

Contemporary Indian
English Poetry
and Drama

Contemporary Indian English Poetry and Drama:

Changing Canons and Responses

Edited by

Arnab Kumar Sinha,
Sajalkumar Bhattacharya
and Himadri Lahiri

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-3322-0

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-3322-6

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INTRODUCTION—
MAPPING THE CONTEMPORARY INDIAN
ENGLISH POETRY AND DRAMA:
NEW DIRECTIONS AND CHALLENGES

ARNAB KUMAR SINHA,
SAJALKUMAR BHATTACHARYA,
HIMADRI LAHIRI

After the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), the scenario of Indian English literature changed remarkably to represent the transformed social, cultural, and political setting of the country and the world. New literary themes and innovative modes of literary writings expanded the horizon of Indian English literature, making it richer and more dynamic than ever before. Rushdie's fiction encouraged literary experimentation. It set an instance of genre that incorporates multiple perspectives of constructing a narrative. *Midnight's Children* uses the technique of magic realism to present the historic events of India's Independence and the Partition of 1947. Commenting on the significance of this fiction, M.K. Naik opines, "A new era had dawned in Indian English literature" (11). It is no wonder that Rushdie received the Booker Prize in 1981, and many other notable awards for this phenomenal fiction. The course of events after the publication of *Midnight's Children* has been very encouraging. Many Indian authors who wrote fiction after Rushdie have gained worldwide recognition. New breeds of fiction have emerged during the post-1980 period, and, even during the post-liberalization era, Indian English fiction has finely fashioned itself to address the demands of the reading public. Urban fiction, crick literature, chick literature, call centre novels, and corporate novels are a few instances of new kinds of fiction that are now popular in Indian English fiction. E. Dawson Varughese, in her book *Reading New India: Post-Millennial Indian Fiction in English* (2013), discusses all the new kinds of fiction that have attempted to represent the 'new India' of the twenty-first century

(Varughese, Kindle Location 451). This euphoria and energy in Indian English fiction is quite conspicuous, and rightly deserves the attention of critics like M.K. Naik and Varughese. But, in this whole process of mapping the journey of Indian English literature, the bright picture of Indian English fiction often shadows the scope and development of Indian English poetry and Indian English drama. Though the fact remains that Indian English fiction today has attained global recognition, critics, and even serious academics, are not quite sure about the global reach of the other two genres. Are these two genres as popular as Indian English fiction? How have Indian English poets and playwrights developed their writing style and thematic representations during the post-1980 period? Is it possible to trace the trajectory of the evolution of Indian English poetry and drama? What are the prominently new kinds of writing that have shaped the canon of these two genres, and how have the readers and critics responded to the newness in these two fields? These are the questions that this book, *Contemporary Indian English Poetry and Drama: Changing Canons and Responses* seeks to address.

The focus of this edited volume, as its title suggests, is on the development of Indian English poetry and drama since the 1980s. In fact, the book contains a time-chart of critical essays on important poets and playwrights, providing a clear understanding of the evolution of these two genres since the 1980s. Such an attempt is directed to generate interest among researchers and students in studying the recent literary trends in Indian English poetry and drama. Before providing a brief overview of the essays in this anthology, we would like to map the growth and evolution of Indian English poetry and drama since the 1980s.

Indian English Poetry since the 1980s

In his elaborate study of the history of Indian English Poetry, M. K. Naik classifies the evolution of Indian English poetry from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century into three distinct phases; 'The Romantic Dawn', 'The Modernist Noontide', and 'Younger Accents: Modernism – II' (Naik, 7-8). These phases, as explained by Naik, are well known to literary historians, scholars, and academics. Such a distinction, as evident in his study, provides a panoramic view of the development of Indian English poetry based on the attitude of the poets belonging to different periods of Indian history. The Indian poets in the first phase adopted a Romantic sensibility, quite similar to their British counterparts. They were primarily influenced by the Romantic poetry of

Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats and Byron. These British poets provided suitable models for poets like Henry Derozio, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu, and Sri Aurobindo, to imitate and create poems bearing the mark of British imagination. While explaining the attitude of the early Indian English poets, who belonged to the 'Romantic Dawn' phase, Naik clearly elucidates the basic tendency of these poets: "Almost all the early Indian English poets considered so far had taken the British Romantic poets as their models; in spite of this, they had failed to produce genuine Romantic poetry, because, in a sense, they were not 'romantic' enough, i.e., they merely copied the external features of Romantic poetry, missing the core altogether" (Naik, 12). These poets, as evident from the list mentioned above, belonged to the pre-Independence period. Among these poets, Toru Dutt and Sri Aurobindo made sincere attempts to write poems based on Indian myths and legends, which rendered a spirit of originality to their creative works, though they could not completely resist the imitative mode of writing poetry.¹ The second phase, 'The Modernist Noontide' indicates the point of view of the post-Independence Indian English poets. The poets of this phase rejected the Romantic model of writing poetry and developed a Modernist outlook. Following the themes and styles of modern British poets, the poets of the 1950s and the 1960s, acquired a typical modern perspective of representing reality. The Modernism that became prominent in Indian English poetry was derivative in nature, like the earlier period of Romanticism. Naik observes this phenomenon by stating the change in the source of inspiration for the poets of the post-Independence era: "But it is true that poetic taste had changed. The Indian English poet is no longer prone to deriving his light from Shelley and Tennyson. His masters now are T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden" (Naik, 52). This derivative Modernism influenced the creative spirit of the Indian English poets as they imbibed all the major traits of British Modernism. Aspects like 'alienation syndrome', 'urbanity', 'obsessive sense of failure', exile, pessimism, intertextuality, and a tendency to experiment with the form and the content of poetry, figure distinctly in the poetry of this phase (Naik, 53). Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, Adil Jussawala, A. K. Ramanujan, P. Lal, Gieve Patel, A. K. Mehrotra and Pritish Nandy are the representative poets of the Modernist phase. In fact, the first significant collection of modern Indian English poetry, *Modern Indo-Anglian Poetry* (1959), edited by P. Lal and K. R. Rao, addresses the poets of the Modernist phase as the 'new poets' (Riemenschneider 26). According to Lal, the poets of this phase must write poems that, "must deal in concrete terms with concrete experience", and such works must also, "be free from propaganda" (Riemenschneider,

27). Lal also urges the poets to realize “the need for the private voice” in poetry, that will “appeal to that personality of man which is distinct, curious, unique and idealistic” (Riemenschneider, 27). These remarks of Lal, which appear in the introductory section of *Modern Indo-Anglian Poetry*, became the new poets’ ‘Manifesto’ (Riemenschneider, 26). Lal’s advisory remarks provided a direction to the new poets, who, instead of simply imitating the style and content of modern British poetry, attempted to write poems that were reflective of their real and private experiences. The various anthologies of poetry published by the new poets in the 1970s reflect a strong desire to establish a canon of modern Indian English poetry. Rajeev S. Patke, in his essay, “Poetry Since Independence” mentions some prominent anthologies that were published in the 1970s: Saleem Peeradina’s *Contemporary Indian Poetry in English: An Assessment and Selection* (1972); R. Parthasarathy’s *Ten Twentieth-Century Indian Poets* (1976); and Keki N. Daruwalla’s *Two Decades of Indian Poetry: 1960-1980* (1980), to highlight the tendency among these poets to form “an anti-Romantic canon” (Patke, 278). These anthologies, as Patke tries to explain, paved the way for the creation of an Indian brand of modern poetry, soaked in the spirit, culture, and ethos of the nation. Thus, the new poets used the modern aspects of British poetry to experiment with ways of representing Indian reality. This phenomenon directed the poets of the 1950s, the 1960s and the 1970s to develop new methods of articulating experiences in a language very close to the socio-cultural matrix of India. The poets of the 1970s - K. N. Daruwalla, Shiv K. Kumar, R. Parthasarthy, Jayanta Mahapatra, Arun Kolatkar, Kamala Das, et al. - carried on the legacy initiated by the poets of two decades earlier. Hence, the 1980s was the time when the scene of Indian English poetry was marked by the presence of new poets, new poetry anthologies, and new themes. Three decades of efforts to search a new idiom of Indian English poetry had reached its peak, and there was no urgency now to depend on foreign sources. Indian English poets of the 1980s and the 1990s reflected the tendency to articulate ideas innovatively, using the medium of poetry to represent issues of diverse kinds. While discussing the poets of the post-1980 phase, Naik draws our attention to the prominent group of ‘Bombay Poets’, who were young and energetic, and flourished in the initial period of this phase (Naik, 128). The group of ‘Bombay Poets’, consisting of Saleem Peeradina, Santan Rodrigues, Manohar Shetty, Ranjit Hoskote and Eunice de Souza, concentrated chiefly on the representation of the urban life of India (Naik, 128). Their poems capture the various facets of the urban culture with a profound sense of honesty and irony. Peeradina’s poems are Bombay-centric, as they sincerely portray the kind of life

