UNIT 11: INTRODUCING INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY

UNIT STRUCTURE

11.1 Learning Objectives

11.2 Introduction

11.3 A Brief Overview of Indian English Poetry

11.4 Major Indian English Poets and their Works

11.5 Let us Sum up

11.6 Further Reading

11.7 Answers to Check Your Progress

11.8 Model Questions

11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- provide an outline of Indian English poetry
- identify the important poets who have contributed to the development of Indian English poetry
- list the major practitioners of Indian English poetry and their important works
- discuss the scope and themes primarily dealt in the works of the various poets
- gain an idea of the emerging trends in Indian English poetry
- analyze the significance of Indian English poetry in the contemporary literary set up of Indian Writing in English

11.2 INTRODUCTION

The term Indian English poetry encompasses within its scope all such works of poets who are Indians writing in the English language. However, it

must be noted that literature in English was produced in India much earlier. It dates back to second half of the eighteenth century. The poetry inspired by the Indian landscape and culture was called Anglo-Indian. These Anglo-Indian poets were British people who, through their poems, had shared their experiences about India. It was in the later part of the nineteenth century that Indian poet like Henry Louis Vivian Derozio literally came out, taking English as their medium of expression. Since then there was no looking back and today Indian English poetry has reached a very high standard by works and concerns of the poets like Kamala Das, Nizzim Ezekiel, Jayanta Mahapatra and many others. This unit, while giving you an idea of the origin of Indian English poetry, also aims to discuss its new and emerging trends. Some of the major poets have been listed here with an aim to add to your knowledge about the Indian English poetry in general. But that does not imply that the other poets are less relevant. Interested learners are advised to go through the books mentioned in the later part of the unit to acquire a detailed information on Indian English poetry. To make it easier and interesting for you, we have divided Indian English poetry into two phases: before Independence and after Independence. Let us now move into the discussion.

11.3 A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY

To begin with, let us first look into the poetry produced before independence. Earlier termed as Indo-Anglian to mark the Indian writing in English, Indian English poetry can be best understood by dividing the works of poets as pre-independence and post-independence poetry. You must note that even before independence, there were writers like **Henry Louis Vivian Derozio** who had composed poems on various Indian sentiments, establishing himself as the first Indian English poet. He initially served as a lecturer at Hindu College of Calcutta but was later dismissed from service on grounds of misleading the students with his sceptical nature and reformist ideas. Within the short span of his poetic career, he contributed two poetry collections which

were named as *Poems*, published in 1827 and *The Fakeer of Jungheera: A Metrical Tale and Other Poems*, published in 1828 respectively. It was seen that Derozio was much influenced by Byron and the romantics. The relevant themes found in his poetry were patriotism, love for Indian myths and legends and a strong Indian sentiment.

Other significant poets of pre-independent India include **Kasiprasad Ghose, Michael Madhusudhan Dutt, Govin Chunder Dutt, Hur Chunder Dutt** and **Girish Chunder Dutt.** However, it was **Toru Dutt** who has been given the credit of raising the stature of Indian English poetry with her authentic flavour. One can see a strong influence of English romanticism in her works. Toru Dutt's *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Field*, published in between 1856-57 became very popular. Her poetry like "Our Casuarina Tree", "The Lotus", etc. showed a strong resemblance to the poetry of English romantic poets. Her themes, therefore, mostly include love, nature, longing for the past, etc. It is important for us to remember her as the first Indian woman poet who could make a mark in the field of poetry with her distinguished sense of simplicity and sincerity by writing in a foreign language, that is, English.

Next, in the history of Indian English poetry, the contribution of **Sri Aurobindo** was remarkable. Some of his poems are "Love and Death", "Ahana", "Baji Prabhou", etc. He has to his credit numerous translated works like "The Hero and the Nymph", "Songs of the Sea", etc. His most popular work is "Savitri", a narrative poem consisting of about 24000 lines.

We must note the first woman poet of India, **Sarojini Naidu** who had made her mark through her poetry. Her first published work of poetry was *The Golden Threshhold* which appeared in 1905. *The Bird of Time* (1912) is her second collection of poetry. She had penned down many songs and was considered as the "Nightingale of Indian Song" (Iyengar). She matured as a poet with each poetry collection and her last collection titled *The Broken Wing* had seriousness of tone. Actively participating in the then politics of the country, as well as, fighting for women's causes, Sarojini Naidu was a gifted speaker.

She had dedicated poems to Gandhi and Jinnah also. They were some of the notable poets who wrote before Independence.

