. Similarly, the speaker makes a dig at his wife's father, how he paced up and down the balcony, cigarette in hand, waiting for his daughter's return. The latter, late again, had gone out with a Muslim friend who "only hinted at touches." Again, we find a rather ironic use of "innocent" here.

In the next stanza, the poet brings in his wife's brother, James; how, this time, it is the brother and sister who quarrel over their childhood. But, leaving out the nature or the content of this quarrel, what does it do for the central argument of the poem that the lack of shared childhood keep husband and wife apart? There are one or two lines in this stanza which strengthen this argument. For example, how the poet and his sister-in-law (James's wife) are completely left out of this "dog fight" between brother and sister because neither of them has any idea of where the bathroom was in the backyard. But most of this last half of the poem seems actually to go against the main argument. What is illustrated is not so much how husband and wife grow apart because they don't have a shared childhood but how even a shared childhood isn't conducive to a good relationship. If anything, these stanzas suggest the opposite of the central argument: brother and sisters will make pretty bad spouses. If that is the case, the initial claim of the poem is belied and its conclusion is unconvincing too.

I may have been a bit harsh on this poem, expecting from it a logical consistency that you may think poems need not have. But good poems, in whatever tradition, have to be logically consistent, especially poems which profess to advance an argument. Whether it is Donne, Marvel, or Browning, poets often work out elaborate arguments in their poems. Some of these are of course facetious, pseudo and not real arguments. Only when you read your poems carefully can you take yourself seriously as a critic. In the present case, you should not only examine the poem carefully, but also the case I have made against it for failing to prove its central proposition.

Perhaps, you could find a way of rereading the poem so as to disprove the argument that I have offered against it.

5.2 JAYANTA MAHAPATRA: A BRIEF LIFE SKETCH AND AN OVERVIEW OF HIS POETRY



Jayanta Mahapatra (1928-)

Jayanta Mahapatra and his poetry are closely identified with one place, Cuttack, an ancient city in Orissa, near which the new capital of the state, Bhubaneswar, has been built. Mahapatra was born there, was educated there, taught there, and has lived there for all his life. There were brief stints out of Cuttack, as at Science College, Patna, where he got his MSc. And, later, frequent trips out of Orissa, especially in the last twenty years, when he has been invited to various seminars and conferences both in India and abroad, as one of our leading Indian English poets. But Cuttack continues to be the haunting presence behind most of his work.

Mahapatra comes from a native Christian family, a fact which is seldom mentioned by his critics, but appears in his poetry. His grandfather was what may be called a "rice Christian"; in a time of famine and starvation, he sought refuge with a Christian mission and, in the process, also adopted a new faith for himself and his family. The Christian community in Cuttack is small, but quite distinct. It is far more Westernized and therefore less hidebound by tradition. Earlier, social intercourse with the dominant community was also restricted. All this would give someone born into this community a sense of isolation; he or she would feel like a natural outsider to the dominant cultural mores of the Hindus. I have mentioned these biographical details because they help explain Mahapatra's attitude to the landscape and the people he loves so dearly.

In poem after poem what we notice is a veiled criticism of the callousness and ruthlessness of tradition, of the indifference of his society to suffering, of the insulated and fossilised Hindu culture to which he bears an uneasy relationship. Images of inertia, helplessness, torpor, and decadence frequent his poetry. The universe that he inhabits is static, languid, almost unchanging, but it is also corrupt, violent, and predatory. The poet himself is impotent to change this world, but can only meditate on it with the deepest karuna or compassion. Ultimately, Mahapatra's is a brooding, interrogative poetry. Profound questions are raised without the answers being necessarily supplied.

Mahapatra's poetry shares the skepticism and questioning of tradition that we see in the modernists, but he departs company with them in his craftsmanship and also in his deeply emotive, not cerebral, tone. There are profound depths in his poetry, sometimes complicated by ambiguous or uncertain syntax. In other words, when you analyse a Mahapatra poem you need to go beyond the surface texture. Invariably, the mood that the poem evokes should be taken into account.

Mahapatra came to poetry somewhat late in his life. He was already thirty-eight when he published his first collection, *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten* (1971). That same year, another collection, *Swayamvara and Other Poems* appeared. Both these collections show promise rather than real achievement. After a gap of five years, Mahapatra published two collections of much better poems, *A Father's Hours* (1976) and the much-acclaimed *A Rain of Rites* (1976). After several collections have followed including *Waiting* (1979), *The False Start* (1980), *Life Signs* (1981), *Selected Poems* (1987), *Burden of Waves and Fruit* (1988), *Temple* (1989), *A Whiteness of Bone* (1992). *Relationship* (1980), a long poem in many sections, won the Sahitya Akademi award for 1981. Mahapatra has also published a collection of short stories in English and collection of original poetry in Oriya. From 1979 to 1985 he edited a journal of creative writing called *Chandrabhaga*. He was also the founding editor of *Kavya Bharati*.

5.2.1 Dawn at Puri

This poem from *A Rain of Rites* is, in many ways, typical of Mahapatra. It is set in Orissa, in the holy city of Puri. In Puri, there is a stretch of beach called Swargadwara, or gateway to heaven, where the dead are cremated. Many pious Hindus consider it auspicious to die in Puri. Of course, Puri is famous not only as one of the four dhams, or sacred cities, but also for the math or monastery established

there by the Sankaracharya. Puri is presided over by Lord Jagannath, a form of Vishnu.

The poem is eighteen lines long, made up of six stanzas of three lines each. Most of the sentences are purely descriptive, but notice how the mood builds up gradually. The first line simply says "Endless crow noises." As you will notice, it is not even a sentence, just a phrase. It's the second sentence, however, which bites: "A skull on the holy sands/ tilts its empty country towards hunger." The skull in question could be that of an unburnt corpse, but to the poet's eye it suggests the hunger of an entire country.

The images that follow, though apparently neutral, are quite critical and negative. There are widows in white, past their primes, waiting to enter the great temple. Notice how their eyes are "caught in a net." They are trapped by faith, not a very happy position to be in. The shells on the sand are "ruined, leprous," again suggesting decay and disease. A whole tradition and way of life lies like "a mass of crouched faces without names." Anonymity, loss of identity, facelessness, death--such are the ideas that the poem invokes.

The next images are that of a blazing funeral pyre, which is "sullen" and "solitary." It's the speaker's dead mother being consigned to flames because it was "her last wish to be cremated here." The poem ends on a uncertain note, like the corpse of his dead mother, "twisting uncertainly like light/ on the shifting sands."

