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Mapping The Trajectory Of Indianness In Indian English Poetry: How Poets Shifted To Individual Dilemmas From Universal Concerns

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Abstract
This paper critically examines the evolving construct of 'Indianness' in Indian English poetry by tracing its trajectory from early universalist and spiritual inclinations to more individualistic and existential explorations in post-independence verse. Beginning with figures like Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, and Sarojini Naidu, whose poetry upheld a vision of India rooted in philosophical depth, spiritual unity, and collective consciousness, the paper identifies a paradigmatic shift in the post-independence period. Poets such as Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, Jayanta Mahapatra, and Keki N. Daruwalla engage with inner conflict, social disillusionment, and fragmented identities. The study thus argues that Indian English poetry has moved from invoking the collective soul of a nation to articulating the fragmented psyche of the individual, reflecting the country's complex postcolonial realities.

Index Terms: Indianness, Identity, Culture, Poetry

I. INTRODUCTION

The question of 'Indianness' in Indian English poetry has provoked diverse interpretations and scholarly engagements since the genre's inception. What began as a medium of expression for elite Indian voices during colonial rule evolved into a complex mode of negotiating identity, spirituality, resistance, and ultimately, individual dilemmas. From its early custodians like Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath Tagore, who articulated the Indian soul through mystical symbolism and spiritual lyricism, to later poets like Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, and Keki N. Daruwalla, who turned inwards to reflect personal angst, identity crises, and socio-political disenchantment, Indian English poetry has consistently mapped the changing ethos of a nation in transition.

Sri Aurobindo's deeply philosophical poetry, Tagore's universal humanism, and Sarojini Naidu's romantic nationalism demonstrate the early aspirations of a culture seeking liberation and a spiritual mooring. These poets created a corpus that transcended geographical boundaries, aiming to articulate India's civilisational values to the world in a global idiom. Their work represents the collective spiritual and cultural consciousness of an India struggling under colonialism but rooted in timeless metaphysical traditions.
However, post-independence poets inherited a different milieu, one marked not by colonial resistance but by political disillusionment, cultural fragmentation, and a fractured postcolonial identity. Poets like Nissim Ezekiel and Kamala Das began to speak of private fears, bodily desires, and social hypocrisies. Jayanta Mahapatra and Keki N. Daruwalla turned their gaze upon existential questions, historical traumas, and ethical dilemmas. This paper, thus, traces the shift from the universal and collective to the personal and particular, delineating how Indianness has been reconfigured in Indian English poetry across time.

II. THE FIRST WIDELY ACCEPTED PHASE: NAIDU, AUROBINDO AND TAGORE

The early phase of Indian English poetry, spanning the late 19th and early 20th centuries, is characterised by a preoccupation with spiritual and philosophical concerns. This poetic generation, consisting of Sarojini Naidu, Sri Aurobindo, and Rabindranath Tagore, contributed significantly to the articulation of 'Indianness' in terms of spiritual cosmopolitanism, religious inclusivity, and a philosophical vision of the human condition.

Sarojini Naidu, often referred to as the 'Nightingale of India,' channelled romanticism and nationalism through lush imagery and lyrical fervour. Her collection *The Golden Threshold* (1905) celebrates Indian culture with aesthetic richness. In poems such as *The Bangle Sellers*, she captures the essence of Indian womanhood not merely in cultural roles but in their spiritual symbolism, such as maidenhood, matrimony, and motherhood, as eternal cycles of life. Indian philosophy, which is deeply rooted in the spiritual realisation offered by Hindu literature, often finds blazing reflection in the poetry of Naidu. For instance, in these two lines from one of her most celebrated poems, The Soul's Prayer, Naidu weaves the reflection of the soul's journey, unaffected by the illusions of this mortal world, as echoed in the Vedantic philosophy:

"Life is a prism of My light,
And Death the shadow of My face."
(Selected Poetry 148)