people lead in a metropolis. Rodrigues's poetry focuses on the Goan lifestyle, seeking to represent Goa where he had spent his childhood days. Shetty, like Peeradina, is also concerned with the Bombay's culture and youth. Hoskote's poems reflect his social and political awareness. Being a poet, he has not simply dealt with the urban youth culture, but has also responded to the various political events that impacted on the youth of India. Outside the group of 'Bombay Poets', Vikram Seth is a notable poet of the 1980s. His books, *Mappings* (1981) and *The Golden Gate* (1986) are a remarkable contribution to the canon of Indian English poetry. Seth's poetic composition, as Rajeev Patke mentions, is "a curious mix of the modern and the Victorian" (Patke, 309). His 'light verse' was an effective medium of restoring 'the drive of narrative to verse', and this aspect, as Patke observes, is his "principal contribution to poetry" (Patke, 309). Seth's *The Golden Gate* is a typical instance of this poetic style that fuses a "contemporary conversational idiom into tetrameters of Hudibrastic brio and a Byronic or Audenesque bravado" (Patke, 309). From the point of view of experimentation, this verse novel is an excellent piece of technical innovation, as it blends two different genres to produce a new kind of poetic form. Seth's use of foreign locations and portrayal of foreign characters are noteworthy features of his poetry. In *Mappings*, Seth places his central character in an unspecified foreign location. This character is often considered to be representative of Seth's self, because he had spent a long time in the UK and the US. However, in *The Golden Gate*, the setting is obviously America. This aspect is quite striking, because in the pre-1980 period, poets did not usually use foreign locations as the setting of their poems, and even if there existed such a setting, it was used in terms of its relationship with the native space. Seth's use of foreign setting, and portrayal of foreign characters playing a major role in the narrative, are unique features of his poetry. These traits in Seth's poetry rendered a truly transnational dimension to the canon of Indian English poetry. Seth's contemporary, Sudeep Sen, is also a transnational poet. Being an expatriate poet like Seth, Sen's poetry evokes images of foreign places visited by the poet. His poetic volumes: *New York Times* (1993), *South African Woodcuts* (1994), *Mount Vesuvius in Eight Frames* (1994), *Dali's Twisted Hands* (1995) and *Post-marked India* (1997), are indicative of the wide spectrum of his encounter with foreign places and people.

Another poet whose contribution is unique in terms of his thematic representation of homosexual love is Hoshang Merchant. He is probably the first Indian poet to celebrate homosexuality by articulating his desire for another male partner. "Merchant's verse," as Naik opines, "is unique in its frank and uninhibited celebration of homosexual love... The poet

records the varying moods and vicissitudes of homosexual love, its tragedies and its triumphs” (Naik, 133).

Agha Shahid Ali is another significant poet of the post-1980 period. Though Ali published a couple of poetic volumes in the 1970s, his masterpiece is *Half-Inch Himalayas* (1987). This was followed by *A Nostalgist’s Map of America* (1992) and *The Beloved Witness: Selected Poems* (1992). Ali’s poems are rooted in Kashmir, the place which is representative of his cultural and religious identity. The poet who created a niche in the field of Indian English poetry, by writing poems reflective of a wide range of experience, is Tabish Khair. Khair is an expatriate writer, and his poems delineate his diasporic experiences. Like Khair, Uma Parameswaran also is a diaspora poet. Her poetry book, *Trishanku* (1988) aptly reflects the Indo-Canadian diasporic life, representing the ways in which the Indians who are settled in Canada negotiate the alien culture, and in doing so, they never forget the homeland. Hence, the poets of the last two decades of the twentieth century provided favourable conditions for the poets of the new millennium to create new kinds of poetry. Indian English poetry diversified into a great range of themes, evolving in the process to acquire dynamism and flexibility. The boundary of the genre became porous, allowing new poetic voices to enter into its domain, and this provided Indian English poetry with a protean structure. Among the new poetic voices of the new millennium, mention may be made of Imtiaz Dharker, Meena Alexander, Anjum Hasan, Jeet Thayil, Robin S. Ngangom, Siddhartha Bose, Tishani Doshi, Mani Rao, et al. These poets are representative of the various issues that have defined the structure of the canon of Indian English poetry in the twenty-first century. Dharker’s and Alexander’s poetry is informed by the post-9/11 diasporic experience, mapping the entire Western discourse on terrorism. Hasan’s poetry stands as an instance of *vers libre*, articulating the diverse shades of her life in Bangalore. Thayil, as a poet, is concerned with religious fundamentalism, and he also loves to deal with the varied experiences of his migratory life. Ngangom is a poet of northeast India, and his poetry is rooted in the culture of his native space. Bose loves to experiment with the poetic style. His innovative use of dashes and brackets conveys the desire of the poet to communicate beyond the printed words. Culinary images abound in his poetry, which suggests Bose’s interest in interpreting life through food metaphors. Doshi is a poet of versatile genius. Apart from writing poetry, she is a blog writer for a cricket website. She is presently working with the publishers to write the biography of a renowned Sri Lankan cricketer, and she is also interested in choreography. Her poems are concerned with exilic experience, citizenship, and Madras life. Rao’s poems are short

pieces exhibiting the myriad interpretations of the Indian mythical characters. The way she recasts the mythical characters and stories in her poetry is really commendable.

