

Challenges and Complications in the Rise of Comparative Literature in Indian English Poetry: A Historical Analysis through Eminent Institutions of India

Tarika¹, Dr. Rupali Jain², Dr. Prem Shankar Pandey^{3*}

¹Assistant Professor, Satyawati College (E) University of Delhi

²Assistant Professor, Satyawati College (E) University of Delhi, India

^{3*}Assistant Professor and Technical Editor Hindustan Institute of Technology and Science, Chennai, India

Email: ¹tarika.english@satyawati.du.ac.in, ²rupalijain.english@satyawati.du.ac.in, ^{3*}techeditor@hindustanuniv.ac.in

Abstract

This paper aims to examine how ideas of Indian 'Modernity' in Indian English poetry evolve simultaneously with the development of the Comparative Literature methodology paradigm within the postcolonial English department and the late twentieth century publishing culture. The article draws on the work done by critics like E. V. Ramakrishnan, Aijaz Ahmad, Amiya Deb among others to track the development of the Comparative Literature departments at premier universities like Jadavpur University, Calcutta, along with the rise of the postcolonial imperative as a critical paradigm in the canonical, theoretical space and the simultaneous opening up of the public sphere to Indian English poetry through the various little magazine movements. The comparative literature paradigm enables a parallel study of these historical, material trajectories, which sometimes intersect in rhizomatic ways and at other times, seem to be completely cut-off from each other. This paper makes a comparative study between the trends archived in the history of a Comparative Studies Department at Jadavpur University as being representative of the developments in Academic spaces in the country with institutional support from institutions like UGC and the Sahitya Akademi, and the rise of specific idioms in the Indian English poetry anthologies as being symptomatic of the same historic moments. The research will bridge the gap in the existing comparative literature in Indian English Poetry.

Keywords: Indian English Poetry, Canon formation, Comparative Literature, Post-colonial, Little-magazine movement.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article examines how some material conditions of the Indian socio-historical landscape beginning from the 1950s onwards shaped the way in which the concepts of Indian modernity were defined and then appropriated by Indian English poetry writers. The institutional affiliation and patronage of certain trends in literary and theoretical spaces provide the cultural impetus, validation for certain kinds of literary definitions to take shape, instead of certain others. E. V. Ramakrishnan states that the 50s and 60s were the decades of centralization of power by the state so that educational and cultural institutions were set-up throughout the country (Ramakrishnan, 39). These institutions became the sites of the practice of culture and its representations with sanction as well as financial patronage being provided by the state. These institutions in turn legitimized the cultural identities validated by the state and its political implications in the socio-cultural sphere. The tensions between the democratically represented masses, which related to the performativity of the oral traditions and the high textuality of canonized and classical traditions are at the heart of the debate. Sudipta Kaviraj called this a move in opposition to one which was instituted in the social sphere by the national independence movement in which the differences between the vernacular cultures were "transcended" and amalgamated in favor of establishing a homogenized collectivity. The setting up of these

institutions according to Kaviraj intensified and ossified the differences between the various vernacular cultures (69).