For Naidu, Indianness was encoded in rituals, customs, and shared social values rooted in harmony and celebration. Though she also wrote about the independence struggle and patriotic zeal, the best of her poetry celebrates the Indian spiritual ethos and philosophical depths.
Sri Aurobindo, a philosopher-poet and spiritual visionary, viewed poetry as a medium for expressing the evolution of human consciousness. His magnum opus *Savitri* represents not merely a poetic narrative but a metaphysical journey towards divine realisation. The poem explores the soul's immortality and the spiritual destiny of mankind. Aurobindo's Indianness was universalist in its spiritual scope. India, for him, was a land destined to lead the world through yogic vision and inner awakening. Moreover, poetry for Sri Aurobindo, as Sethna describes, becomes "a direct revelation of the spiritual thought that is itself poetry: the language becomes then the rhythmic body of the inspired consciousness, not a mere outward means of communication (96)".

This emphasis on soul over self and cosmos over chaos exemplifies how Indian English poetry in this phase functioned as an expression of philosophical unity and divine aspiration, spearheaded by spiritually charged poetic outputs of Sri Aurobindo.

Rabindranath Tagore, a polymath whose work earned him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913, infused his poetry with Vedantic principles and a deep humanism. His *Gitanjali* (Song Offerings), written originally in Bengali and translated into English by the poet himself, is a testimony to the convergence of bhakti (devotion) and modern aesthetics. Tagore's invocation of God as a friend, lover, or eternal companion unites Eastern and Western sensibilities. In poem after poem, he envisions India not in narrow nationalistic terms but as a moral and spiritual force. His famous lines, "Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high," embody a universal vision of freedom that transcends geopolitical boundaries.

These poets, therefore, saw poetry as a tool for spiritual and cultural renaissance. The philosophical concept of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (the world is one family) permeates their works, not as an abstract idea but as a lived metaphysical reality. In their verse, the spiritual and the universal converged, offering a form of Indianness that was rooted in the soul's journey rather than the self's anxieties.

Importantly, this phase also responded to colonial hegemony through cultural assertion rather than political confrontation. The poets believed in India's spiritual superiority and sought to showcase this through a global literary idiom. Their English was elevated, often ornamental, but it bore the weight of Indian metaphysics, classical heritage, and a collective dream of liberation, not only from colonial rule but from worldly bondage.

This spiritual and universal orientation was not escapism but a deliberate reclamation of India's civilisational ethos. These poets believed that India had something profound to offer to the world, a moral compass, a path to inner peace, and a voice that harmonised multiplicity into oneness. Their Indianness was thus not narrowly cultural but inclusively human, a universal idiom drawn from Indian soil.

III. POST-INDEPENDENCE SHIFT: FROM SPIRITUAL UNIVERSALITY TO INDIVIDUAL DILEMMAS

The achievement of independence in 1947 marked not only a political transition but also a cultural and psychological rupture in the Indian imagination. The hopes of a just and unified nation, nurtured by early poets like Tagore and Aurobindo, gave way to stark realities: widespread poverty, communal violence, bureaucratic apathy, and the slow corrosion of Gandhian ideals. Indian English poets writing after independence no longer viewed the nation through the lens of spiritual glory or cultural unity. Instead, they turned inward, confronting the fractures of postcolonial identity, personal alienation, and the dilemmas of existence in an increasingly complex society. This marked a significant shift in the portrayal of Indianness, from metaphysical universality to embodied subjectivity.

Nissim Ezekiel is often considered the father of modern Indian English poetry. His works, beginning with *A Time to Change* (1952), are anchored in the quotidian struggles of the urban middle class. In *Background, Casually*, Ezekiel traces his Jewish heritage, colonial education, and eventual identification with India, asserting, "I am not a Hindu, / and my background makes me a / skeptic." This declaration of cultural estrangement and psychological complexity stands in sharp contrast to the spiritual certainties of the earlier generation. His poem *The Night of the Scorpion* is another emblematic work that reveals the superstitions, suffering, and quiet endurance of rural India, narrated with a tone that is observational yet not devoid of empathy.

