

**The Aurobindonian and the post- Aurobindonian Traditions in Indian English Poetry:
A Contrastive Study of Representative Poets**

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Abstract

This paper attempts to demarcate two domains of poetry the Aurobindonians and the post-Aurobindonians, who belong to two rival groups of poets. It focuses on the contrastive features of the poetry of these two categories of poets. The Aurobindonians formed a school of poets that aimed at writing verses in the poetical mould of their master Sri Aurobindo and hence they approximated to him in respect of exploitation of theme, mode, style, diction and craftsmanship.

In contrast to these Aurobindonian poets, the post-Aurobindonians reckon Nissim Ezekiel and P. Lal as the model of excellence in poetry and adhere to the new canons of versification advocated by them. Under the influence of these literary stalwarts, the new poets produced modernist poetry. Whereas the poetry of the former group is romantic, metaphysical and mystical, that of the latter tends to be anti-romantic, surrealistic and representative in character. These two classes of poets remain ideologically uncompromising and irreconcilable in as much as they march along two different paths of poetry that run in the opposite directions. Since the Aurobindonians are traditionalists in outlook, they look back to ancient Indian tradition and culture. Unlike them the post-Aurobindonians are modernists in outlook and imbibe the new modernist culture and literary fervour. The paper seeks to highlight all these distinctively distinguishing features of their poetry in English.

Key Words: Aurobindonian and post- Aurobindonian Traditions, contrastive features

Tradition in art, literature and culture inevitably undergoes with the passage of time a vicissitude in any nation of the world. This law of change also occurs in the evolution of a new tradition in literature. From this angle of vision, if we retrospectively review the past trend of Indian English Poetry, we notice progressive transmutation of its features from poet to poet from the time of Derozio up to post-modern period.

In this context of metamorphosis of tradition of Indian English poetry, attempt is sought

to demarcate two traditions exploiting the traits of Aurobindonian poetry as the basis of distinction.

This article expatiates comprehensively upon the distinctive features of the Aurobindonian and the post- Aurobindonian poetry in English with a view to highlighting the dissimilarities existing in the traditions of Indian English poetry. It focuses on the bifurcation of avenue of poetry in terms of trend and tradition and establishes two distinctive traditions that are analysed in the article on the basis of contrastive study of

the poets of the pre-Independence and post-Independence periods.

At the advent of new modernism in post-independence India an ideological cleavage occurred in the community of Indian Poets writing in English and resulted in their classification into the Aurobindonians and the post-Aurobindonians. This classification, which was made by P. Lal the founder of the Writers Workshop and his co-worker K, Raghavendra Rao on the basis of the new poets' response and reaction to the poetry of Sri Aurobindo led to a kind of rivalry and hostility between two groups of poets. Each group of poets asserted in poetry an identity and individuality of its own. They differed radically from each other in their conception of the mode and technique of versification.

The stream of Aurobindonian poetry that emerged from the poetical works of the pre-Aurobindonians like H.V. Derozio, Kashi Prasad Ghose, Michael Madhusudan, Toru Dutt and Manmohan Ghose gradually widened its breadth by assuming exuberantly romantic and mystical character. This trend of Aurobindonian poetry perpetuated till the dawn of post-modernism in the wake of which it declined due to predominant influence of new ideological theories and concepts. The evolution of new theories such as post-modernism, Marxism, feminism and existentialism paved the path for emergence of post-Aurobindonian poetry known as new poetry. The new poets were inspired by the Writers Workshop to write poetry in accordance with the canons of Kavita Manifesto introduced by the poets P-Lal and Raghavendra Rao. The new poets of the post-Aurobindonian tradition

intellectually opposed the Aurobindonian tradition of poetry evolved by Sri Aurobindo and sustained by his adherents. With this objective in view they characterized their verses with new ingredients such as new themes of sociological interest, surrealism, private voice, colloquialism, new idioms and jargons. They exploited all these traits as advocated by the Writers Workshop founded in 1959. The new poets who invariably denounced the past poetic convention adhered to by the Aurobindonians, often reviewed retrospectively their poetical works to derive inspiration from their versification. They, however, revolutionized their own trend of writing and reshaped their mode and artifice of versification in an altogether new mould but without ignoring the traditional value sustained by their predecessors. M.K. NAIK contends "the modernist poets who are militant modernists stand on the shoulders of the older poets". (1)