There is no denying the fact that Indian English poetry matured during this period to produce a typical idiom of its own. The poets of this generation are quite capable of experimenting with new forms of writing, and in doing so, they seem to be effectively using the British English to articulate diverse cultural experiences that do not appear to be alien to readers. While discussing the poets of the post-1980s period, Naik categorizes the poets of the 1980s and the 1990s as, 'Younger Accents: Modernism-II' (Naik, 127). This categorization appears to be contradictory when one notices the poetry anthology edited by Makarand Paranjape. In the introduction to *Indian Poetry in English* (1993), Paranjape classifies the post-1980 poets as representative of 'Postmodernism' (26). Though he is not sure about the difference between the poets of the post-1980 phase and the earlier ones, he confidently observes that, "Poets like Kolatkar, Mahapatra and Alexander, have easily moved into the post-modernist mode with relative ease, calling into question the observing self in their poetry. Postmodernism seems to promise a variety of new devices, including parody, pastiche, collage, intertextuality, and literary cannibalism of varying degrees" (Paranjape, 26). The question that arises from the above two classifications made by two eminent critics, is whether we should consider these new voices of the post-1980 era as an extension of the tone and tenor of modernism that began in the 1950s. We are probably not sure about the exact mode of defining these poets, and the problem indeed lies in the act of classification. Instead of classifying them as modern or postmodern poets, it is better to recognize the diversity of the canon of Indian English poetry in the post-1980 era. Once we go beyond the 1990s, the new century promises to introduce us to the vast range of themes, styles and techniques. New Poetry anthologies published in the twenty first century are prominently reflective of the panoramic dimension of Indian English poetry. Sudeep Sen's edited anthology, *The Harper Collins Book of English Poetry* (2012) is an excellent instance of showcasing the immensity and diversity of Indian English poetry. This anthology is a comprehensive one, as it contains the illustrative poems of eighty-five significant poets of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. A cursory look at the names of the poets and their poems indicates the vastness and flexibility of Indian English poetry. A broad range of themes, including diaspora, cosmopolitanism, urbanity, love, sex, body, homosexuality, northeast landscape and culture, and dalit identity, has now permeated the canon of Indian English poetry. This obviously

sends a positive signal attesting the belief that the future of Indian English poetry is bright. But is its future really bright? This question leads us to the initial remarks made at the beginning of this essay on the issues of popularity and visibility of the literary genres. In spite of the richness and the vastness of Indian English poetry, the fact remains that it is not as popular as Indian English fiction. Many poets, after writing for a short period of time, disappear from the scene. This phenomenon is mentioned by Sudeep Sen, who is quite aware of the conspicuous crisis:

In the wider cultural arena, very little is known about Indian poetry and poets, within, and more so outside, India. Only a handful of contemporary English-language Indian poets command international and national status. And those who are visible happen to be known within very tight and narrow confines of the poetry circles, university reading circuits, and literary festivals. Beyond the initiated groups, not many follow or read contemporary English poetry, though ironically a great number write it (21).

We would like to end our discussion in this section by appealing to readers to consider this particular aspect of visibility and popularity as a threat to the future of Indian English poetry. Academics, critics, scholars and researchers must realize the need to address this crisis, and discuss the methods through which Indian English poetry may become as popular and visible as Indian English fiction.

Indian English Drama since 1980s

The heritage of Indian English drama, in comparison with Indian English Poetry, is relatively weak. As a literary genre, it flourished during the post-Independence era, to establish a canonical structure. During the colonial period, Indian English drama, according to M. K. Naik, suffered due to the lack of any “firm dramatic tradition nourished on the actual performance in a live theatre” (Naik *A History of Indian English Literature*, 98). This phenomenon led the dramatists of the colonial period to write “mostly closet drama” (Naik *A History of Indian English Literature*, 98). Despite the lack of any Indian tradition of drama, the dramatists of the pre-independent period made sincere efforts to write plays that addressed the problems of the contemporary society. Sri Aurobindo, Harindranath Chattopadhyay, A. S. Panchapakesa Ayyar, Thyagaraja Paramasiva Kailasam, and Bharati Sarabhai, are the prominent dramatists of colonial India. These dramatists drew inspiration from the Western traditions of drama to represent issues related to the mythic and the cultural tradition of