You will notice how the poem evades a direct stand on what it describes. This is typical of Mahapatra. His own position is never stated clearly, but emerges from the manner in which he describes the events and incidents in his poems. Here it is clear that there is a strong sense of disapproval which is the undercurrent of the poem. The social critique is unmistakable when we go back to the title, "Dawn at Puri." The title does not say "A Dawn at Puri," that is, it does not refer to one particular dawn, which might have been particularly unpleasant. After all, one's mother is not cremated every day. But rather than make this dawn special, the poet does the opposite, suggesting that all dawns at Puri are more or less like this, with dead mothers being burnt on the sands, widows in white being herded into the old temple, and empty skulls, tilting their empty eyes towards the sky, signifying the hunger of a whole continent. The poem is informed by a deep compassion for those who suffer.

It is this compassion which gives the images their bite, their sense of outrage and smouldering anger. But there is little sympathy for the traditions and practices of a society on whose fringes the poet stands. The poet has no kind words to say about those who believe in the traditions and practices that he criticises.

5.2.2 *Indian Summer Poem*

Once again, we see a very general title for what appears to be a specific scene and experience. This poem is, again, about death and birth, about the end and the beginning of life. But the images here are more elliptical, disjointed. There is a description of a scene: what in your opinion is actually happening in the poem? It seems as if the poem describes a funeral. The last line makes this clear by referring to "the deep roar of funeral pyres." But who is dead? This is unclear. We only know that the priests are chanting; the waters opening their mouths wide to receive the dead; the crocodiles moving farther down; and so on. Note the image, "the mouth of India opens." India is seen as a sort of giant monster opening its mouth to swallow up the dead. It is not a very flattering image because the poet seems to identify the whole country with death. Another brief stanza emphasizes the burning sun above and the burning pyres below. No wonder a certain vision of India emerges in Mahapatra's poems which is rather grim and graphic. There is a sense of futility even in death because there is the poet's good wife sleeping in bed unaffected by the burning of the funeral pyres. The languid wife's mid-afternoon siesta in the poet's

bed is suggestive of sexual possessiveness. She dreams, that is she is unaware of the sense of death that haunts the poet. But, to speak up for the wife, should she be aware of death at all? Whose death? That we don't know. So it is perfectly natural that most of us are unaware of all the cremations or burials that take place in our own cities because the dead are those whom we don't know. But in Mahapatra's poem, the speaker, who is aware of death, is estranged from his sleeping wife because she has recourse to her dreams while he must face the brunt of a horrible reality.

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5.2.3 *Hunger*

This rather well-known poem is also from *A Rain of Rites*. Mahapatra selects it quite often when he gives a reading and says that the "poem is based on a true incident" (see Mehrtotra, *Twelve Modern Indian Poets* 22). The poem is in five paragraphs of five lines each except the last one which has an extra line. It tells a rather simple story. It has three characters: there is the speaker, an old fisher, and his young daughter. The fisherman is willing to let the speaker have sex with his daughter for a few rupees.

The casualness of this transaction underscores, for the the speaker, its enormity. There is a sense that a terrible moral crime is about to erupt with such little fuss on the sprawling sands of this beach. The speaker, despite his own disgust, succumbs to the temptation and has sex with the fifteen year old daughter of the fisherman. But what he experiences at the end is a sort of horror: "Long and lean, her years were cold as rubber." The act is utterly degraded, losing all its sense of joy, comfort, or pleasure. Instead, it evokes a sense of disgust and self-loathing in the speaker. The fisherman's shack opens "like a wound." The girls legs are "wormy." And as he enters he feels a hunger there, of "fish slithering, turning inside."

The poem contrasts two types of hunger and how they feed on each other. The speaker's hunger is that of the flesh, that of "a mind thumping in the flesh's sling." As we know, this is one of the hardest hungers to control. No matter how respectable and decent we might try to be, it gnaws us to our very bone. Contrary to this is the other hunger, the hunger not for sex, but for food, perhaps the only hunger more primeval. The fisherman and his daughter are poor. To feed their stomachs, they resort to feeding the other hunger, the sexual hunger, of the speaker. But, in the end, is that hunger really appeased? It does not seem like it at all. Instead, a sense of catastrophe haunts the speaker; the very sky, it seems, falls on him.

This poem is more direct, less ambiguous, than the earlier one. Here the moral outrage, the social criticism is much more direct, hard-hitting. The poet, from behind his persona, clearly indicts the system which allows such careless prostitution to happen. Here, destitution is the cause of the prostitution. And it is this extreme poverty and deprivation that the poet focuses on and exposes.

5.2.4 *Evening Landscape by the River*

This poem from *Life Signs* (1993), once again, takes us back to a familiar landscape. Instead of the sands of Puri at dawn, here we wander on the banks of the river in Cuttack at dusk. It is a short, fourteen line poem, in three stanzas. What is its theme? There are images of broken shacks of fishermen, of frail and still temples, of an infant crawling in a hut, of light laughter and abundant darkness. The poem ends with "an uncertain light," reminiscent of the same phrase in the last lines of "Dawn at Puri." Here, the light is like "familiar but useless ornament," a wonderfully telling image.

This is a good example of a mood poem. At the beginning the poet states that he is sad--he says so not directly, but indirectly, in a rather impersonal statement: "There is a kind of sadness which closes the eyes." Why is the poet sad? This is not clear, but some clues are provided. Is it because he can no longer recollect the faces of the dead? That is he can no longer remember those he has lost? Or is the sadness even

more profound, a sort of emptiness in which everything around one is familiar but useless, unable to take away from the overflowing dukkha of existence itself? All the images seem to suggest that the poet's sorrow is like the clinging and abundant darkness in which all the objects and events of daily life get detached and depersonalized, losing the individuality and capacity to be meaningful.

There is a tremendous loneliness that seeps through this poem. The speaker is thrown back upon himself and nothing that he observes or experiences seems to be able to take him away or out of himself. The nature of the experiencing self itself, the poem suggests, is sorrow. The evening by the river, then, becomes a metaphor for the suffering of the human condition itself.

This is a very well-constructed poem which, in a few lines, touches upon a subject of great importance. The poet, of course, offers no palliatives, no answers, no antidotes to the sadness that he invokes. Perhaps, it is best to feel it as deeply as he does and thus to purge ourselves of it.

5.3 ARUN KOLATKAR: A BRIEF LIFE SKETCH AND AN OVERVIEW OF HIS POETRY

Born in 1932 in Kolhapur, Arun Balkrishna Kolatkar was educated at Rajaram High School. Later he studied art at the J.J. School of Art, Mumbai, and at Kolhapur and Pune, before getting his diploma in painting from the J. J. School. Kolatkar has lived in Mumbai most of his life, earning his living in advertising. He is, as I mentioned earlier, a bilingual poet, writing both in Marathi and in English. Since 1955 he has been appearing in various journals and anthologies, though he has published only one book in English, *Jejuri* (1976), and one in Marathi, *Arun Kolatkarchya Kavita* (1976).

