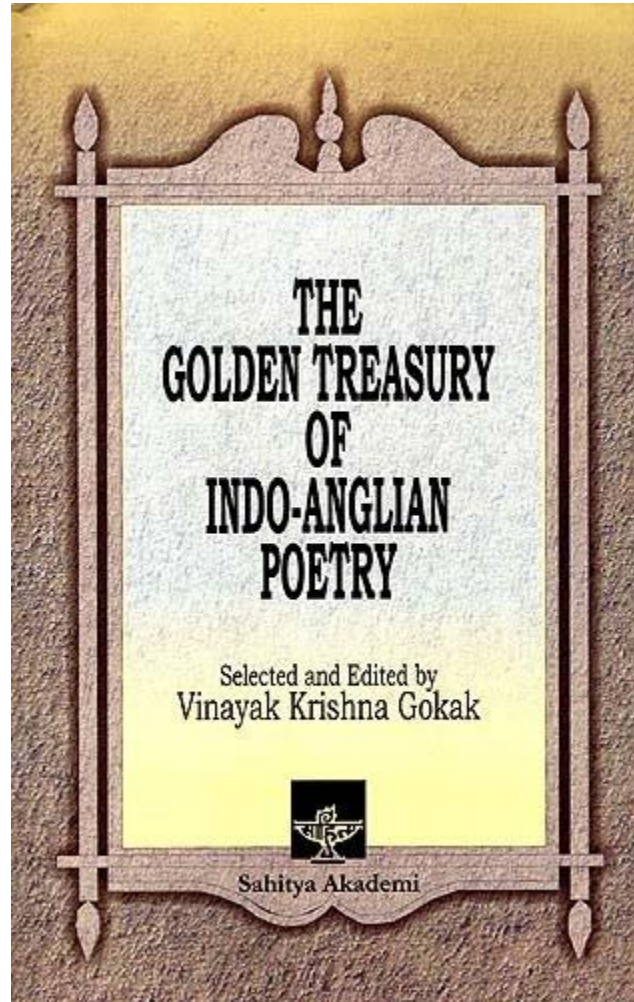


**Breaking New Grounds in Contemporary Indian English Poetry:  
A Note**

**Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D.**



**Abstract**

India is a country which is known for its diversified culture, and many Indian writers tried their hands in the manipulation of English as a medium of expressions. Indian English poetry has become a part of process of modernization, but phrases, and expressions included in Indian poetry and fiction show Indian traditions as its ways of feelings. The treatment of

mythological themes and re-interpretation of Indian myths and philosophical ideas are nothing but a continuation of earlier traditions, but its modifications can experience in the hands of modern Indian writers. This paper throws light on the efforts of a few Indian poets in English who successfully gave a new dimension to poetry by writing on myths, legends, traditions, and politics.

**Key words:** Indian poetry in English, favorite themes, Departure from the Traditional Song of Praise, Revealing the Unquiet Mind, Quest for Cultural Moorings

### **Recent Indian Poetry in English**

Recent Indian poetry in English is genuine for it is deeply felt and addressed to the whole community Indian situations form a vital part of it. The early romanticism and rapid narcissism of the early Indian poetry in English are now discarded in favour of poetry as 'criticism of life.' Recent Indian poetry in English tries hard and succeeds too in settling its roots and developing its artistic credo. It has successfully risen above 'decadent romanticism.' It has acquired new dimensions thanks to the efforts of a few significant Indian poets in English like Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, Keik N. Daruwalla, Shiv K. Kumar, Jayanta Mahapatra, R. Parthasarathy and A.K. Ramanujan. These poets have given Indian poetry in English, a total habitation and made it acceptable to a larger public outside India, standing head and shoulders above a motley crowd of Indian versifiers in English.

### **Some Recent Favorite Themes**

The deep-rooted superstitious and folk belief existing in Indian society turns out to be a favourite theme of recent poetry. Nissim Ezekiel is found handling this in the poem "Night of the Scorpion." Here the mother is stung, the nationalist and skeptical father tries 'every curse and blessing, powder, mixture, herb and hybrid as the swarm in to console her offering advice of a strongly ritualistic and faith healing kind. The mother's reaction to her suffering, 'Thank God, the scorpion picked on me / and spared my children,' ironically cancels out earlier responses, both primitive and sophisticated.

Shiv. K. Kumar comes out openly against rituals that overshadow Indian society. In 'Kali,' he says,  
"If the way to create  
is the way to kill  
I have hoarded enough blood  
In my doubt  
For all the hyenas to suck form."

### **Departure from the Traditional Song of Praise**

Similarly, A.K. Ramanujan makes a departure from the traditional song of praise for the full river in 'A River.' He takes what she sees as the villager's real experience. The river is beautiful when quite in summer but when it floods, it causes sufferings that are not at all poetic. The visitor to the village reports what happens, in incredibly simple language as the villagers would use. The poem ends with details about the twins, which the women would have borne, bringing the experience down to its straightforward and painful humanity. Indian English poets share the feelings of the ordinary citizens of the country concerning the major problems faced by their motherland. One such problem is 'brain-drain.' O.P. Bhatnagar examines the implication of the exodus of the Indian intellectuals to foreign lands and makes a fervent appeal to them to return home. The poet aptly describes them in 'Look Homeward Angel':

"Their visions have been swingers,  
By night-clubs and swingers,  
Blondes and ballrooms their ethics  
Performing cultural striptease  
or waltzing national pride."

