

Alienation of Culture in Contemporary Indian English Poetry

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For a long time I have been trying to negotiate with the concept of alienation of culture in Indian writing in English, specially poetry, which, if surveyed from pre-Independence to post-Independence period, shows a glaring difference in the outlook, attitudes and values of the poets concerned. Here I am talking about Indian poetry written in English and not regional poetry written in native language like Oriya, Marathi, Tamil etc.

Alienation has corroded human life from various quarters. The existential 'encounter' with nothingness and the tenuousness of human existence are prototypical of modern life. The hiatus between what the individual aspires for and the harsh reality of what he achieves; between what he professes and what he practices and between what he really is and what he would like to be taken for, has mercilessly crumpled his life leaving an insidious effect on his inner being. The injuries inflicted and the scars left on his psyche generate a cynical attitude towards the established social norms and values and make him grope for life's relevance. He is shocked to find that he is no longer the master of his destiny and that there are forces which threaten the very fabric of his life and all its joys and hopes. Angst-ridden and utterly hopeless, he finds life profoundly vast without any proper inter-linkages to hold it together from falling apart. Painfully aware of his precarious position, man experiences severe limitations in today's set-up and an acute terror of the world augmented by its randomness and alienation.

Alienation may be social or of the self. Social alienation is the sense of estrangement brought out by the sudden discovery that the social system is either oppressive or not in conformity

with the individual's desires and ideals. Self-alienation means the loss of contact of the individual self with the concepts that are not in agreement with the prevailing social patterns. The loss of self-alienation is intimately related to the loss of, and quest for, one's identity in order to define the 'Self'.

The well-known American poet Ezra Pound once stated that the "Poets are the antenna of the race". They catch and transmit the signals they receive from the society. If the cultural moorings of the nation are firm and strong, the literary output of that country cannot help but reflect the same, and if there is decadence, disintegration and disillusionment in the minds of the people, the literature of that nation will be a disturbed ritual, displaying indifference, insensitivity and regression.

It is true that poetry cannot be classified as classical, modern, post-modern or contemporary, as the source of all poetry is the same, the innermost voice of the poet. What is modern today, will be ancient tomorrow. When poets write, they write about their passions, their feelings, their dreams and their desires. The emotions when processed by the intellect become words and words get immortalized in poetry. Poets thus act as recorders of history, preservers of tradition, restorers of romance, interpreters of emotions, painters of art, inventors of intellectual sophistication, thinkers of philosophy and messengers of God. Ever since the inception of Indian poetry in English, which is almost 175 years old, Indian poets have done a laudable work. Many of them have been ambassadors of Indian wisdom to the West as their poetic works reflect and illumine rich, cultural, religious, philosophical and

spiritual strains and speculations. Their works demonstrate their deep love for the motherland, its folklore, its customs and traditions, its legends and the ancient tales of high moral and spiritual character.

While Kashi Prasad Ghose had the distinction of being the first Hindu as he asserted, to write original English Verse in 1830, Henry Derozio is generally credited as being the first Anglo-Indian poet in English who set the individualistic tone for his love of India, his motherland and lamentation over her fallen state. The highest cultural achievement reached its crescendo during the Renaissance period, pioneered by the formidable trio, Sri Aurobindo, Tagore and Sarojini Naidu. As leaders of a new creative movement, they projected the vibrantly-alive cultural profile of India to the world outside, particularly the prejudiced West.

They were not simply of the mere beautiful but also of the truth and goodness as *Satyam*, *Shivam*, *Sundaram* was their leit motif of their poetic works. Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri* celebrates the unconquerable spirit of India and vindicates the divine destiny of man. Vivekananda's sense of renunciation, devotion, quest, innate mystic effulgence, self-realization came from a voice that sounded as authentic as a prophet. It was an interpretation of God's way to men. Tagore wakes up the Indian mind from narrow domestic walls and lights the way towards a trans-national experience and participation. Sarojini Naidu with her romantic sensibility and poetic charm earns the title, 'the Nightingale of India'. In a nutshell, they advocated universal love, service to mankind and devotion to the Infinite. Sri Aurobindo tried to achieve

in English verse something analogous to the *Vedic mantra* effecting a divine *ananda* in the soul of the poet. He extended the frontiers of poetry by repossessing the ancient Indian tradition of *Upanishadic* poetry and assimilated it into English language.