Jejuri, from which all the three poems that you're studying have been taken, is a rather special collection of poems. It is the only book of poems to have won the Commonwealth Prize. It has thirty-one poems, but can be read as one long exploration on a common theme. The book describes a journey to Jejuri, a temple town near Pune. Jejuri is an ancient centre of pilgrimage in Maharashtra. The presiding deity, Khandoba, predates more popular folk deities like Vittala. Khandoba is worshipped by the Dhargar or the shepherd community in Maharashtra.

Jejuri has provoked a considerable amount of debate because of its attitude to the religious experience. What happens in this book is a modern pilgrimage which overturns or undercuts several traditional devotional practices. The speaker seems to be rather irreverent. Some readers have found Kolatkar insulting or supercilious; others have asked him whether he himself believes in God or not. But from a more literary-textual point of view both issues are less relevant; what we need to do as readers, first of all, is to discover what the poet is trying to do. Mehrotra in his excellent headnote to Kolatkar in *Twelve Modern Indian Poets* gives us a clue when he says, "The presiding deity of Jejuri is not Khandoba, but the human eye" (54). Thus, the poems, in Mehrotra's words, "name and observe, isolate and magnify, and by so doing radically transform ... everything they see" (ibid).

This exactness of observation is almost an article of faith for the modernist poet. They wish to look at, and thus, make things anew, not being content with images of the past, images filtered through the coloured glasses of other people's words and deeds. Discarding the burden of tradition does not always make for irreverence or bad faith but may actually prepare the ground for a new vision and creation. *Jejuri*, then, is about noticing and observing what is before us, not giving it a name of "sacred" or "holy" just because it is considered so. In such skepticism is a certain

kind of sacredness because adherence to truth produces a sanctity which the blind imitation of tradition cannot.

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5.3.1 *The Bus*

Eight three line stanzas followed by a single line of conclusion make up this poem. It occurs at the beginning of the collection and rightly so because it describes a journey to Jejuri. It is as if the poet is approaching a new planet, so conscious and careful he is about everything he observes. The aimed at objectivity is illustrated in the pervasive use of "you" to signify what the poet observes. The whole poem abounds in visual metaphors. In the beginning, the tarpaulin flaps of the bus, its eyes so to speak, are buttoned down. Very little is visible. In the cold wind, the narrator looks for signs of dawn, expressing yet again a yearning to see things clearly. The first attempt is abortive: all that can be seen of the countryside is the speaker's own divided face in an old man's glasses. This seeing of oneself instead of the object is very significant. After all, this is the curse that is involved in any act of perception. One's own intentionality damns one no matter how hard one strives for a flawless objectivity. The subjective, inevitably, intrudes, clouding one's judgement. In the end, you can only see what you are; that is what you allow yourself to see or what you are allowed by your own limitations to see. One's own self is thus divided--it is both subject and object at the same time.

The next stanza takes us to the speaker's destination; significantly, it seems to be just above the caste-mark on his forehead. Again, we see the effects of optical illusions and reflections; in the glasses of the old man, the speaker observes the countryside. But beyond caste, beyond tradition is certainly where the poem leads us thematically. Then the sun rises, aims and shoots its beams into the bus, touches the driver's temple; the direction of the bus changes. Jejuri is near. The images of the sun suggest a splitting, a breaking into two. The speaker's own face appears to be on either side of the bus when he gets off.

The destination so far has been mapped on the old man's face, through the reflection of the countryside on his glasses. Now, when the bus actually arrives, the poet's own face is divided; the optical illusion is broken.

As you can see, this poem only prepares the ground for what is to follow. It merely describes an arrival. It must therefore be viewed in continuity with the other poems in the collection. What is important, though, is the attitude of the speaker, of the observer, to what is seen and observed. That establishes the tone of the rest of the collection.

5.3.2 *A Low Temple*

This sixteen-line poem exemplifies the so-called "irreverance" of the speaker quite well. The adjective low cannot be devoid of its negative connotations of inferiority and inadequacy, though it is primarily descriptive, that is, suggestive of lack of height. No doubt the temple is "low," but by whose standards? Many old houses were similarly "low," with such small doors that you had to bend down to enter. But by the standards of those for whom these houses were built, they must have been adequate. The speaker's response is typical of a modern person, used to the modern architecture of steel and concrete, not of someone used to living in a hut made in the same way for centuries. What I've been suggesting is that the gap is not just ideological but technological.

When a devout person enters a temple, he may bow before the deities, concentrating more on his relationship with the Divine than on the physical features of his surroundings. In Kolatkar's poem, however, just the opposite happens. The darkness inside the shrine prompts him to claim that the gods themselves are in the dark in this

low temple. Actually, the speaker is as much in the dark as the gods whom he cannot see clearly. It's not that the gods are in dark, but there is darkness inside the temple.

The next lines carry on this metaphor of literal enlightenment; only when the matches are lit do the gods "come to light." What happens next? Not devotion, again, but a cool apprehension of "amused bronze." What the speaker sees are not icons but forms of bronze. And stone--"smiling stone." The depersonalization is unmistakable. The gods, however, are "unsurprised," though the poet may be. The length of the matchstick, both in real time and visual time, creates the effect of cycles of the creation and destruction: "gesture after gesture revives and dies/ Stance after lost stance is found/ and lost again." But these gestures and stances are lost on the poet. He has to ask the priest who that was.

The exchange that follows is interesting. "The eight-armed goddess" does not impress the speaker: "a skeptic-match coughs." The speaker, with his sharp observation even in darkness illumined only with matches says, that she has eighteen, not eight arms. But this does not convince the priest. Tradition is stronger than empiricism; no wonder the speaker's skepticism does not abate. On deeper reflection, however, the problem is somewhat more complicated. I wonder what Indian words were used to describe the eight-armed or eighteen armed goddess. Perhaps, knowing this will help us verify if clash in perception is linguistic or epistemological.

We are denied the luxury of such reflections in the last two lines of the poem. The speaker, emerging from the low and dark temple, lights a cigarette and jokes about children playing on the back of a twenty-foot tortoise. What is this twenty-foot tortoise? Is it the poet's idea of a fitting retort to the error of perception on the priest's part inside the temple? Or is it a rock shaped like a tortoise? We don't know, but, once again, questions of perception are foregrounded.

On the whole, the poem shows an interaction between two kinds of sensibilities, one traditional and the other modern, inside the dark interiors of a low temple. Perhaps, the labels that I have used, "tradition" vs. "modernity" are neither precise nor productive. Try to reformulate this difference in your own words, if you like. Yet, this poem, indeed the whole book, is about this clash between two ways of seeing and, perhaps, two ways of being. In the end, you'll have to ask yourself what each offers before making your choice.

