



Identity and Authority: Inclusion of Bengali Poets in the Canon of Indian English Poetry

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Abstract

Makarand Paranjape in his review of Bruce King's *Modern Indian English Poetry* deliberates on how King's critical work seemingly authenticated and legitimized the canon of Indian English poetry, focusing only on poets belonging to specific geographical location- Bombay. In 1970s when the process of anthologization commenced, only a dozen or so Indian English poets attained validation, relegating many other meritorious poets to the periphery. As the process of anthologization and canonization are two facets of the same coin, publishing houses like Macmillan and Oxford University Press that captured the Indian literary scene in 1970s brought out *Contemporary Indian English Poetry* (1972) and *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets* (1976), respectively, shaping a canon of Indian English poetry, which till date remains unquestioned and unchallenged. This coterie of poets essentially belonged to Bombay and therefore the canon of Indian English poetry seemingly became increasingly geographically centric. However, in 1970s, P. Lal also engaged himself in publishing anthologies, and, ostensibly, his endeavors were towards the establishment of an anti-canon. In 1972, when Macmillan brought out its anthology, housing the following poets- Ezekiel, Ramanujan, P. Lal, Kolatkar, Parthasarathy, Katrak, Daruwalla, Kamala Das, Gauri Deshpande, Mamta Kalia, Adil Jussawala, Gieve Patel, A.K. Mehrotra and Saleem Peeradina- P. Lal, in 1974, brought out *Indo- English Poetry in Bengal*, edited by K.C. Lahiri. The poets that it included were- Margaret Chatterjee, Harindranath Chattopadhyay, Sukanta Chaudhuri, Prafulla Ranjan, Ira De, Rupendra Guha Majumdar, Dhan Gopal Mukherjee, etc. This anthology was allegedly an answer to Macmillan's Bombay centric anthology. Lahiri's anthology included forty-six Indian English poets who primarily belonged to Bengal. Ostensibly, this was Lal's answer to the exclusive canon of Indian English poetry. Absence of any Bengali poet in the canon was jarringly blatant, and this was befittingly answered by Lal. In the Preface, Lal writes, "The inspiration behind the preparation of this anthology of English verse composed by Bengalis has been the distinctive character of the aesthetic appeal and emotive responses of the poets rather than regional parochialism" (Lal xv).

This statement of Lal further brings the argument of the identity of Indian English poetry in the post- independence India. Ostensibly, the canon of Indian English poetry was fixated on the idea of forming a single identity, concentrating essentially on the concept of "Indianness". This overemphasis on forming a single identity did not only obscure the surfacing of myriad themes and issues which were being discussed by many other non-canonical poets but also circumscribed the parameters of the canon of Indian English poetry, withholding further promulgation, growth and development of this genre. This paper therefore argues that instead of focusing on forming a single identity, Indian English poetry should be an amalgamation of multiple identities. India, being a land of pluralities, should not have such a representation in the canon of Indian English poetry which demonstrates only one single identity. Therefore, the idea of representation of Bengal identity must be included in the canon. This paper, while discussing K.C. Lahiri's *Indo English Poetry in Bengal*, will put forward the aforementioned arguments. It will argue for the inclusion of Bengali poets in the canon of Indian English poetry, furthering the case of the canon of Indian English poetry to be more inclusive in its outlook.