After Independence, the poets who had contributed towards the development of Indian English poetry are **Keki N. Daruwalla, Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, Kamala Das, A. K. Ramanujan, Arun Kolatkar, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Jayanta Mahapatra, Adil Jussawalla, Vikram Seth**, etc. to name a few. It must be noted that: "The English poetic tradition came to India on the path laid down by Macaulay's 'Minute' of 1835, trailing clouds of literary glory" (Mehrotra 276) Unlike the earlier poetry which was more dependent on western themes and was imitative, the poetry after Independence was modern in its outlook. With his poetry volumes like *A Beginning* (1957), *Poems* (1960), *The Brass Serpent*, etc., **Dom Moraes** was one of the first poets to have made a mark. His poetry was confessional, as well as, realistic.

Jayanta Mahapatra was one of the Indian poets who became popular both in India and outside. Winner of many international and national awards, Mahapatra was a teacher of Physics. It is significant that he wrote and published poetry at a very later age in his life. You must know that his poetry reflects his inner self which is very much rooted in India, more particularly in Orissa. His poetry shows influence of the West, especially the twentieth century poets like G. M. Hopkins, Ezra Pound, etc. However, the most important feature of his poetry that distinguishes his works from the earlier poets is the diversion of themes. Unlike earlier poetry, his works bear a strong personal voice. Themes like love, lust, discontentment with prevailing customs, vision of Indianness, reflection of stark realities, etc. mark his poetry as modern. His poetry is rooted to the Indian tradition and hence, they are difficult to be read in isolation; his works are chiefly written in a particular social and cultural context. He is credited with seven books written in Oriya and twenty books in the English language. It must be noted that he was one of the Indian poets who received Sahitya Akademi award for poetry written in English language.

Some of his works are *Svayaamvaraa and Other Poems, Close the Sky, Ten By Ten, A Father's Hours, A Rain of Rites, Relationship*, etc. to name a few. You can acquire more details about his life and career in Unit 14 of this block.

Kamala Das, another bilingual poet, has contributed greatly to the changing trends in Indian English poetry with her confessional poems. Her poems are an echo of her individuality and an expression of her feminine sensibility. You will read in greater details about her in the unit that follows. The most notable work by another famous poet, **Vikram Seth** is *The Golden Gate* (1986). **Keki N. Daruwalla**'s *Relationship* and *Temple* are worth mentioning in the context of modern poetry in English. Hence, it can be said that these poets with their originality and confessional mode broke the stereotype and garnered the future of Indian English poetry in a fruitful manner.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Name the first notable Indian poet writing in English? Name his two poetry collections.

Q2. Name some of the significant poets of pre-independent India.

Q3. What are the common themes in Toru Dutt's poems?

Q4. Name the longest poem written by Sri Aurobindo.

Q5. Write the names of a few modern poets in Indian English poetry.

11.4 MAJOR INDIAN ENGLISH POETS AND THEIR WORKS

Some of the Indian English poets are discussed below in order to give you a brief idea of the development, themes and poetic output of Indian English poetry in general.

Nissim Ezekiel: One of the most notable Indian poets writing in English is Nissim Ezekiel. Emerging as one of the first poets to have a voice of his own

in poetry, Ezekiel wrote in an age when patriotism and nationalism were intensified in the society. However, this poet broke those shackles and focussed on urban themes and urban life. He showed the other emerging Indian poets their way through his mass involvement with printing, starting magazines, promoting new poets and so on. The most significant aspect of his poetry is his expression of personal feelings in a diction that is precise and overt. His poems are a record of his struggles to come to terms with his own self. Professionally, he served as a Reader in the university of Bombay and has authored several collections like *A Time to Change, Sixty Poems, The Unfinished Man, The Exact Name, Hymns in Darkness and Poster Poems* to name a few. Besides this, he has written poems for *The Illustrated Weekly of India, Encounter, London Magazine and The Spectator*. Padma Shri Nissim Ezekiel was also the recipient of Sahitya Akademi Cultural Award.

Eunice D'souza: One of the representatives of women poets in Indian English literature is Eunice D'souza who belongs to a Goan family. Her poetry depicts the Goan way of life with utter sincerity. She served as a teacher at St. Xavier's College in Mumbai and was widely involved in literary activities of the college. Her published works are *Fix* (1979), *Women in Dutch Painting* (1988), *Ways of Belonging* (1990) and *Selected and New Poems* (1994). Her poetic mode is also confessional in tone. But what is significant is the way she draws materials from her personal experiences and merges them to a general cause. Her poetic brilliance lies in transporting the readers from a particular to a general context. The language she uses is colloquial and depicts her emotions vividly. Like Kamala Das, D'souza also uses poetry as a medium of expression of her inner turmoil and frustration.