Bruce King offers a nuanced appraisal of Ezekiel's contribution, asserting that the poems in *The Exact Name* "expressed Indian life without self-conscious or artificial Indianness (21)." This marks an important transition from the elevated, symbolic treatment of India to a more grounded and authentic representation. Ezekiel evolved from viewing Bombay as merely a symbolic city of modern dissatisfaction to one where there were actual events, people, dangers and pleasures. His Indianness, therefore, is ironic, fractured, and self-conscious, but deeply rooted in lived experience. The poet's engagement with Indian realities, linguistic, social, and existential, is marked by a modern sensibility that resists both nostalgia and exoticism. His verse reflects the individual's uneasy place within inherited cultural frameworks and remains central to understanding the shift from collective to personal in post-independence Indian English poetry.

Kamala Das furthers this trajectory by foregrounding the body, desire, and female subjectivity in her poetry. Her celebrated poem *An Introduction* articulates her resistance to linguistic, social, and gendered expectations:

"Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Every one of you?"
(An Introduction)

Her confessional mode is deeply political, and it interrogates patriarchal constraints and asserts a woman's right to speak in her own voice. In doing so, she reframes Indianness as a lived experience of pain, pleasure, and resistance. Das's work reveals that Indianness, particularly for women, is neither monolithic nor glorious, but an embattled terrain where tradition and autonomy are in constant conflict. Moreover, this remains the story of Kamala Das's poetry to a great extent. To her, individual space, experiences and angst are more important and worth expressing than the collective beliefs, psyche and customs once celebrated without any questions asked.

Jayanta Mahapatra, writing from Odisha, introduces a stark lyricism marked by existential intensity and cultural introspection. In *Indian Summer*, the interplay between sensuality and mortality becomes a central motif: the serenity of a wife sleeping indoors is juxtaposed with the sombreness of cremation fires outside. The quietness of the domestic realm becomes a space of philosophical reflection influenced by individual experiences. His poem *Hunger* narrates a chilling encounter with a fisherman who offers his daughter for

survival, underlining how poverty strips humanity of dignity. For Mahapatra, Indianness is entwined with ethical dilemmas, historical guilt, and personal anguish. His use of English is understated, but his imagery is searing, evoking both the sensual and the sacred, the tragic and the transcendent. He poses questions that are reflective of the present situations, aware of the social realities and pertinently introspective.

"What if we had touched, the only way
we could touch?
What if we stand here in the middle of nowhere?
In a country drugged with its image."
(Another Love Poem, from A Whiteness of Bone)

The lines from Mahapatra's poem juxtapose the modern realities with the ancient and the past romanticised image of our country, glorified by the Indian English poets of the first well-received generation. Mahapatra's image of 'a country drugged with its image' marks the shift in the approach Indian English poets use to observe and express Indianness. His objective approach to call out the problems and sordid realities scattered around him in society makes Mahapatra a poet of realism and astute observation. In the words of Bijay Kumar Das, Mahapatra "is truly a modern poet who creates his poems out of contemporary reality". BKD also opines highly of the poet and affirms that Mahapatra "speaks to us in our situation and elicits our participation (70)".

Mahapatra may have produced some of his poetry with a sense of admiration for the cultural and collective consciousness of India, even for the religious and spiritual heritage. Keki N. Daruwalla, a Parsi poet and former Indian Police Service officer, however, brings to Indian English poetry a grim realism, historical consciousness, and an ethical vision laden with an objectivity that spares none. In poems such as *The Ghaghra in Spate* and *Pestilence in Nineteenth-Century Calcutta*, Daruwalla does not romanticise India's past or present. He writes with a forensic eye and a moral urgency, excavating layers of violence, indifference, and absurdity. His work often interrogates history and myth alike, as in *The Epileptic*, where ritual and science collide, exposing the fissures between inherited belief and modern scepticism. Daruwalla's Indianness is marked by ambivalence; he is both a chronicler and a critic, deeply embedded in the national psyche but never uncritical of it. He questions the beliefs even most sacred to the Indian populace. He exposes the pervading corruption in politics, administration, judiciary and humanity at large from various individual perspectives.