### **Seasonal Birds**

These intellectuals are worse than migrating birds for the birds that fly away in winter because of trenchant, cold and return home at the turn of the season. But our intellectuals fail to escape the lure of gold and glamour and stay back. Thus, Bhatnagar ironically calls them 'angels.' Likewise, Shiv. K. Kumar comes heavily on the politicians who are unprincipled and

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time-servers. In 'Epitaph on an Indian Politicians' Shiv K. Kumar gives a very daring portrayal of the politicians:

"Vasectomized of all genial urges  
for love and beauty  
he often crossed floors  
as his wife leaped across beds".

### **Revealing the Unquiet Mind**

In 'on Meeting a – Pedant,' Ezekiel says, 'words, looks gestures, everything betrays / the unquiet mind, the emptiness within' and it is this 'emptiness within' of the hollow men inhabiting the wasteland that catches the attention of contemporary Indian poets in English. In a sequence of poems called 'Poverty Poems,' Nissim Ezekiel highlights the problems of beggars. The picture of leper beggar at railway-stations and old woman stretching her hand for a coin as depicted in 'poverty poems -2', 'Poverty Poems -3' moves one's heart.

### **Creating and Using an Indian English Idiom – Quest for Cultural Moorings**

Besides these contemporary problems, there is a vital problem - namely the problem of creating an Indian English idiom which haunts our poets. Some efforts have already been made in this direction and to some extent, Ezekiel, Daruwalla, and Parthasarathy have been successful. Ezekiel's 'Very Indian Poem in Indian English' and 'Good buy party for his Miss. Pushpa T.S', 'Dawualla's 'The Professor Condoles' and Parthasarathy's 'Incident at Ahemepore station are cases in point.

The quest for cultural moorings seems to be a major pre-occupation of the Indian poets, which 'they unwittingly share with Madhusudan Dutta, an earlier Indian poet in English. But the pervasive presence of this Conscious 'Indianness' without any trace of romantic nostalgia or exotic quaintness sets contemporary Indian poetry in English apart from the imitative mediocrity of much of this poetry in the nineteenth century.

### **Love and Sex**

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Indian poets in English are bold enough to speak of love and sex as inseparable part of life. Sex and sensuality are integral parts of life and as the Indian English poets have said, 'one has to affirm sensuality to accept art. Kamala Das in 'The Looking Glass' says that 'getting a man to love is easy' and to the union complete, the woman has to 'gift him all/gift him what makes you woman, the scent of long hair, the musk of Sweat between the breasts. The Warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your, endless female hunger. Shiv. K. Kumar's, 'The Sun Temple of Konark' catches the spirit of Kamasutra in verse:

"Rhythm and fire

This riotous sea of novels

Breasts and lips will never break

Into pre-verification

For the perfect logos

In the act of affirmation."

### **Sex Moves Centripetally Rather Than Centrifugally**

Ezekiel rightly says in his 'Nudes,' 'Sex moves centripetally rather than centrifugally in an ever-narrowing circle and the participation remains only physical. Jayanta Mahapatra's 'The Whore house in a Calcutta street' describes a scene where a novice in the art of love making tries to learn something more about women while she does what she thinks proper to please you, the Sweet little things, she imagines.' Daruwalla describes what he calls his first experience of sex in a poem called 'You were the First'.

"Your were the first

It was from you I learnt

that stroke went parallel to the body

not vertical

like across

hammered down

on a grave."

## No More Victorian Taboos

Surely, the readers have outgrown Victorian taboos, and our poets have broken new grounds. The Indian English poets write exclusively about their private lives and of the present day world. Ezekiel's 'Background Casually,' Shiv. K. Kumar's 'Broken Columns,' Parthasarathy's 'Rough Passage,' Ramanujan's 'Self-Portrait' and Kamala Das's 'An Introduction' are cases in point. What the Indian poets in English is a sense of tradition. Recently there has been an attempt to acclimatize indigenous tradition, and an attempt to assimilate the South Indian tradition into English and Parthasarathy's dialogue with his Tamil past in Rough Passages are efforts in this direction.

## Deficient Use of Myths

The Indian poets in English are deficient in making use of myths. Kamala Das incidentally uses the myth of Radhakrishnan in a poem called 'Radhakrishnan' and talks of Mira Bai 'Vrinda-Van' who relinquished the ties of marriage search of Lord Krishna, the eternal lover who is also the epitome of the fullest consciousness that a human can contemplate. These poets are also deficient in making use of new images. Shiv. K. Kumar whose power of making new imagery is to some extent satisfactory uses American imagery to describe the long hairs of Indian Women. Perhaps, he has in mind the American audience while employing such images. One happy thing about recent Indian poets in English is that they are not blindly imitating the Anglo-American. The situation of Indian poetry in English in the nineteen sixties, when our poets followed consciously or otherwise, either the genteel British or the Confessional Americans is no more. The poets have discovered their own voices and in a limited sense their idiom too. Recent Indian poetry in English is no longer the shadow. It has become the substance, and it is not an echo but a voice worth listening to. Like new literature in English written in various parts of the Globe, it has acquired an identity of its own. It is not a myth but a distinct reality. It has come to stay with a firm hand.

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