5.3.3 *Chaitanya*

This tiny poem contains an important message which is conveyed through one vivid image, that of Chaitanya spitting out the seeds of the grapes that he has eaten. Chaitanya was a great Vaishnavite figure of the 15th century. He hailed from Bengal, but traveled all over India spreading his cult of ecstatic devotion to Lord Krishna. Chaitanya, of course, also means awakened consciousness. His visit to Jejuri must have been commemorated by several temples.

The thrust of the poem, as I said, is on one image--the stones of Jejuri are as sweet as grapes. To prove this, Chaitanya pops a stone in his mouth instead of a grape. Now grapes have "stones" or seeds which we spit out instead of chewing. But in this case, instead of these seeds, Chaitanya spits out gods. The image seems to be blasphemous, but what it implies is the god-making ability of Chaitanya. He had the capacity to turn stones into gods. Eating and spitting out both suggest a supernatural, if irreverent, attitude to this otherwise miraculous transfiguration. In several Indian temple-towns, we have instances of shrines consecrated by some great saint, sage, or mythological hero. Sometimes, shrines are named after parts of the body of this legendary figure; at other times, places associated with that figure become sacred. Here the same process is not just described but satirised. Even the grape-stones that Chaitanya might have spat out would become apotheosized, such was the faith of our folk. Chaitanya sat here, ate here, slept here; this is his foot print; this is his hand

impression--and so on--all these legends would turn into temples or shrines. The poem, then, is about associational sacralization--how a place gets deified and sanctified through its association with a holy person. In this case, the skeptic in Kolatkar imagines that given the credulity and devotionism of our people, even the place where Chaitanya spat might become a shrine.

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There is, no doubt, something quite anti-devotional about this poem but perhaps it betrays a faith in a different kind of reality. Not the reality of legends and myths but of historical facts. A healthy secularism runs headlong into the sacred mythology of a temple town. From the images that spark off from this clash, a new kind of poem is born--terse, sharp-edged, and provocative.

5.4 LET US SUM UP

We have in our discussion on Ramanujan found the element of skepticism which runs most persistent in his poetry. We have also seen his use of tradition which is ironic and that a certain anxiety, a blankness marks his poetry. However, the consequences and conundrums of profound displacement may appeal differently to you. It is for you to judge his treatment of Indian material.

The other poet, Jayant Mahapatra, shares the skepticism of Ramanujan and the modernists, but he departs from them by being deeply emotive, not cerebral. Mahapatra's Christian belonging made him an outsider to the dominant Hindu culture and hence all the helplessness, inertia, torpor and the unchanging universe.

Arun Koltakar's *Jejury* provokes a debate in the context of religious experience of a modern pilgrim. The presiding deity being the "human eye", it transforms the phenomena it sees and interacts with. As a modernist, Koltakar does not discard the traditions but prepares for a new vision and creation and, therefore, makes us look at 'modernism' in a new perspective.

5.5 GLOSSARY

Vernacular:	language of one's own country, native tongue.
Estrange:	alienate person from another.
Ostensible:	professed; used as blind.
Putative:	reputed.
Torpor:	suspended animation; apathy.
Languid:	suffering from faintness or lassitude.
Ambiguous:	of doubtful meaning; uncertain.
Smouldering:	burning without flame or in suppressed way.
Apotheosis:	deification; transformation.
Deify:	make a god of.

5.6 QUESTIONS

1. Give a biographical sketch of A.K.Ramanujan. What/Who were his major literary influences?
2. Critically analyse the poem *Looking for a Cousin on a Swing*.
3. Give the critical appreciation of *Love poem for a Wife*, and write a short note on the love-hate relationship portrayed in the poem.
4. What is the poet trying to convey through *Self Portrait* and *A River*?
5. Give a detailed analysis of Jayanta Mahapatra and his contribution to Indian English Poetry.
6. What is the significance of the title *Dawn at Puri*? Give a critical analysis of the poem.
7. What is the poet trying to convey through the poem *Evening Landscape*.
8. Give the critical appreciation of *Indian Summer Poem* and *Hunger*.
9. What is Kolatkar's contribution to Modern Indian English Poetry?
10. What is the poet trying to convey through *Jejuri*?
11. Give a critical appreciation of *The Bus*.
12. How does Kolatkar portray the famous religious poet of Bengal, Chaitanya in his poem *Chaitanya*? Give a critical appreciation of the poem.
13. In what way, do you think, can Kolatkar's *Jejuri* be compared with T.S.Eliot's *Four Quartets*?
14. Annotate the following:
 - i. With every lunge of the swing
she felt him
in the lunging pits
of her feeling;
and afterwards
we climbed a tree, she said
 - ii. Now she looks for the swing
in cities with fifteen suburbs
and tries to be innocent
about it
 - iii. I resemble everyone
but myself, and sometimes see
in shop-windows,
despite the well-known laws
of optics,
the portrait of a stranger,
date unknown,
often signed in a corner
by my father.

- iv. a river dries to a trickle
in the sand,
baring the sand-ribs,
straw and women's hair
clogging the watergates
- v. The new poets still quoted
the old poets, but no one spoke
in verse
of the pregnant woman
drowned with perhaps twins in her,
kicking at blank walls
even before birth.
- vi. Really what keeps us apart
at the end of years is unshared
childhood. You cannot, for instance,
meet my father. He is some years
dead. Neither can I meet yours:
he has lately lost his temper
and mellowed.
- vii. and reduce the entire career
of my recent unique self
to the compulsion of some high
sentence in His Smilesian diary.
- viii. Probably
only the Egyptians had it right:
their kings had sisters for queens
to continue the incests
of childhood into marriage.

Annotate the following:

- i. Endless crow noises
A skull on the holy sands
tilts its empty country towards hunger.
- ii. Their austere eyes
stare like those caught in a net
hanging by the dawn's shining strands of faith.
- iii. her last wish to be cremated here
twisting uncertainly like light
on the shifting sands.
- iv. Over the souging of the sombre wind
priests chant louder than ever:
the mouth of India opens.
- v. Mornings of heated middens
smoke under the sun
- vi. I saw his white bone thrash his eyes.
I followed him across the sprawling sands,
my mind thumping in the flesh's sling.
Hope lay perhaps in burning the house.