"Black-jacketed lawyers
and a black-robed judge
munch away at the body of law."
("District Law Courts," Collected Poems 270)

Not only the justice system and agencies of various kinds, Daruwalla portrays an overall weaker, morally corrupt society and the collapse of people's judgment in India through his poetry. Moreover, he ridicules the very central thesis of Indianness that forms itself with an amalgamation of morality, righteousness, strength and determination, marking an apparent walk away from the themes of the Indian English poets before independence who focused on the collective beliefs and consciousness.

The shift from collective to individual concerns in Indian English poetry is not merely thematic; it also involves a transformation in diction, tone, and aesthetics. Unlike the elevated and often ornamental language of the early poets, post-independence poets adopted a more colloquial, ironic, and self-reflexive idiom. Their poems are grounded in the material and psychological realities of contemporary India—caste, class, gender, urban alienation, religious dissonance, and emotional vacuity.

Furthermore, this generation of poets reveals a layered understanding of postcolonial identity. They are not engaged in defending Indian culture against colonial stereotypes, but in scrutinising Indian society from within. The poetry becomes a mirror, sometimes cracked, through which the poet and the reader confront their shared anxieties. Indianness, in this context, is no longer a spiritual destiny but a lived contradiction. It becomes an unwanted amalgamation of mutually shared anxieties, hopelessness, pain and a journey to the unknown with a baggage of burdens and broken promises, packed in the linen of disillusionment. However, the satirical, realistic and sceptical portrayal of Indian values and likewise engagement with Indianness do not mean these second-generation (and beyond) poets are entirely dismissive of these aspects of Indian life.

Bruce King believes these poets are very much aware and conscious of these aesthetic, cultural and spiritual values (236).

These poets also participate in a broader modernist sensibility, influenced by T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, and the confessional poets of the West, yet deeply rooted in Indian experiences. Their works exemplify what Homi Bhabha might call a "third space" of enunciation, a hybrid site where the self is constructed in negotiation with both inherited and contemporary forces. The transition from universality to individual dilemmas, therefore, is not a rejection of Indianness, but its reconfiguration within a postcolonial and postmodern framework.

For poets post-independence, Indianness is not an eternal truth but an evolving identity, shaped by memory, history, gender, language, and desire. In turning from the cosmos to the self, from philosophy to psychology, these poets have deepened the scope and relevance of Indian English poetry.

IV. CONCLUSION

Thus, it can be observed that the trajectory of Indianness in Indian English poetry is neither linear nor monolithic; rather, it reflects the evolving consciousness of a nation negotiating its place in history, culture, and the globalised world. The early phase, exemplified by Sarojini Naidu, Sri Aurobindo, and Rabindranath Tagore, foregrounded India's spiritual and philosophical heritage. These poets articulated Indianness through universal humanism, mystical thought, and collective national identity. They offered an image of India as the spiritual beacon of the world, a land where the soul's quest transcended temporal concerns. Their verse expressed a vision of unity, drawing from India's metaphysical traditions to address the broader human condition.

In contrast, the post-independence poets, notably Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, Jayanta Mahapatra, and Keki N. Daruwalla, represent a significant rupture from this collective, transcendental mode. Their work is shaped by modern disillusionment, personal estrangement, and cultural fragmentation. These poets confront the contradictions of contemporary Indian society, such as moral ambiguities, socio-political decay, gendered marginalisations, and existential crises. Indianness, in their poetry, becomes a space of conflict rather than consensus, of interrogation rather than affirmation.

This shift is reflective of larger postcolonial dynamics. As the nation moved from colonial subjugation to sovereign identity, poetry too moved from espousing national glory to exploring the individual's fractured self within a complex society. The change from universal concerns to individual dilemmas marks a deepening of poetic consciousness rather than its diminution. It signals the poets' courage to confront uncomfortable truths and to redefine Indianness not as a fixed essence but as a dynamic, evolving experience.

Thus, Indian English poetry, through its movement from the spiritual to the psychological, from the collective to the personal, offers a compelling chronicle of India's cultural and emotional metamorphosis. It reclaims the individual voice as a site of resistance, reflection, and a complex depiction of the vivid Indian experience.

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