A.K. Ramanujan: Known for his poetry collections titled *The Striders* (1966), *Relations* (1971), *Second Sight* (1987) etc., he established himself as one of the finer poets and carved a significant place in Indian English literature. He writes both in Kannada and English. He served as a teacher of English Literature in various Indian universities as well as International universities.

Apart from being a poet, Ramanujan was a translator. It was through his translations from Tamil and Kannada languages to English language that opened to the readers from the West an idea about Indian sensibilities and provided a fascinating retreat to the traditions of India. Ramanujan's poetry is known for his art of craftsmanship. Poetically, his works are rich in imagery and ironic in tone. His uniqueness lies in his artistic balance, his "quest for the self" and the juxtaposition of traditional with the modern. Few of his poems are "Love Poem for a Wife I", "The Hindoo", "Self-Portrait", etc.

Apart from them, there are other major poets as mentioned in the previous section. You are advised to collect information about a few other Indian poets and expand your knowledge on the same.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q6. Write a note on Nissim Ezekiel.

Q7. Mention any two works by Eunice D'souza.



11.5 LET US SUM UP

To sum up, it must be noted that Indian English poetry has been emerging ever since its beginning in the late eighteenth century. From Anglo-Indian poets to poets of Indian origin, Indian English poetry has seen tremendous growth in its output. Earlier it was imitative of the West but gradually it has strengthened its base by producing many authentic works. Among the pre independence poets, a few names like Derozio, Toru Dutt, Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, Sarojini Naidu, etc. are worth mentioning. However, you are now familiar with the post independence poets also who have contributed a lot towards the growth of Indian English poetry through their experimental attitude and newer techniques. Chief among them are A.K. Ramanujan, Jayanta Mahapatra, Kamala Das, Nizzim Ezekiel, etc. to name a few. By reading this unit, you have become familiar with the origin of Indian English poetry as well as the major poets.



11.6 FURTHER READING

1. Iyengar, K.R. Srinivasa (2013 rpt.) *Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd.

2. Mehrotra, Arvind Krishna (ed.). (2010). *A Concise History of Indian Literature in English*. New Delhi: Permanent Black.

3. Singh, Kanwar Dinesh. (2008). *Contemporary Indian English Poetry: Comparing Male and Female Voices*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors Pvt Ltd.



11.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1. Henry Louis Vivian Derozio. He contributed two poetry collections which were named as *Poems*, published in 1827 and *The Fakeer of Jungheera: A Metrical Tale and Other Poems*, published in 1828 respectively.

Ans to Q2. Kasiprasad Ghose, Michael Madhusudhan Dutt, Govin Chunder Dutt, Hur Chunder Dutt and Girish Chunder Dutt, Toru Dutt.

Ans to Q3. Her poems mostly included love, nature, longing for the past, etc.

Ans to Q4. "Savitri".

Ans to Q5. Keki N. Daruwalla, Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, Kamala Das, A. K. Ramanujan, Arun Kolatkar, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Jayanta Mahapatra, Adil Jussawalla, Vikram Seth, etc.

Ans to Q6. One of the most notable Indian poets writing in English is Nissim Ezekiel. He served as a Reader at the university of Bombay and has authored several collections like *A Time to Change, Sixty Poems, The*

Unfinished Man, The Exact Name, Hymns in Darkness and Poster Poems to name a few. Besides this, he has written poems for *The Illustrated Weekly of India, Encounter, London Magazine and The Spectator*. Padma Shri Nissim Ezekiel was also the recipient of Sahitya Akademi Cultural Award.

Ans to Q7. *Fix* (1979), *Women in Dutch Painting* (1988),*Ways of Belonging* (1990) and *Selected and New Poems* (1994).



11.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Write in detail about Indian poetry in English before independence highlighting the important contribution of the major poets.

Q2. Who were the modern or new poets of Indian English poetry? Discuss in detail.

Q3. What are the distinctive features of post independence Indian English poetry? How is it different from its earlier output?

Q4. Write short notes on:

(a) Derozio and his contribution to Indian English poetry

(b) Modern Indian English poetry

Q5. What are the themes mostly dealt with by the modern poets of Indian English poetry?

Q6. Give a detailed explanation of the history of Indian English poetry.

Q7. Highlight the works of the major poets who have contributed towards the development of Indian English poetry.

Q8. Comment on the present status of Indian English poetry.

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