- vii. She opened her wormy legs wide. I felt the hunger there,
the other one, the fish slithering, turning inside.
 - viii. This is the kind of sadness which closes the eyes.
Here the memory for faces of the dead never appears.
 - ix. A temple stands frail and still
in the distance, as though lost in reverie.
 - x. It is evening, there is light laughter,
and the abundant darkness of water
lies like a familiar but useless ornament
over which an uncertain light of the moon
16. Annotate the following:
- i. your own divided face in a pair of glasses
on an old man's nose
is all the country side you get to see
 - ii. At the end of the bumpy ride
with your own face on either side
when you get off the bus
you don't step inside the old man's head
 - iii. Sweet as grapes
are the stones of Jejuri
said Chaitanya
 - iv. he popped a stone
in his mouth
and spat out gods
 - v. For a moment the length of a matchstick
gesture after gesture revives and dies
stance after lost stance is found
and lost again,
Who was that, you ask.
 - vi. You come out in the sun and light a charminar
children play on the back of the twenty foot tortoise.

5.7 SUGGESTED READING

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UNIT 6 R. PARTHASARATHY AND KEKI N. DARUWALLA

Structure

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 R. Parthasarathy: A Brief Life Sketch and an Overview of his Work
 - 6.1.1 Exile: 2
 - 6.1.2 Trial: 1
 - 6.1.3 Homecoming: 1
- 6.2 Keki N. Daruwalla: A Brief Life Sketch and an Overview of his Work
 - 6.2.1 Rumination
 - 6.2.2 Routine
 - 6.2.3 Crossing of Rivers
- 6.3 Let Us Sum Up
- 6.4 Glossary
- 6.5 Questions
- 6.6 Suggested Reading

6.0 OBJECTIVES

Our last Unit in this Block includes poems by two talented but rather different poets. R. Parthasarathy occupies a poetic world similar to that of A. K. Ramanujan. Like Ramanujan, Parthasarathy has translated extensively from Tamil into English, but, unlike him, has not written much in Tamil. In his only significant collection, Parthasarathy speaks of problems of identity, loss of the mother tongue, and ultimately, the loss of poetry itself. Daruwalla's poems, on the other hand, deal with a world of action, not just of ideas. His is a strongly masculine muse, preoccupied with themes of power, control, and dominance. He explores the rich mine-field of history, not just of Indian history but of middle-eastern and near-eastern history, coming up with incidents and images of lasting value. Daruwalla's poetry is cosmopolitan, not necessarily Indo-centric. In this Unit, we shall look at selected poems of both poets, preceded, of course, by a brief life-sketch of each and an introduction to their works.

6.1 R. PARTHASARATHY: A BRIEF LIFE SKETCH AND AN OVERVIEW OF HIS WORK

Rajgopalan Parthasarathy was born in Tiruparaitturai, Tamil Nadu, in 1934. He spent his early years in the temple town of Srirangam, before moving to Mumbai for his education. In Mumbai, he was educated at Don Bosco School and Siddharth College, where he got a B.A. in English. He then did his Masters in English from Bombay University. After teaching in a college for some time, he went abroad to study in 1963-64, as a British Council scholar at Leeds University.

In England, his distance from his motherland and mother tongue gave rise to the special tension that is evident in his poetry. He published some poems that were privately circulated when he was in Bombay, but his only major published collection is *Rough Passage* (1977). Parthasarathy revised this collection in 1980, recasting many of its poems. It is this revised edition from which we have got our texts. Parthasarathy has been an extremely influential editor and anthologist.

- Mahapatra, Jayanta. *A Rain of Rites*. Athens: Georgia University Press, 1976.
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R. Parthasarathy. (1934-)

His anthology *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets*, published by the Oxford University Press in 1976, is perhaps the best-selling and most prescribed anthology of modern Indian English poetry. In it Parthasarathy defined the modernist ethos in a manner which has not been seriously disputed by any other anthologist except Makarand Paranjape. I shall not go into the details of the debate here except to say that Parthasarathy, by selecting specific types of poems of just ten Indian English poets, consolidated the purist high-modernism which has made Indian-English poetry so restricted and narrowly confined. By tightly controlling the canon, by rejecting the older poets, and by exercising an oppressive control over the content and style of poetry, Parthasarathy's anthology can be considered to mark the high-point of Indian English literary modernism.

Parthasarathy also served as an editor of Oxford University Press. During his tenure, some of the best-known Indian English modernist poetry was published, with the same careful and exacting editorial standards. The year 1976, in fact, saw the publication of several significant titles in recent Indian English poetry. After Parthasarathy left Oxford University Press, he went to the USA to complete a PhD at the University of Texas at Austin. He is now a professor at Skidmore College, USA.

6.1.1 *Exile: 2*

Rough Passage is divided into three sections, Exile, Trial, and Homecoming. This tripartite structure suggests the loss and recovery of a colonized self, an almost emblematic shape of the progression of every postcolonial pilgrim.

All the poems in the revised *Rough Passage* have three-line stanzas as in this poem. This one has fourteen stanzas. The scene is a basement flat in London. In the fog, lights shine like holes in walls. The basement flat suggests rather cheap accommodation such as students might afford. Conversation fills the night--and cigarette stubs, empty bottles of liquor, and the music of Ravi Shankar. Such a setting is conducive to some serious soul-searching, it would appear. What does the main character, distanced through the impersonal second person, "he," learn from exile: "He had spent his youth whoring/ after English gods." The image is powerful and self-incriminating, but in the context of our long history of colonization, suggestive of nothing really new. We could say the same of Michael Madhusudan Dutt or of any of the Anglicised poets, writers, and intellectuals of the nineteenth century or twentieth century. Like them, the protagonist learns that "roots are deep" only when he is exiled. More troubling is the loss of the language under an alien sun: "language is a tree, loses colour/under another sky." Ultimately, it is this that is most distressing about exile; what it does to the language of one's cultural make-up.

The other thing that the poet encounters is the racism of England. He is considered a "coloured" person, marked out as different from the white natives. The city is also full of "smoke and litter." Here the poem's thematic concerns expand to embrace the whole history of colonialism, of "the de Gamas, Clives, Dupleixs." This requiem for dead empires is heard by the poet at Trafalgar Square. An old man, presumably a Briton, speaks the words: "Victoria sleeps on her island/ alone, an old hag,/ shaking her invincible locks." This seems to suggest that the end of empire is quite inglorious and anticlimactic.

The poem ends with images of London: the scene from the Westminster Bridge, the stone chariot wheels of Boadicea, the shadow of the poplars, the Thames at night, and so on. Again, there is an uncertainty about what the poem is trying to say exactly. Perhaps, we should not look here for some well-articulated idea about the postcolonial condition, so much as a sense of exile that an Indian poet experiences when abroad. This section is a part of a larger poem in three parts, we should remember. As in *Jejuri* we must not expect a sense of completion and unity in each poem.

What remains vivid about this poem is a sense of both displacement and belonging, a rediscovery of one's roots and the acute awareness of the loss of one's language, the requiem for empire sung by an unknown old man, and, finally, the uncertain and confusing submergence of these vexing questions themselves in the welter of the city.