India. Sri Aurobindo, as Naik notes, “modelled his plays exclusively on the late Victorian pastiches of Shakespearean drama” (Naik *A History of Indian English Literature*, 100). Kailasam’s masterpiece, *Karna or The Brahmin’s Curse* (1946) is considered by K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar as a narrative that is based on ‘Oedipus-fatality’ (Iyengar, 237). Among the dramatists mentioned above, Bharati Sarabhai is the only female dramatist of the period whose plays reflect her engagement with Gandhian thought and philosophy. Naik refers to her two plays, *The Well of the People* (1943) and *Two Women* (1952) to indicate her attitude to Gandhian ideology (Naik *A History of Indian English Literature*, 149). Thus, except for a few plays which are thematically significant, Indian English drama during the colonial era was mainly a derivative genre seeking the support and guidance of the rich Western traditions of drama. In fact, many English plays were written during the colonial period, but the quality of most of them is poor, leading to a situation where the genre failed to make any big impact on the literary scenario. The circumstances, however, significantly changed during the post-colonial period, when, due to different government initiatives, Indian theatre, in a sense, revived. Sahitya Natak Akademi was set up in 1952, and the National School of Drama was established in 1959 (Naik *A History of Indian English Literature*, 255). The Indian government also took the initiative to organize a National Drama Festival in 1954 (Naik *A History of Indian English Literature*, 255). All such steps were taken by the Indian government in the 1950s, “to encourage the performing arts as an effective means of public enlightenment”, but, quite surprisingly, all these initiatives ultimately fostered the growth of regional language theatre (Naik *A History of Indian English Literature*, 255). It was because of this phenomenon that Bhasa theatre flourished in the post-colonial period. Different theatre groups from the various regions of India – Marathi theatre, Bengali theatre, Kannada theatre and Hindi theatre – contributed prominently to the canon of Bhasa theatre. Under such circumstances, the canon of Indian English drama grew at a slow pace, with the contribution of those playwrights who were primarily interested in Bhasa theatre but occasionally opted to write in English. These dramatists mostly translated the Bhasa plays into English, and if an attempt was made to write originally in English, those plays were either imitations of Western plays, or very poor in terms of style of writing and treatment of theme. However, overcoming the initial crisis of lack of production of good plays, Indian English drama strongly made its presence felt in the 1960s, when Asif Currimbhoy, the first major voice of this canon, started writing plays. Faubian Bowers considers Currimbhoy as, “India’s first authentic voice in

theatre”, and this remark attests to the fact that his plays are original pieces bearing the mark of the author’s sincere engagement with the history and politics of India (quoted in Iyer, 98). During his career as a dramatist, Currimbhoy produced twenty-nine plays which deal with a variety of themes, reflecting his desire to infuse the spirit of authenticity of representation in the canon of Indian English drama. Natesan Sharda Iyer acknowledges the contribution of Currimbhoy by describing his ability to represent the contemporary society through diverse perspectives: “He chose to write dramas, because he felt that this was the art form which allowed him most to show the complexity of society.... He has taken unusual themes from contemporary Indian society and woven them into plays of artistic excellence” (Iyer, 99-100). Hence, Currimbhoy rescued Indian English drama from the shackles of imitation and poor quality productions. He breathed a new life into the canon, reforming its nature and identity. The dramatists of the 1960s and the 1970s were inspired by the efforts of Currimbhoy to write plays in English, a phenomenon which accelerated the growth of the canon. Pratap Sharma, Nissim Ezekiel, Gurucharan Das, and Girish Karnad, are the important playwrights of the 1960s and 1970s, and their plays are remarkable instances of original perspectives on Indian history, myths, socio-cultural scenarios, and political ambience. Girish Karnad rose to eminence in the 1970s with plays like *Tughlaq* (1972) and *Hayavadana* (1975). These plays reflect Karnad’s experimental mindset, as he fuses myth, history, politics, and human psychology, to create a complex thematic structure. Gurucharan Das is also a significant dramatist of this period, and his play, *Larins Sahib* (1970), offers an excellent perspective on the colonial history of Punjab during the time when Henry Lawrence visited India. So, the 1980s were the decade when the area of Indian English drama was fertile ground for new ideas, new experimentation, and new techniques. The contributions of Currimbhoy, Karnad, and Das, helped the post-1980 dramatists to direct their creative genius to write plays that effectively created a big impact on the dramatic literary scene. Mahesh Dattani is a pioneering dramatist of this phase, exhibiting his intense understanding of socio-cultural reality of India, the problematic of gender distinction, and the psychology of diseased patients. *Final Solutions* (1994), *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), *A Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998), and *Brief Candle* (2010), are some of the important plays of Dattani, displaying the variety of issues dealt with by the author. Dattani, indeed, is the first Indian English dramatist to focus on the subject of homosexuality (Naik and Narayan 206). His play, *A Muggy Night in Mumbai*, represents the anxieties of a few homosexuals in the city of Mumbai. *Brief Candle* is another