Thus, the post-Aurobindonian poetry blossomed out after the appearance of Nissim Ezekiel as a harbinger of new poets in the new horizon of Indian poetry in English. He is pre-eminently a major voice that represents the change of an era in the domain of Indian English poetry. Ezekiel is an outstanding poet in terms of his wealth of literary output and sustained quality of verse. He is the first post-Independence poet who inaugurated a new tradition of poetry which was later on invigorated by his successors P. Lal, R. Rao, Pritish Nandy, Parthasarathy, Daruwalla, Adil Jussawalla and above all by Kamala Das, Gauri Deshpande, Mamta Kalia and other women poets. All these new post-Aurobindonian

poets waged a war against Sri Aurobindo and his adherents with the weapon of new modernist poetry that undermined his poetic tradition and overshadowed his achievements as a poet. The overwhelming sentiments of modernism and the influence of this new theory gradually weaned poets from the Aurobindonian tradition of versification.

The emergence of Sri Aurobindo as poets ushered a new tradition in to Indian poetry in English. His exquisite thematic exploitation of myths and legends, innovation of new mode, diction and artifice of versification infatuated many of his contemporary poets, who formed a school of poets and became the practitioners of the poetic convention known as Aurobindonian tradition of poetry . Sri Aurobindo and his adherents initiated a new tradition that flourished luxuriantly till its culmination in the publication of his epic Savitri in 1950.

Let us first analyse the characteristics of the poetry of the Aurobindonian tradition in order to differentiate it from that of the post-Aurobindonian modernist poets The distinctly marked features of their poetry are pointed out contrastively in the following paragraphs. Let us first analyses the characteristics of the Aurobindonian poetry. The Aurobindonians were the practitioners of religious, mystical , philosophical and meditative verse. The poetical works of Sri Aurobindo, N.K. Gupta, D.K. Roy, K.D. Sethna, Nirodbaran, Anilbaran, Romen and Prithwindra give ample evidence of this kind of poetry. They keenly responded to the values of legends, myths and mystical ideas. The post-Aurobindonians on the other hand

reacted against this kind of poetry of imagination and vision. Instead of savouring the myths and legends and the Vedantic and mystical ideas drawn from the past of India, they responded to the psychological, social, economic and cultural issues of the contemporary society. The post-Aurobindonians committed to writing verses with an anti-Aurobindonian interest outlook and spirit imbibing the mode style and technique innovated by Ezekiel , Dom Moraes, Kamala Das, P. Lal, R. Rao Daruwalla and Shiv K. Kumar. It is axiomatic that the post- Aurobindonians were basically anti- Aurobindonians, who pioneered a new tradition of versification in response to the new modernist concepts and conventionalized the new mode of writing for the new poets of the post-Independence era . With an unflinching commitment they embarked upon the new tradition of writing verses in an unprecedented new fashion with a view to imparting a new identity and dimension to new poetry. Their verses bear the stamp of their anti- Aurobindonian attitude and spirit.

Hence they adopted themes from Indian life and situation such as folk-belief, rituals, corruption in socio-political life, miseries of life of the downtrodden and natural calamities. The poetry of Ezekiel, Parthasarathy, K.N. Daruwalla, Adil Jussawalla and Pritish Nandy is replete with picturesque descriptions of contemporary Indian life. These poets were chiefly concerned with the realities of life on which they focus in their verses. Ezekiel, Shiv K. Kumar, Daruwalla and Adil Jussawalla portray the plight of beggars, rickshaw pullers, vagrants, and slum dwellers,

prostitutes and child widows and so on with compassion and sympathy. The evils of city life are depicted by Ezekiel, Daruwalla, Jussawalla and Nandy. In contrast to these poets, the Aurobindonians were not at all concerned with the realities of socio-economic problems of India. Their Indian sensibility manifested itself in their adherence to the Vedic and Upanishadic tradition of spiritualism and mysticism. K.S.R Iyengar observes "All modern Indian poetry including Indian English poetry is sustained by the living waters of our racial tradition ,the Veda, the Upanishad, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata ,the stream of Vaishnava or Shaiva devotional Poetry".(2)