6.1.2 *Trial: I*

What is this brief poem about? No doubt, it speaks of some experiences which are very distressing, even anguish-ridden. There are references to "the end." What end is the poet talking about? The end of life itself or of something else as well? There is a confession that the speaker has not found the "key to unlock His gates"--His, that is God's. So there is no solace in some superior wisdom or faith. The skepticism of the modernists definitely comes back to haunt them. Even love is nothing but "night curves." Can it answer to the soul's anguish? Can it solve the riddle of the universe? Not really. And yet, love does offer some solace, some comfort: "I grasp your hand/ in a rainbow of touch." So the physical presence and warmth of another being attentive to one's own does help. The poet ends with a resolve rather unconnected with the rest of the poem: "Of the dead/ I speak nothing but good." Is he saying that he will not blame his parents or ancestors for his condition?

Let us come back to the beginning of the poem: "Mortal as I am, I face the end/ with unspeakable relief." Death here is seen as a release. But the very next lines express the panic of someone who is cut off mid-sentence, before he has had a chance to complete what he wished to say. Yet, soon afterwards, quite philosophically, the poet reconciles himself to that eventuality: "Yet that too would pass unheeded." That is, when one is cut-off, whether one has things left to say or not does not matter. The emphasis on having things to say and being stopped in the middle suggests, at least to me, that the "end" is not just the end of the body, but could be thought of as the end of poetry. The loss of poetry, of the gift of the poetic voice, is akin to death, so debilitating it can be. And yet, here, the poet bravely prepares for that. It is as if he tells himself that the worst that could happen is death (or the end of poetry), but one would have to accept even that.

To learn to accept reality, no matter how bitter or difficult it may be, is one of the ordeals that the poet must undergo during his trial.

6.1.3 *Homecoming: I*

What remains to be seen, after the exile and trial, is if the homecoming is triumphant and convincing or, at best, uncertain and unsatisfying. In the four stanzas of this

poem, a penitent poet returns to his mother-tongue: "My tongue in English chains, / I return, after a generation, to you." This is perhaps the most acute and pained statement of the clash inherent, as we have seen, in the very nature and texture of Indian English poetry. While later, postmodern poets, have seen this clash of languages as a blessing rather than a curse, Parthasarathy seems to prefer purity to hybridity.

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The poet returns not to a country but to a language, Tamil, his tongue in English chains. Again, the fact of the primacy of English induces guilt and unease in the poet as in the earlier image of whoring. English, then, is not only the rival but also the alien mistress who has usurped the place of the mother-tongue. The poet feels guilty of disloyalty. And yet, the hunger for the mother-tongue is "unassuaged." Perhaps, as the poem proceeds, we realize that this hunger cannot be assuaged because Tamil too is no longer the language of the Kural, but is now hooked on celluloid; from the language of classical texts, it has become that of popular films.

The poem thus speaks not only of the politics of identity but of language. It tells us what happens to languages--how one language dominates the other in the international market place, how people choose languages not for ideological but for pragmatic reasons. Even Tamil to which the poet turns to for reclaiming his self is now dominated by market forces. Commerce triumphs over culture.

This poem shows us that the poet's homecoming is somewhat uncertain, if not unsatisfactory. Perhaps, there is no primal wholeness to which we can return. Rather, we substitute one sort of displacement for another.

These three excerpts from *Rough Passage* may not offer us a coherent picture of the text, but do help to foreground certain themes that recur throughout modern Indian English poetry.

6.2 KEKI N. DARUWALLA: A BREIF LIFE SKETCH AND AN OVERVIEW OF HIS WORK



Keki N. Daruwalla (1937-)

Keki Nasserwanji Daruwalla was born in Lahore in 1937. He spent his childhood at various places, including Junagad, where his father was in the service of the Nawab. Daruwalla later went to college in Ludhiana, where he got an M.A. Afterwards, he joined the Indian Police Service. He has served the Government of India in various positions and postings, including stints abroad, before his retirement. His volumes of

poetry include *Under Orion* (1970), *Apparition in April* (1971), *Crossing of Rivers* (1976), *Winter Poems* (1980), *The Keeper of the Dead* (1982), and *Landscapes* (1987). He has two or three new collections which are ready for publication. He won the Sahitya Akademi award for his collection *Keeper of the Dead*. He is also a short story writer with two collections to his credit. In addition, he has edited an anthology of modern Indian English poetry, *Two Decades of Indian Poetry: 1960-1980*.

Daruwalla, as I said earlier, is primarily a poet of action. Some of his poems like "Hawk" or "Wolf" are about predatory birds and beasts. A number of other poems feature conquerors or soldiers. There is a fascination for power and dominance. The victims of history as seen as just that--victims, who may deserve sympathy, but little else; after all that is how the world operates. Is there a God that presides over Daruwalla's world? We cannot be sure, because here the law of the jungle seems to operate. If there is a moral order it is marked by the absence of compassion or retributive justice. One need not conclude that Daruwalla is a cynic, though that is what some of his poems might suggest; actually, he would probably prefer to see himself as a realist, someone who can look at the unsavoury aspects of history with an unblinking eye. He is not fascinated or impressed by those who renounce power and glory, unless this leads to a different kind of power as in the Ashokan edict poem, "The King Speaks to the Scribe." Instead, in Daruwalla's world, the powerful will exercise power, even if they do so in a cruel and destructive fashion. Power, violence, lust are like natural forces and drives; they will work themselves out in the world of men. This is what human history is about, for Daruwalla.

6.2.1 Ruminations

This poem from *Under Orion* is a meditation on violence. The speaker is somebody who is on duty, as it were, "prodding rat-holes/ and sounding caverns" to detect violence before it erupts. Perhaps, he is a police officer like Daruwalla himself.

As the poem begins, the speaker "smells violence in the air," as if before the outbreak of a communal riot--there is a clear reference to "mass hatreds." The image of these hatreds drifting "grey across the moon" is suggestive of a momentary lapse of sanity or, to be more precise, a touch of lunacy (the word itself derives from the supposed effect of the moon on people). Violence is next compared to a poised cobra, hood swaying, fangs exposed. The speaker, searching as if for an enemy, seems to be tracking down death itself, suggested by the cross bones and skull head.

In the next stanza, which is the longest, the focus of the poem shifts somewhat from violence to death itself, to the frailty of the flesh, in fact. The poet describes how a dead body putrefies, turning pulpy as it rots. At the funeral, the stench of rotting flesh competes with the aroma of incense-sticks. Next we see another stray instance of violence: a woman with her nose sliced off, supposedly for cheating on her husband. Then we see three ways of disposing off the dead--cremation, burial, and the Parsi tower of silence, where the body is picked to the bone by the vultures.