Historical Analysis of Eminent Institutions of India

The institutions of eminence like the Sahitya Akademi (established in 1954), the University Grants Commission, Jadavpur University as well as publishing houses were defining the canon of texts which were worthy of the new categories of literatures which were being formulated in the Indian universities and public spaces. The university became an important geo-location for the development of the modern poetic idiom as many IE poets were either trained in literature, taught literature or were related to the University system in some form. In this context, Bruce King states that, the validation of the IE poets came through many institutional channels like the awarding of the Sahitya Akademi award to poets like Keki N. Daruwalla, Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, Jayanta Mahapatra and Shiv Kumar apart from the conferring of the Padma Shree on Ezekiel by the President of India. Even here there are more nuanced arguments that have already been made, though they are beyond the scope of this paper. Bruce King in his work *Modern Indian Poetry in English* gives a helpful account of the difference in publication dynamics between the Bombay and the Calcutta little magazine movements in the chapter titled 'Towards a Canon.' The anthologies edited by poets often betrayed their own value judgments about which poets were thought to be greater by the poet editing the anthology. He states for example that when editing anthologies, Pritish Nandy favored authors he had published in his Dialogue publications or poets associated with his publishing enterprise, Writers Workshop (63). The 60s and 70s was the time when the young poets in Bombay were trying to find their feet and trying to establish a new poetic idiom for Indian poetry. Many academic publishing platforms in the form of journals also came up around this time. The Jadavpur Journal of Comparative Literature for instance, began in 1961. The connection between Comparative literature and the postcolonial idiom is unmistakable. Aijaz Ahmad, whose last assignment was as a professor in the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of California, Irvine, played a vital role in bringing the two fields together in English academic thought. His academic career, much like the careers of early academicians at Jadavpur is testament to the interlinkages between the role of the South-Asian academician in the various fields and departments of English Literature and the rise of the Comparative Literature paradigm in the postcolonial context. Aijaz Ahmad taught critical theory at various universities across the globe, including a long stint at Rutgers University (1975-1992) before coming back to India, to teach at JNU and Jamia Millia Islamia, both prominent universities in New Delhi, while also working as an editor and contributor at prominent magazines like Frontline. Ahmad continues to be one of the seminal theorists who have worked as a translator from Urdu, while also engaging with the politics of translation, literary production and the reception of literary texts. His position as a seminal thinker within the debate lends a lot of value and cultural capital to his views about the ways in which different Indian literary traditions intersect. The multi-linguality, at the heart of Ahmad's critique of the category of 'Indian Literature' in his seminal essay, "Indian Literature: Notes Towards the Definition of a Category," falls squarely within the methodological paradigm of comparative literature. Ahmad offers the methodology of Comparative literature as the radical space through which the English departments in the country could re-evaluate the place of English in the transmission of Indian literatures between different language traditions. The interconnectedness of the various literary traditions in the Indian context function rhizomatically and cannot be attributed as separate systems which can neatly form a hierarchical summation to create a specifically wholistic 'Indian' literary tradition. The reason why Comparative Literature can function as a valid methodology for the study of the Indian English Poetry corpus and the canon-forming impulses of the genre, is because as Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta states in her essay, 'Comparative Literature in India: An Overview of its History,' the advent of Comparative Literature in the Indian academia, enabled the shifting of the perspective from the Sanskritic traditions to the acknowledgement and the eventual acceptance of the oral, performative as well as other marginal literary traditions and forms. The rise of the marginal literatures and their eventual canonization through acceptance into IE poetry anthologies and subsequently, dedicated anthologies, like the anthology of Dalit poetry, or the

anthology of North-East Indian poetry or even the anthology of Feminist or Women's poetry are all symptomatic of the opening up of the 'mainstream' space for 'other' literatures. As E. V. Ramakrishnan states, the same kind of paradigm shift was enabled by the little magazines which sprung up primarily in Bombay and in Calcutta. Ramakrishnan states, "The conflict between the canonized and the non-canonized is reflected in the distance between the mainstream periodicals and the little magazines" (Ramakrishnan, 13). Ramakrishnan further states that the "commitment to 'culture'" showed by the mainstream periodicals and their authors/poets was a sign of their political stance about "perpetuating the hierarchical order," (13) whereas the little magazines provided space to the young authors/poets to challenge the norms of canon formation and their rules which limited their access to this canon. Sisir Kumar Das' multi-volume history of Indian Literature as an interconnected system rather than as a sum of disjointed sections, rose from the institutional support of the Department of Modern Indian Languages and Literary Studies as well as the Sahitya Akademi. The 70s and 80s was the time when several universities in the country were giving academic space and attention to Comparative literature. According to Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta, the universities which expanded their programs to practice Comparative literature included, Madurai Kamaraj University, Bharatidasam University, Kottayam and Pondicherry. Dasgupta's essay about the development and history of the Comparative literature department at Jadavpur University also provides important insights about the parallel development of the postcolonial methodology and the trajectory of the syllabi at comparative literature departments like the one at Jadavpur. Some of the examples she quotes include Calcutta University receiving grants to study the literary relations between India and Europe in the nineteenth century, and Saurashtra University, Rajkot, initiating research on Indian renaissance and translations of Indian authors into English took place. The introduction of Latin American and African texts in the 80s marks the presence of the postcolonial imperative in the academic departments where the historical contingency of 'imposition' or otherwise of the English texts in Indian academic spaces was being questioned and the interconnectedness of Indian texts synchronically to other texts which were formulated through resistance to the colonial framework was studied. Simultaneous with this is the rise of the new IE poets. The breaking of the canonical hold on the syllabi is also reflected in the breaking of the confines of the subject matter explored by the younger IE poets writing around this time, who are more interested in the exploration of their own personal lives to create a modern, more democratic poetic idiom, than the earlier generation of IE poets who experimented with radical modernist techniques. The Indian academia was responding to these new trends in the IE poetry through critical analyses through such seminal works as M. K. Naik's *History of Indian English Literature* published in 1982 among others. The fact that in the 80s, a sense of 'history' could be transcribed onto the genre, which was still mapping the trajectories of its configuration and canonization marks an important step in its ontological crystallization.