They also revived English romanticism in their poetry. They conceived themes for their poetry by exercising their romantic sensibility and hence their themes are imaginary, visionary, dreamy and meditative. This kind of unrealistic poetry appealed to the Aurobindonians but embittered the taste of the post-Aurobindonians, who crusaded against that tradition and discarded verses of Aurobindonian, flavour. They eschewed forms of romanticism and metaphysical speculation in order to make their poetry a vehicle of social service and reform. S.C. Harrex comments "the new poetry was new because it abhorred the old conventional jargons, sociological as well as literary and rejected romantic or mythic generalizations that deflected the attention from every day realities (3)

The new poets started writing poetry in the new modernist tradition reposing faith in a vital language, in the value of concreteness, and in the full time nature of the poet's

vocation. They opposed propaganda, imitation and romanticism and finally asserted their faith in a private voice. The post- Aurobindonians produced a new kind of poetry characterized by surrealism, new idiom, colloquialism and new diction. Thus, Indian Poetry in English took a new direction and dimension in the hands of the new poets. Kamala Das writes her poem in a colloquial manner "It voices my joys and my longings, my hopes and it is useful to me

As cowing is to crows or roaring to the lions
it in human speech ,the speech of the mind
that is here and not there (4)

The Aurobindonians were complacent in their world of myths and legends and gods and goddess. In the light of these themes they explored the deeper levels of human mind and truth of life and death enshrouded in the mist of mystery. These themes of myths and mystical experiences had a deep fascination and appeal to them. The post-Aurobindonians on the other hand were psychologically pre-occupied with their self-scrutiny and self-introspection. It is pertinent here to refer –to M.K. Naik's views about Indian Literature of the post-Independence period "The era of hope, aspiration and certitude was gone: an age of merciless self-scrutiny, questioning and ironic exposure commenced" Among the post-Aurobindonians, there are poets like Ezekiel, Parthasarathy, Dom Moraes, Ramanujan, A.K. Mehrotra and Kamala Das who are well known for exposition of their inwardness. They do not take delight in philosophical speculation about life and death but they are psychologically obsessed

in the discovery of their own cultural heritage and roots. The other themes of psychological significance are a sense of alienation, loneliness, nostalgic and exile that impart a distinct identity to the new poetry. The post- Aurobindonians resorted to nostalgic reminiscences and dreamy experiences for a kind of pleasure where as the Aurobindonian remained engrossed in philosophical contemplation for ecstatic experiences. The post-Aurobindonians disdained the quality and excellence of the Aurobindonian poetry on the ground of exuberance of romanticism and mysticism and resolved to bring this trend of writing to an end . With this objective in view they publicly proclaimed their break with the past with the slogan that “ the phase of Indo-Anglian romanticism ended with Sarajini Naidu”.(6)

The new modernist poets have a tendency to exploit their own self own self and personality in poetry for which it becomes a vehicle of autobiographical reflection of the poet’s personal experiences .From this viewpoint of use of self, the new poets echo the British poets who have written poetry about their own” experiences. Parthasarathy’s “Rough Passage” Ezekiel’s “Events and Enterprise”, “Night of the scorpion”, Ramanujan’s“ “Small Scale Reflections on a Great House”, “Love Poem for a Wife”, and Kamala Das’s “My Grand Mother’s House”, Jaisurya”, “Hot Noon at Malbar” etc are the poems of an autobiographical nature. Unlike these poets the Aurobindonians were far away from their self. Their poetry is bereft of any self-revelation or autobiographical reflection They on the other hand luxuriated in the

versification of mystical lyrics but the post-Aurobindonians dismissed such themes based upon these elements .They on the contrary adopted contemporary social issues of universal interest . M.K. Naik comments “it is strange that certain Indian critics who reverently genuflect before The Wreck of Deuts land, Ask Wednesday and The Four Quartets should turn up their noses at these mystical lyrics”(7)