The poem ends with a description of rain. But this rain does not leave the poet feeling cleansed. Why? The poet says he has misplaced it "somewhere in the caverns" of his past. The meditation on violence and death has not given the poet knowledge or release. Instead, it has made him (and through him, us, his readers) confront some unsavoury facts about the human condition. The poem does not offer us a well-articulated insight about violence or death but induces in us a feeling of discomfort and, even, revulsion. Why are people violent? Why do we kill each other? These questions are not answered. Instead, we are left with sensations that accompany them, sensations which are by no means pleasant.

I've been trying to suggest that this poem operates not through a progression of ideas so much as through a progression of images, which convey some definite sensations. These sensations, however, do end up conveying some sort of message about the

nature of violence. And it is left to us, as readers, to figure out what that message might be. To me, this poem suggests that the cycle of violence follows a certain, almost natural pattern. First, there is a sense of menace in the air, the brooding, hovering felling of an impending outbreak. Then, violence does erupt. Many people may be killed in the process; or else, as in the case of domestic quarrel, only one person may be mutilated or dead. In death, it is clearly how pliant man is, so easy to dispose of. He is equally amenable to a variety of terminations and disposals. Finally, it is over. Like rain after summer, normalcy is restored. But this normalcy does not necessarily cleanse us; certainly, the speaker does not feel cleansed. Instead, he is left with several unanswered questions and a bitter after-taste.

6.2.2 Routine

This poem is from Daruwalla's second collection, *Apparition in April* (1971). In tone and content it seems to continue from the previous poem; even, the persona seems to be the same as in the earlier poem. The speaker is a policeman, whose "beat" is to put down a riot; so he is on a riot routine in this poem.

The poem begins with the putties, or the strips of cloth which policemen tie on the calves above their boots. This practice, as indeed, much else about our police force, is a hangover of the British Raj. Why does the poem allude to this past? The fact is that this so-called independent country bears many after-effects of colonial rule. The police in any colonial state is an instrument of state repression because by definition a colonial power cannot have the best interests of its citizens in mind. But, what about an independent nation which has won its freedom in spite of brutal repression by this very police force? Shouldn't the police force of such a nation be different? But, no, it is not--as the poem shows us only too well.

The dress code of the police does not seem to be climatically suitable because it makes the police rather short-tempered: "Within the burning crash-helmet/ the brain is fire-pulp." Daruwalla wishes to give us an insight into the psyche of the policeman. He is doing a very difficult job under very difficult conditions. Naturally, he may lose his temper and react. Some innocents will die. In the end those killed will only be empty statistics for the third page of the daily newspaper. The crowd that the cops have to control is not only unruly, but abusive. Daruwalla depicts it as immature and dangerous. Karam Singh's observation, "these kids whose pubes have hardly sprouted" suggests both his sympathy and contempt for them. Raw, uncouth, and callow, the protestors seem to be students. The reference to "young blood" and the burning of tram cars later suggests that the poem is set in Calcutta. The first stanza also gives us a clue about the composition of the force. Colonial administration was based on the principle of divide et impera or divide and rule. Policemen recruited from one region were sent to keep law and order in another part of the country. They were thus not only perceived as outsiders but were actually aliens, who could carry out certain kinds of anti-people orders with less guilt because they had little sympathy for the local people. Perhaps, Karam Singh, who says that he has children as old as the rioters is one of these outsiders.

In the second stanza, the poem reaches its climax. The very routine that the policemen have to perform makes them callous and cynical. It's the same story over and over again. The speaker says "It's all well rehearsed." The protestors are warned; the police are commanded to load and to fire. But unlike Karam Singh and most others, the speaker fires not in the air, to warn the protestors, but into the crowd. He knows what he is doing: "I put a piece of death up the spout."

The main question in this poem is why does he do so? Is it hatred? Or indifference? The evidence of the poem seems to suggest the latter. The boy killed by the speaker's bullet is picked up by the Salvage Squad, to be sent for an autopsy. The speaker continues with his tone of matter-of-fact reporting. Order has been restored. The policemen, weary and depressed after the toil, march back to the lines.

The last line, "We are marching forward," makes us reflect on the chief import of the poem. The last line is, of course, ironic, meant to suggest the opposite of what it states. It satirises the politicians who mouth slogans of progress though they themselves contribute most to the backwardness and chaos in the country. And yet, shifting the blame to the politicians does not solve the problem that the poem raises. It does not absolve the speaker of killing the rioter, almost in cold blood. This is an act of murder, all the more deplorable because it has been carried out by a law enforcement agent. True, the poem does show us how badly stressed out these riot police are. But the individual pathology of the speaker cannot be exonerated by the difficult conditions under which the whole force functions.

The poem's main intent seems to be to do precisely this: to offer an explanation for certain acts of inexplicable violence which the police themselves perform. But, in my opinion, instead of offering the rationale for such an act, the poem actually ends up doing something entirely different. The hero of the poem is Karam Singh, and thousands of "good" cops like him, who even in times that are very trying, do not lose the sympathy for their Other, the amorphous crowd that they are sent in to control. Instead, Karam Singh, though supposedly an outsider, can actually see the crowd not as a crowd, but as what it really is, a group of individuals, each with their own personal histories and families. Karam Singh and the rest of the contingent aim at the sun when they fire their rifles, that is, they shoot in the air. Provoked some more, they may even be forced to shoot at the feet of the protesters. But the speaker aims straight into the body of the crowd and ends up killing one of the youths.

Instead of increasing our understanding of and sympathy for the speaker, the poem ends up exposing the psyche of cold-blooded killer in the garb of the policeman. It is, in this deft and, perhaps, terrifying clash between professed and possible meaning that makes this poem so fascinating as a study in the pathology of violence.

6.2.3 *Crossing of Rivers*

The poem from Daruwalla's eponymous collection published in 1984 certainly ranks among his best. Its forty-five lines are split into paragraphs of uneven length, some just a couple of lines long, while others, like the third extend to nineteen lines.

The subject of the poem, as the title says, is the crossing of rivers. Now this itself can be of various kinds. You may cross the river for fun, just to see if you can swim across. But this simple act can have a lot of symbolic significance. For instance, you must have heard of the phrase "cross the Rubicon." This refers to Caesar's crossing of a small river in Northern Italy that marked the border of the Roman Republic. Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon in 49 B.C. started his civil war with Pompey. Once he did so, there was no going back of Caesar. He had to defeat his enemy or be defeated. It was a point of no return. Do you think this poem also suggests such an irrevocable transition?

Geographically, a river is often a natural boundary. Psychologically or culturally, too, it can suggest a similar liminality. Crossing a river, then, can trigger a transition to a different state of consciousness, a different way of life, a different culture, a different religion, and so on. Is this change reversible? Or is it final and absolute? That may vary from situation to situation, but it is certainly a very decisive event in the life of an individual or a nation.