The influence of Indian postcolonial critical discourses in English, peaking around the mid to late 1990s, can be explained with respect to several important and interlocking historical and pedagogical factors, including the status of India within the broad history of independence movements; the international location and prominence of many Indian critics, writers, and theorists, not least Salman Rushdie, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabha; as well as the institutional receptivity of these writers and critics to poststructuralist literary theory. (Chaudhuri and Boehmer, 5) The impulse of institutional canonization of the authors like Mehrotra and Chitre, seen as rebellious, avant-garde and anti-establishment in the 60s and 70s and yet canonized as representatives of Indianness in the 1990s can perhaps be understood through the emergence of postcolonialism as an academic imperative in the 1990s. In the background of these developments in the Comparative literature departments and methodologies as well as the development and appropriation of the postcolonial paradigm in the academic spaces in the country, the IE poets were creating their corpus of a specifically 'modern' idiom of what it meant to be a poet in the Indian public sphere. The anthology quickly grew up to become one of the most popular spaces for the publication of the IE poets. Bruce King acknowledges the force and importance of the cultural capital yielded by established publishing houses like the Oxford University Press. Editors like Arvind Krishna Mehrotra and publishing houses

like Oxford University Press, Macmillan and Sahitya Akademi enable the anthologies to become not just the repositories but also the producers of cultural capital in the postcolonial marketplace. The readers would turn to anthologies verified by literary institutions like Oxford University Press, Macmillan, or even Arvind Krishna Mehrotra for guidance and validation. Taking into consideration R. Parthasarthy's *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets* King states that the anthology gave the "Oxford seal of approval" (37) which effectively ended the conversation about which editors had a better understanding of the canonical works of the newly emerging genre of IE poetry. He states, "For all practical purposes a canon was being established which might be said to represent what many poets and critics felt to be the best post-War poets up to then, and the anthology soon became an established text for university courses in Indian English literature" (37). In fact, King correlates the increasing number of anthologies which were being published with the increasing interest in IE poetry itself (King, 42). Subha Dasgupta states that the interdisciplinary framework of the Jadavpur Comparative Literature department in the first decade of the twentieth century underwent a specific kind of change because of the increased funding it received as the newly promoted Centre of Advanced Studies in 2005 (16). She further states, "...in the late nineties and in the early following decade there was a constant demand for engaging with literatures of marginalized communities in different platforms of comparative literature studies in India, often from such communities (16)". This institutional impetus must have played a significant role in the expression of public literary consciousness. One way of mapping such a consciousness, as stated in the case of IE poetry by King above was the publication of specific anthologies. The publication of anthologies of what had been till now marginal literature must be attributed to these kinds of institutional encouragements, endowments, awards, workshops, translation and publication opportunities, apart from, of course, the penetration of English education to an increasing number of communities which till now had occupied the space of the marginal. The anthology has the potency of creating as well as sustaining a sense of collective consciousness and identity. The great labyrinth of the extra-textual elements of the anthologies, like the blurbs and reviews serve to qualify and quantify the quiet assumptions which the anthologies create through performative examples of how terms like modernity, Indian and canonicity can be defined. Anthologies are often understood as the most reliable and accessible ways of working and contributing towards a good literary-historical sketch of any given period. Representative poetry in popular imagination has come to be associated with anthologies curated by important poets as editors who can homogenize often disparate voices through an editorial narrative. The publication of *An Anthology of Dalit Literature (poems)* edited by Mulk Raj Anand and Eleanor Zelliot in 1992 might be considered one such event. While books like M. K. Naik's, referred to earlier, suggested that there already was a well-established 'history' of Indian English literature by the 1980s, the editor's introduction of the Anthology of Dalit poetry suggests the uniqueness of Dalit poetry anthologized in the volume. The introduction emphasizes at many points the non-literariness of Dalit poetry. Anand notes that, "Rhythmic speech, then, which is poetry has grown out of extroversion of physical energy to achieve desired reality" (ix). The physicality of the Dalit identity, formulated on their caste-marked bodies as being the source of their poetry is an important marker of the ways in which the cultural capital of the poetry anthology creates a newer dimension of the Dalit identity, that of being capable of some form of collective literariness, quantified in an anthology. The Dalit poetry is born out of sheer hard physical labour but it can create a cultural dimension beyond the physical for the Dalit. Eleanor Zelliot's introduction in the same work which is titled 'Dalit Sahitya: A Historical Background' is also replete with the political and social conditions of existence of the Dalits and the resistance mounted by them. The wide-spanning introduction takes cognizance of earlier writers like Chokhamela and other writers/poets as well, but Zelliot also claims directly that all forms of Dalit creativity has historically been linked to the political movement begun by the Mahar caste. The socio-political nature of the Dalit history belies the absence of any literary tradition which anticipates Ahmad's argument about the lack of interlinkages between the different formats of literature in India – pertinent here, the lack of a documented history of oral and performative histories which can contextualize the written anthology. In his essay titled, 'The Haptic and the Phatic in the Era of Globalization,' Arjun Appadurai has put forth a helpful argument about the sensory economy of the