Another feature of poetry is the theme of love. Both the groups of poets have written poems of love but in the conception and treatment of love they differ entirely from each other. Ezekiel, Kamala Das, Shiv K. Kumar, Pritish Nandy, Daruwalla and Mahapatra have written poems on love, mostly in earthly or at best psychological terms and with regard to marriage or personal relations. In contrast to this kind of erotic love, the Aurobindonians conceived of celestial love of immortal character. The love between Urvasie and Pururavus, Chitrangada and Urjoon, Savitri and Satyavan transcends the boundary of vulnerability, inconsistency and transience. Their love assumes spiritual significance and attains fulfillments. The lover conquers death by love. They never experience any kind of frustration, dejection and anguish in love as Keats, Yeats and Kamala Das had felt in their real life. The lovers in the poetry of the Aurobindonians sublimate their love by virtue of their fidelity , intensity and consistency. These disciples of Sri Aurobindo treated love on a higher spiritual plane. They also deal with mystical love between Man and God and Man and Nature.

In writing these love poems the Aurobindonians have followed the Vedic tradition that treats physical love as sinful and as an impediment on the path of a possible relationship between Man and God. Indian mythology is a storehouse of tales of mythical love. It is out of this repertoire of stories of love that the Aurobindonians have borrowed themes for their love poetry. Whereas the Aurobindonians were inspired by a cult of beauty, lyrical passion and intensity of emotion, the post-Aurobindonians were imbued with a new spirit of creativity, innovation, experiment and novelty. David Mc Cutchion remarks "the poets of fifties were fresh, inventive and individual"(8)

The former group of poets was writing lyrical verse, traditional narrative poetry and poetic drama but the latter group was pre-occupied with free verse and prose poems. Nandy is pre-eminently known for his prose poems, which constituted a new breakthrough in Indian poetry in English. The Aurobindonians considered poetry a vehicle of spirit and the world of body. It served as a communication between Man and God. Unlike them, the post-Aurobindonians treat poetry as a medium of manifestation of all creative urges. Modern poets embody in their verses new areas of thoughts and philosophy such as Darwinism, Marxism, Buddhism, Gandhism, Feminism, existentialism, positivism and Freudian psychology. The new poets 'vision of life is coloured by humanism and irony but the Aurobindonians perceive life mystically and symbolically.

In respect of versification the Aurobindonians continued to write in the

Milonic and Keatsian tradition. They used similes, images, symbols, meters, blank verse and vocabulary provided by the British poets. The poetic diction of Sri Aurobindo was interlarded with Milonic Latinized expressions. His disciples too followed his footsteps in the versification of poetry. K.D. Sethna, N.K. Gupta, D.K. Roy, Romen and other Aurobindonians wrote exactly or tried to write exactly like their master. They were trained in the art and technique of writing by Sri Aurobindo himself. The poems, written by K.D. Sethna were corrected by him. The corrected scripts give evidence of this training imparted by the master. They all cultivated an elevated style of writing.

Unlike them, the post-Aurobindonians drew inspiration from P. Lal to write a new kind of poetry in accordance with the canons of versification laid down in the Kavita Manifesto(1959). These poets searched for new and innovative techniques of expression and innovated their own art and artifice. They used the colloquial style and idioms to give vent to their Indian sentiments and sensibility. Their poetry became an expression of their private voices. Satire and irony are salient features of the Post-Aurobindonian poetry. Irony is noticed for example in Ezekiel's", "Afternoon poem," "The Egoist's Prayers" and "Theological". In Shiv K. Kumar's "In my Co-Respondent" and "Pilgrimage", we perceive an implicit irony. Similarly Daruwalla uses irony in the poem "Fire-Hymn."