interesting play of Dattani's, which deals with the lives of cancer patients. Thus, the innovative themes dealt with by Dattani enriched the canon of Indian English drama. Along with Dattani, Karnad's plays of the post-1980 phase illustrate the author's deep engagement with the interface between the mythical tradition, the history of India, and human psychology. *Tale-Danda* (1993), *The Fire and the Rain* (1998), *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (2005), and *Flowers* (2005), are instances of plays that display Karnad's genius as a dramatist. He has the ability of weaving human psychology with Indian myths and history, to create complex characters that are partly real and partly mystical. Apart from Karnad and Dattani, whose contribution to the canon in the post-1980 phase is really phenomenal, the other dramatists of significant repute are Vijay Tendulkar, Gieve Patel, Dina Mehta, Uma Parameswaran, Manjula Padmanabhan, and Rana Bose. Vijay Tendulkar's and Dina Mehta's plays are related to contemporary social reality. Some of their plays foreground the need for female emancipation and freedom. The only play of Gieve Patel that provides a new cultural dimension to the life of the Parsis in India is *Mister Behram* (1998) (Naik and Narayan, 210). This play offers an interesting perspective on ethnic identity, through the character of Behram. *Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees* (1987) is a unique play, written by Uma Parameswaran. This play deals with the problems experienced by Indian immigrants in Canada (Naik and Narayan, 212). As a diasporic play, this offers a new way of looking at immigrants settled in the West. Manjula Padmanabhan's play, *Harvest* (1998) deals with the remarkable issue of organ trade. *Harvest* is an experimental play which addresses the interface of the global organ trade and capitalism, in the post-globalization era. Like Parameswaran, Rana Bose's plays also capture the emotional and cultural conflicts of Indian immigrants in Canada. *The Death of Abbie Hoffman and Other Plays* (1997) is an excellent collection of Bose's plays, which showcases his ability to read the diasporic experiences from diverse perspectives. The two plays of Gurucharan Das, *Mira* (2011), and *9 Jakhoo Hill* (2011), are dramatic representations of the legendary character, Mira, and the socio-cultural changes that impacted on the psyche of the Indian middle class during the 1960s.

Many playwrights of the contemporary generation are receiving the attention of a global audience. Girish Karnad, Mahesh Dattani, Manjula Padmanabhan, Rana Bose, and Gurucharan Das, have earned the appreciation of drama critics, and they have also won several awards from reputed international institutes and agencies. Indian English plays are now performed in different countries, which was previously a very rare phenomenon. These aspects indicate a bright future ahead, hoping that the

canon achieves a protean structure like the other two major genres. However, the only big challenge that the canon is probably encountering at the present moment is the influence of cyber culture. With new Kindle editions of novels and poetry arriving in the market, how can drama, which is meant for both reading and performance, negotiate with this new mode of culture? As a performative art, will drama lose its power to influence people directly? These indeed are vital questions, which will decide the future of Indian English drama.

The whole book has been divided into two broad units: Contemporary Indian English poetry, and contemporary Indian English drama. The first unit contains nine critical essays on contemporary Indian English poetry, focusing primarily on new emerging aspects in the canon. The essays in this unit are further classified into four different sections. In the first section, “Changing Canons: Some Reflections”, the essay of Ajay Kumar discusses the approaches of modern Indian English poets, mainly focusing on the empirical approach used by Arun Kolatkar, A.K. Ramanujan, and R. Parthasarathy. These modern poets, Kumar argues, have used the empirical approach to trace the roots of their culture. The second section, “Representation of the Nation and the Diaspora”, presents four insightful critical pieces. Sajalkumar Bhattacharya’s essay, “My Piecemeal Shelters – Exploring the Diasporic Woman’s Voice in Selected Poems of Meena Alexander”, offers a remarkable perspective on the poems of Meena Alexander by primarily focusing on the representation of the condition of diasporic women. Bhattacharya believes that Alexander’s poems brilliantly represent the voice of women, attempting in the process, to construct a woman’s aesthetics. The uniqueness of this article lies in its originality of approach, and in-depth analysis of selected poems of Alexander. The poetry of Agha Shahid Ali is the subject of Mausim Mondal’s essay in this section. In her essay, she has attempted to analyze the change in the thematic representation of Kashmir in Ali’s poetry. In fact, literary representations based on the Himalayan region of India are a recent phenomenon in the domain of Indian English poetry. Kashmir has emerged as a distinct subject of study for many Indian creative writers. Agha Shahid Ali is a representative Kashmiri poet, and his poems capture the cultural spirit of this region. Mondal’s essay sheds light on Ali’s creative source, which, according to her, has thematically enriched the canon. This essay of Mondal will provide ample scope for the academics to map the shift in the thematic concerns of the canon. The third essay in this section is by Gargi Dutta. This essay deals with the representation of the life of Sikh immigrants in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s Yuba City poems. Swetha Anthony’s essay is the last essay in this section.