caste system in India. He builds upon the work done by philosophers like Sundar Sarukkai, Gopal Guru and P. Thirumal when he states that the sensory economy of the Indian social spaces can only imagine the Brahmin as the active thinking subject with the agency of deciding their own haptic interactions and limitations. He discusses the work of P. Thirumal about the inclusion of Dalits into the inclusive educational institutions where Brahmins also study. The analysis is pertinent to the discussion here. He states that: ...the law can force them to accept Dalit students but cannot oblige them to change their sensory economy. This sensory economy, which has to do with sight and sound, listening and smelling, is a design for insulating Brahmins, as archetypes of pure thought, from Dalits who are seen as inert matter, which can never constitute genuine thinking subjects (9-10).

At the cost of being anachronistic, if we put Anand's introduction to the Dalit poetry anthology in the context of the arguments put forth by Appadurai and the other scholars, it is clear that the framing argument given by the editors enforces rather than challenges the essentialization of the Dalit as a purely physical form. The insistence through the introduction of the Dalit poetry having originated in the physical labour that the Dalit poets have to perform as a part of their socio-economic reality supersedes even the social configuration of poetry as an intellectual exercise – an extension of the 'thought' that is equated specifically with the Brahmin identity. The inclusion of 'thought' into the poem is regarded as an optional event and when it does, Anand claims that, "both content and form have an internal coherence of their own and become prose-poem" (xiii). Anand does protest the canonicity of the classical texts but he categorizes Dalit poetry squarely in the context of its social function as its point of origin– it is the poetry of labour protest. The anti-canoncity of the poetry anthologized by Anand serves only to essentialize its discriminatory discursive identity so that the constant evocation of Bharatmuni, Beethoven and "pakka raag" etc. (xiv) only highlights the absence of even the vocabulary in which the politics of social protest which forms the basic register of Dalit poetry is revealedⁱ. Anand does echo many of the arguments that theorists of Comparative literature make around the same time – the need to contextualize learning and accept the rhizomatic structure of literary traditions rather than limiting the critical praxis to a hierarchical comparative paradigm between the canonical and the popular.

2. Conclusion

The nineties and the first decade of the twentieth century witnessed the academic and discursive conversations taking place in academic spaces. Subha Dasgupta for instance highlights that the comparative literature department at Jadavpur was engaged in questioning the politics of Dalit literature and its interactions with 'mainstream' literature. Critical responses to Dalit literature often inflected other discourses while emphasizing the performative aspect of the praxis of reading – the reader was drawn into a re-drawn reality of the world they inhabited while also raising questions about the shared nature of their humanity. The intensely political and personal nature of Dalit poetry raised some very pertinent questions about the canonicity of not just literature but also the act of reading and the access to fundamental social structures which enabled literacy.

One of the most important literary practices which enables anthologization and study within the postcolonial and Comparative literature paradigm is translation. When texts are translated through special programs sponsored by institutions like UGC or the Sahitya Akademi, the political affiliations and leanings are implied in the texts that are selected and ultimately anthologized. Translation is the only praxis available for the conceptualization of a world literature and comparative literature the only way in which it can be understood. Amiya Dev in his article 'Rethinking Comparative Literature,' states that definition of world literature should be limited to the sum of literatures available to any individual either in their original language or in translation. This subjective understanding of the categorization of what constitutes literature at the individual location of the reader can also be traced to the methodology of Comparative Literature which challenges both the canonization of 'value' as well as that of location. Comparative literature, through its acknowledgment of the rhizomatic structure of structures of literary traditions and interactions between literary cultures through translations, provides an important framework, through which the development of a specifically 'Indian' and 'modern' format was outlined in the IE poetry tradition. Such an interdisciplinary study

can reveal many other overlapping trends and idioms which might not otherwise be visible to a siloed reader/critic.

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