With the dawn of freedom, the scenario changed completely. The era of hope, aspiration and certitude was gone and an age of merciless self-scrutiny, questioning and ironic exposure commenced. The artist in a man became marginalized, an alienated outsider. The feverish pursuit of materialism, power-politics and self-aggrandizement brought disintegration of family as a unit, ushering in the bane of nuclear family where the sensitive poet seemed to lose his self which led to the crisis of his identity. There was restlessness and rootlessness along with the gradual erosion of values in daily life. Violence, corruption, exploitation became the norms of our social set-up. The poet's psyche was in a dilemma as he wanted to assert and reassert his cultural values, specially the expatriate poets like A.K. Ramanujan, Shiv K. Kumar and G.S. Sharat Chandra. In writing in a language, i.e. English which was not his own, the poet's sensibility got partly westernized and the language became partly Indianized. The end-product seemed to have cross-cultural bearings. The avant-grade movement, the mechanics of modernism and the new *mantra* of technology accelerated the disintegration of the inherited values. The tendency to rebel and protest came in the way of modern contemporary poets.

Isolated, alienated and perhaps cut-off from the roots of culture, the poet today is in a flux of tradition and modernity. He can neither detach himself from his glorious past nor does he have certitude in future. In the wake of experimentation, using colloquial language, many poets have crossed the borderline in revealing the vulgar, the obscene and the forbidden with persistent use of deplorable vocabulary.

The reader feels disgusted, embarrassed and scandalized to read such stuff. The restless, anxiety-ridden soul is coming up with literature hardly with any consistency, now dramatic, now conversational, now ironic, now satirical, now humorous, now meditative. One of the modern poets, Nissim Ezekiel, portrays the present scene aptly in one of his early poems 'On meeting a pedant':

Words, looks, gestures, everything betrays,

The unquiet mind, the emptiness within.¹

Dom Moraes reveals:

*I have grown up to live alone
sometimes dream glumly,
I am unloved and forlorn,
I want to run away from strangers.*²

The women poets questioned the patriarchal system and began to articulate.

The tormented mind with its loss of identity is revealed in the upcoming woman poet Mamta Kalia's work:

*I no longer feel I'm Mamta Kalia
I'm Kamla
or Vimla
or Kanta or Shanta
I cook, I wash
I bear, I rear
I nag, I wag
I sulk, I sag.*³

Elsewhere in a poem entitled, 'Tribute to Papa' she tells her old father,

*Who cares for your clean thoughts,
clean words, clean teeth?
You remained only a Lower Division
Clerk
and never indulged in smuggling
so that I would have been proud of you.*

Apparently, here the poetess protests vehemently against her father's ideals, which according to her, became the cause of his failure in life. But in the deeper level her protest reveals the regretful lack of values in the present generation.

This cerebral, so-called intellectual poetry of unrelenting ironic stance and with a distinct discomfort with tradition seems to be situated at the interface of desire, despair, and delirium. The desire is for exploring the self, the despair at the loss of identity and delirium and madness of the process of poeticization itself. Today, poetry is, therefore, one-stringed instrument producing only the doleful tune of alienation of culture from one's roots. It is about the mundane, the quotidian and the monotony of routine city life. "Poets frequently perceive the city as a site and use it as a metaphor where the self/other barrier is explored. The self meets other selves in relationships that are antagonistic, supportive, threatening or simply indifferent. There is maladjustment, fear, cruelty, pathos that uniformly mark the poetry of the city."⁴

Let me conclude this paper by stating Tennyson: "The old order changeth yielding place to new". After a long and varied discourse with 'self' and a loud lament at the precarious human conditions, the Indian poet in English, who certainly does not live in vacuum, is not totally bereft of culture but is simply alienated. Let us hope that he would start realizing and believing in the value-based tradition, sensibility and cultural philosophy, paving the way for a great new social order, in order to herald substantial meaningful poetry.

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