In Daruwalla's poem, the act of crossing a river is generalized; this is clear because the title uses a plural--rivers, not river. So the very first line of the poem is as symbolic as it is literal. The crossing of rivers has to be undertaken in every season. Sometimes, as he says, the river is waist-deep, sometimes it is placid and glassy, and at other times it is in flood.

The state of the river is related to not just the life cycle of humans, but to specific images of various kinds of crossings. This gives the poem its particularity and freshness. Even if its ultimate import is symbolic, it never loses sight of the immediate, the specific, the local.

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N.Daruwalla**

The main story of the poem is of a crossing which is linked with grown up, with a rite of passage as it were. The youth plunges into the swollen river, holding on to a water-skin or the tail of a buffalo. He wishes to venture out, to go beyond his ancestors' compass. Perhaps, they have never explored what lay on the other bank. His youth is described in sexual terms: "slivers of glass/ explode like flying fish."

On the other side, there is a fisher-girl waiting for him. She rescues him, half-drowned that he is, clears his mouth of clotted weed and grit. It's a kiss of life, literally, or, to use less romantic terminology, CPR, or mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. The youth has truly crossed over to the other side because he cannot see the rock from which he took his plunge.

The experience in the poem is of a transformation that follows a risky venture. A barrier is crossed, both physically and psychologically. The river is an obstacle, a challenge; the youth almost loses his life going to the other side. Actually, that is as it should be, because youth dies at the end, yielding to a wondrous cognition of the beginnings of adulthood.

Much, of course, may follow. Will the youth return to the other bank or set himself up on the other side, with his new-found saviour, the fisher-girl? Such questions are not answered in the poem. But, perhaps, we are left as breathless and wonder-struck as the youth at the end.

When we return to the poem, however, what we remember is the series of striking images with which its simple-enough story is told. The brown weeds, the coughs and eddies, the river conversing with the mud, the glassed green moss, the stretch of silt, the head bobbing up like a coconut, the crowd of silhouettes, the oozing mud between their toes, the ring of froth around the youth's mouth, and so on. The craftsmanship of the poet is revealed in these specific metaphors and images. It allows the poem to one particular crossing of the river and many such crossings, in general, at the same time.

6.3 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have discussed Daruwalla primarily as a poet of action. His poems reveal his fascination for power and dominance. Daruwalla does not let God preside over his world as 'power' and dominance' imply the law of the jungle. But then he would not like to be called a cynic either. A better term to describe him, would be a realist. In Daruwalla's world natural forces like power, violence, lust are as powerful as the elemental forces and these drives work themselves out in the world of men. Human history is an account of these natural forces.

In our discussion on Parthasarthy we have seen how he is better known for his anthology *Ten Twentieth Century Poets*, published by the Oxford University Press in 1976 and establishing the purist high-modernism in Indian English Poetry in no uncertain terms. After reading this Block, you may or you may not agree with his modernist stance but undoubtedly his poetry is marked by craftsmanship in his use of metaphors and images. His tenure as an editor of Oxford University Press saw the publication of some of the best known modern Indian English poetry.

Of calling him a cynic he would like to be called a realist. In Daruwalla's world natural forces like power violence lust are like natural forces as powerful as the elemental forces and drives that work themselves out in the world of men. Human history is an account of these natural forces.

6.4 GLOSSARY

Cosmopolitan:	of all parts of the world.
Incriminate:	charge with crime.
Vexing:	annoying; disturbing.
Hybridity:	offspring of two different species.
Apparition:	appearance especially of startling kind.
Akin:	similar.
Retributive:	recompense especially for ill deeds.
Eponymous:	commemorated by the adoption
Resuscitate:	return or restore to life.

6.5 QUESTIONS

1. Write an essay on Parthasarathy and his contribution to Indian English Poetry.
2. Give a detailed critical appreciation of (i) *Exile* (ii) *Trial* (iii) *Homecoming*.
3. Does *Exile* deal with the question of language and identity upon the need for roots? Elaborate with examples.
4. What is Parthasarathy trying to convey through the poem *Trial*?
5. Has Parthasarathy's Tamil upbringing and heritage reflected in *Homecoming*? Explain with examples.
6. Give a comparative study of the 'self' in the poetry of Ramanujan and Parthasarathy.
7. Write an essay on Keki.N.Daruwalla and his Poetry.
8. With examples assess Daruwalla as a poet of nature.
9. Write a short essay on the myth and imagery in the poem *Crossing of rivers*.
10. Give the critical analysis of the poem *Rumination-I*. Write a note on the symbolism in the poem.
11. Annotate the following:
 - i. He had spent his youth whoring
after English gods.
There is something to be said for exile:
 - ii. you learn roots are deep.
That language is a tree, loses colour
Under another sky.

- iii. On New Year's Eve he heard an old man
at Trafalgar Square: "It's no use trying
to change people. They'll be what they are.
- iv. An empire's last words are heard
on the hot sands of Africa.
The da Gamas, Clives, Dupleixs are back.
- v. Victoria sleeps on her island
alone, an old hag,
shaking her invincible locks."
- vi. Were I to clutch at the air,
straw in my extremity,
- vii. how should I not scream,
"I haven't finished"?
Yet that too would pass unheeded.
- viii. I grasp your hand
in a rainbow of touch. Of the dead
I speak nothing but good.
- ix. My tongue in English chains,
I return, after a generation , to you.
I am at the end
of my dravidic tether,
hunger for you unassuaged.
- x. Now, hooked on celluloid, you reel
down plush corridors..

12. Annotate the following:

- i. I can smell violence in the air
like the lash of coming rain -
mass hatreds drifting grey across the moon.
- ii. I watch my wounds but they don't turn green.
Cross -bones I look for you.
Death I am looking
for that bald bone-head of yours.
- iii. Man is so pliable, adaptable. Bury him
and he is steadfast as the earth.
Burn him and he will ride the flames
Throw him to the birds and he will
surrender flesh like an ascetic.
- iv. Karam Singh marching in the same rank as I
curses under his breath,
"I have children older than them,
these kids whose pubes have hardly sprouted!".
- v. Depressed and weary we march back to the Lines.
A leader says over the evening wireless,
"We are marching forward."

- vi. Somewhere along that stretch of silt
 a cry goes up as someone spots you,
 your head bobbing up along the waters
 like a coconut.
- vii. --sends a shaft of cold oxygen through her gills
 and wipes the ring of froth from your mouth
 with her wet mouth.
- viii. And when you gaze across
 you can't even see the rock
 from where you took the plunge.

6.6 SUGGESTED READING

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