Representation of nation in the narratives of modern Indian English poetry is the topic of her study. This essay maps the various ways India has been represented in Indian English poetry. The third section of this unit is titled, "Representation from the North East". Mridul Bordoloi's and Sayantan Chakraborti's essays in this section provide a critical analysis of northeast poetry. Seeing northeast poetry from a broad perspective, Bordoloi's essay, "Literature in English from the Northeast: A Critical Survey of Poetry from the Imagined Periphery", makes an attempt to study some of the distinct features of this poetry. Temsula Ao's poetry, as Chakraborti argues, can be read from a geographical point of view, signifying the traits of Ao Naga culture. These essays provide new dimensions to the study of northeast poetry. The poetry of the northeast region, though not very new in the domain of Indian English, has acquired great significance in recent studies focused on the region. In the context of new scholarly studies that the literature of this region has inspired, Chakraborti's essay, "Stones and Ao-Naga Culture: A Geographical Reading of Temsula Ao's Stone-Poems", offers a useful critical intervention. It helps us to grasp the intricate philosophical connection of the Ao-Naga community with the stones. "Gender Perspectives" is the title of the fourth section of this unit. The essays of Arnab Bhattacharya and Sandipan Ray Choudhury in this section read Indian English poetry from the perspective of the representation of Indian women. It is through the lens of liminal subjectivity that Bhattacharya analyzes post-independence Indian English poetry written by women. Choudhury's focus is more specific, as he deals with the problematic representation of women in Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry.

The second unit of this book, contemporary Indian English drama (1980-2012), contains six essays, which have been further classified into three different sections based on the thematic aspects. The first section of this unit, "Changing Canons: Some Reflections", presents three insightful essays. Anita Singh's essay, "Re-drawing Boundaries of the Canon: Indian English Women Dramatists", provides a comprehensive survey of Indian English women dramatists, who, according to Singh, have made attempts to redefine the canon of Indian English drama. Analyzing the contribution of the women dramatists of India, Singh identifies the important links between these dramatists, to examine the method of their dramatic composition. This essay critically maps the unique tradition of Indian English women dramatists. Singh's essay is important from the perspective of our book, because it deals with the issue of canon formation and its changing patterns. The canon of Indian English drama, as Dipendu Das states in his essay, contains certain contesting issues, which must be

considered before arriving at any conclusive decision regarding the future of the canon. Das's criticism of the canon is quite in tune with the spirit of this book. This essay will help the scholars and academics to assess the canon from a wide perspective. Partha Sarathi Gupta's scholarly criticism of Karnad's *Broken Images* is based on a remarkable study of the 'syncretic' drama. This kind of dramatic form, as Gupta argues, reflects the interface between drama and post-globalization cultural forms. There is only one essay in the section, "State, Society and Individuals". In this essay, "Time Bombs in a Time Machine: Modern Mythopoeia in Poile Sengupta's *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, So Said Shakuni*", Amit Bhattacharya examines Poile Sengupta's complex approach to Indian myths. Sengupta has, according to Bhattacharya, recast the mythical characters - Shoorpanakha and Shakooni - to offer new interpretations that reflect a different aspect of these characters. In our edited volume, Bhattacharya's essay renders a clear idea of Poile Sengupta's treatment of Indian myth, and in doing so, it also seeks to address the innovations that provided a new dimension to the canon. "Representation of the Nation" is the title of the last section of this unit. Two essays in this section aptly foreground the representation of nation in select Indian English dramas. The first essay of Anindya Bhattacharya situates the entire discussion on the events of the 1960s in India, when Nehruvian economic policies changed the socio-cultural matrix of the country. Bhattacharya reads Gurucharan Das's *9 Jakhoo Hill* through the lens of urban modernity, a phenomenon that shifted the whole texture of India in the 1960s. This essay of Bhattacharya is useful in our volume, as it situates the entire discussion on the interface between history and drama, to foreground the dramatic skill of Gurucharan Das. The poetry of Asif Currimbhoy, as Devamitra Chakraborty's essay argues, reflects the poet's understanding of the socio-cultural milieu of India. His poetry, and particularly the Bengal trilogy poems, are, according to Chakraborty, concerned with issues related to violence, ethics, and revolution. This essay is the outcome of Chakraborty's deep engagement with the canon of Indian English drama. Thus, the book addresses some of the very relevant and recent aspects that have redefined the canons of Indian English poetry and drama. It will hopefully ignite the interest of the researchers and scholars working in these areas, in investigating and examining the aspects that have been discussed in these essays.