Symbolism is used by the new modernist under the influence of the French poets and British poets like Eliot, Yeats and Wyndham and Lewis. H.M. William "in many cases the new poetry was generated by the

acceptance of a new set of influences .In place English and Indian Romantic poets came the influence of the British poets or the modernist poets, who echo Yeats, Eliot and Pound”.(9)

In Ezekiel’s poems, “Crow, “Night of the Scorpion” and “Enterprise” the underlying meaning of the poems can be inferred symbolically. To Ezekiel, the crow is a symbol of evil and sin. Likewise, the scorpion in the “Night of the scorpion” suggests the pervading evils. These symbols sometimes made poetry obscure. The poetry of A.K. Mehrotra, Mahapatra and Kolatkar is often called the poetry of obscurity and ambiguity from this viewpoint. The post-Aurobindonians used images in poetry. Women, body of women, city and nature are recurring images, which assume symbolic overtones. Unlike these poets, the Aurobindonians used the traditional symbols to avoid confusion and vagueness. They used various elements of nature as symbols.

The Aurobindonians imbibed the influences of Milton, Wordsworth, Keats and Tennyson and assimilated them to their own Indian sensibility. The post-Aurobindonians on the other hand criticized the Aurobindonians as imitators on this ground of such absorption of Western influences. Ironically ,they forgot that they themselves had written poetry under the influence of the British and Americans poets, like Hopkins, Yeats Eliot, Pound, Wyndham, Lewis and Allen Tate. In the words of M.K. Naik “they (two groups of poets Pre-Independence and post-Independence poets) have merely exchanged the kinglog of Milton, Shelley and Tennyson for the kingstork of Pound, Eliot and Yeats. It is specially Eliot, who is too much with

these poets, for poetry for them seems to be almost synonymous with Eliotry.” The post-Aurobindonians revolted with an anti-Aurobindonian spirit against the persistence of old tradition of writing romantic and mystical lyrics and professed their superiority to the Aurobindonians for their new kind of surrealist and representative forms of poetry woven in a new thread of language. Nevertheless they reckoned their Aurobindonian predecessors as versatile poets in view of latter’s exquisiteness of versification Iyengar states “ Although the anti- Aurobindonians look upon Sri Aurobindo as their Milton and Tagore and Sarojini Naidu as romantic singing birds yet they waged a war against them through criticism” .(11)

Despite the inception and predominance of new tradition of poetry, there are poets like B.B. Paymaster and Adil K. Sette, who continue to write in the well-established Aurobindonian tradition of poetry. In the case of poets like Kamala Das, we find a unique blend of the physical as well as the spiritual aspects of life. She writes about her personal physical love and aspires for its spiritualism transcendence. She desires to transmute her love to in the mythical love of Radha and Krishna.

There are also poets among the post-Aurobindonians, who instead of siding with any of these two groups stand poised between them. Mokashi Punekar and R.Y. Deshpande are modernist poets, who steer a middle course and oscillate between the Aurobindonians and post-Aurobindonians, between traditionalists and the new modernists and between the sentimentalists and the intellectualists. Mokashi-Punekar

voices his predicament in the poem” The Rejected Race”. He writes

“We poets are race

Rejected by two worlds”

The contrastive study of the poetical features and traditions of the Aurobindonians and the post-Aurobindonians drives us to a conclusion that these two groups of poets stand irreconcilable because they march uncompromisingly along two different paths of poetry that run in opposite directions. The former followed the path of the Vedic and Upanishadic tradition in poetry and the latter group proceeded along the new path of modernism to post-modernism. Since their directions are different without any meeting point, the Aurobindonians and the post-

Aurobindonians can never be reconciled at any point of concordance or agreement in the line of Indian English poetry.

Thus, both groups of poets sustain their own tradition of versification and traverse along their respective paths pioneered by their masters. At the end we reassert in unequivocal terms the existence of two traditions, the Aurobindonian and the post-Aurobindonian, which in other terms are traditionalism and modernism or new symbolism and new modernism, Although these traditions have conflicting groups of poets in respect of differences in aesthetics of poetry and ideology yet both have generated talented and versatile poets and rich poetical works which are reckoned as the literary monuments of world literature.