Notes

1. Toru Dutt's use of language and choice of themes in her poetry are distinctly different from the other poets of the nineteenth century. Her language, as Rosinka Chaudhuri observes, "addresses her experience, her vision radiation beyond the

boundaries within which most of the nineteenth-century poetry in English was confined” (Chaudhuri, 81). This aspect is quite remarkable in Dutt’s poetry, as it foregrounds her desire to produce an Indian idiom of poetic language. However, her poetic expressions reveal that she could not completely detach herself from Western inspirations. In *Our Casuarina Tree*, Dutt’s style, as noted by Iyengar, reveals her imitation of the Keatsian method of writing poetry (Iyengar, 73). Sri Aurobindo was instrumental in introducing spiritualism in the field of Indian English poetry. *Savitri* is undeniably his most significant work, but in his shorter lyrics there are traces of Western influence. Peter Heehs refers to poems like, *Trance*, *Liberation*, and *Descent*, to indicate Sri Aurobindo’s ‘interesting metrical experiments’, which are recreations of Greek and Latin forms in English (Heehs, 139).

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I

CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY

**CHANGING CANONS:
SOME REFLECTIONS**

THE EMPIRICAL EYE OF THE MODERNIST: STUDYING SOME MODERN INDIAN POETRY IN ENGLISH

AJAY KUMAR

It goes without saying that early Indian English poetry was mystic, and primarily based on religion and spiritualism. Poets like Sri Aurobindo gave a spiritual flavour to the literary world. They were transcendental. But a change happened gradually after the post-Independence era, which we can take as an aftermath, as an impact of the modernism of European literature. Nothing such as modernism existed in India in its pristine sense. Thus modernism in Indian literature is an outward phenomenon. After the post-Independence era, poets started composing poems which dealt mostly with their personal life. This personal happened to be universal, though.

A rigorous foregrounding of personal traumas, emotions, aspirations, and quests, runs dominantly across modern Indian poetry in English. Besides many shifts of focus as regards theme, technique, form, etc., modern Indian poets tend to be empirical in their perception of life. Pre-Independence poets were inward-oriented; they seemed to compose from a mystic poetic inspiration. This inspiration was not essentially empirical. It was generally thought to be a divine inspiration—a kind of Socratic frenzy—that one can call the Indian Muses. But post-Independence poets have shown an epistemic shift. They are outward-oriented, and their poetry is highly physical and empirical. Everything is born of their sensory experiences. Ramanujan, Kolatkar, Mahapatra, Parthasarathy—all derive poetic inspiration from their sensory experiences. The self in their work is, seemingly, to borrow David Hume's words, a 'bundle of perceptions'.

These modern poets, largely influenced as they are by the industrialized and upwardly mobile society of the present, have filled their poetry with physical, material, and concrete realities. They too have endeavoured to find the self and society in their work. But their approach being outward, skeptic, and highly empirical, means that a substantially and characteristically different body of poetry has come into existence. While they made a

landmark departure from the existing structures of the Western models of poetry, and took to experimentation with form and technique, which is a step praiseworthy enough, European modernism did not leave them untouched. However, the absurd human condition of European literature did not engage them.

Despite empiricism and skepticism, the all-pervading essence of Indian culture emanates, albeit irregularly, throughout their poetry. For instance, Mahapatra's *Dawn at Puri* reflects the faith of Indians who, though they are poor, do adhere to their age-long superstitions. Superstitions transform everything into a healing panacea for these people. But the poet's attitude is logical as a consequence of his experiences.

What has to account for this change is partly the education the poets have acquired, and the dislocation they have had as a result. It is obvious that a very huge gap exists between the Eastern and the Western education systems. Generally, the word 'education' is mistaken as an equivalent for the Hindi word 'shiksha'. Etymologically, the word 'education' is derived from *educare* (Latin) meaning 'to bring up', which is related to '*educere*' that means 'to bring out', 'to bring forth what is within'. But the connotation of 'shiksha' is diametrically opposite to that of 'education'.

Early poetry exudes a deep religious and spiritual experience in an epiphanic manner. The light of knowledge burns inside the poet's soul. It is in this very context that Sri Aurobindo talks of 'godlight' that enlightens the human sight. The 'syllables of the unmanifest' (Aurobindo, *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*, 190) are identified in soul-vision and soul-sense (Aurobindo, *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*, 191). Thus, the mystic poets of India closed their eyes and got glimpses of God, while their modern/postmodern counterparts opened their eyes and saw the world with the external sensory organs.

The point is, that everything is centred on one's approach. Henceforth, modern Indian English poetry is, for the most part, a product of an empirical approach. Till now, researches in Indian poetry in English have not focused on the approaches of the poets. Approaches can be many, however, two approaches—empirical and rational—have basically been discussed at length in philosophy so far. The quintessentially Indian approach is mystic, transcendental, miraculous, and primarily based on intelligence and intuition, rather than on empiricism. This is the approach that most of the pre-Independence poets applied.