Keywords

Indian Poetry in English, canon, Bengal identity, anthologies, Writers Workshop

P. Lal's Writers Workshop, Calcutta, established in 1958, was highly instrumental in the formation of the canon of Indian English poetry. In present times, many Indian English poets who are well ensconced in the canon made their debut through Lal's Writers Workshop. In the earlier decades of post-independence India, when Indian Writing in English was scathingly attacked and condemned for employing a medium of expression which was burdened by a colonial baggage, Lal's Workshop published indiscriminately in order to substantiate the legitimacy and authenticity of this body of writing. However, the polemical debate on the question of language bedeviled Indian English poetry for decades, and, at times, till date, the usage of English as the medium of expression is one of the major arguments put across by the detractors of Indian English poetry. The process of anthologization of Indian English poetry began in the late 1960s. While journals like *Quest*, *Illustrated Weekly*, *Thought*, *New Quest*, *Literary Criterion* etc. were vociferously engaged in the process of publishing poetry, they were also simultaneously publishing critical articles, which, wittingly or unwittingly, were forming a canon. In 1969, P. Lal brought out *Modern Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology and a Credo*, which published more than a hundred poets. This indiscriminate publishing received a backlash from literary critics, and, eventually the process of winnowing the weed from the chaff commenced. In 1972, *Quest* brought out a special issue, edited by Saleem Peeradina, including only fourteen poets, and this later became an anthology under the banner of Macmillan titled as *Contemporary Poetry in English: An Assessment and Selection*.¹ The poets included were Nissim Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan, P.Lal,² Arun Kolatkar, R. Parthasarathy, K.D. Katrak, K.N. Daruwalla, Kamala Das, Gauri Deshpande, Mamta Kalia, Adil Jussawaala, Gieve Patel, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra and Saleem Peeradina. Another anthology which housed almost same group of poets was R.

¹ Saleem Peeradina's selection first appeared in the Jan.-Feb. 1972 issue of *Quest*. Peeradina included only fourteen poets. "Each selection of a poet is prefaced by a short introduction, often of a judgemental nature, in which the praiseworthy is usually balanced, at times over balanced, with criticism." (King 62). This could be seen as a second attempt by at the canon formation of Indian English poetry by *Quest* as in 1965 it had brought out an anthology titled *Ten Years of Quest* (1965). This anthology comprised of selected articles, poetry and short stories. The poets included in this selection were: Dom Moraes, Arun Kolatkar, Asoke Vijay Raha, R. Parthasarathy, A.K. Ramanujan, Bishnu Dey, Buddhadeva Bose, Nissim Ezekiel, P. Lal, George Keyt, Adil Jussawalla, R. Parthasarathy, Kamala Das, and Subash Mukhopadhyay .(King 62).

² It is to be noted here that while P. Lal was included in Peeradina's selection, he was severely criticised and condemned for his poetry. Critical assessment of Lal's poetry was done by Elizabeth Reuben. She described Lal's poetry as utterly romantic in nature, lacking "concreteness in imagery", not making up a "fresh and adequate medium", etc. Only two poems by Lal were included: "The Lecturer" and "The Poet". For details, see, Reuben, Elizabeth. "P. Lal." *Quest* (Jan.-Feb. 1972): 38-40. Print.

Parthasarthy's *Ten Twentieth Century* (1976). These two anthologies, published by big banners, played a colossal role in establishing the canon of Indian English poetry.

Anthology by nature is selective; selectivity marks canonicity, and, therefore, the relationship between canonisation and anthologisation is intrinsically webbed and can be considered as two faces of the same coin. The process of literary canonisation is increasingly imbricated “between the pedagogical project of the university and that of the anthology” (Srivastava 152).³ As anthologies “operate at interstices between literary works and their readers” (Nicholas 175), the vacuity created between them is filled by providing to its readers a narrative assemblage of texts and also providing them a context to situate these narratives. Poetry anthology plays a profounder role than prose anthology as the former transmits a notion of the canon and “often proves to be vital to the circulation of a poet’s works, since the market for poetry is much smaller compared to that of fiction” (Srivastava 160). Cary Nelson states, “Critics can revive a poet’s reputation, but the only sure way to keep a poem alive is to anthologize it... anthologies shape our memory of poetic history. They help to establish not only whether a poet will be remembered but also how a poet will be remembered” (qtd. in Srivastava 160). Paul Lauter asserts that anthology making is a “serious enterprise” (Lauter 102), and the selections in the anthology are expected to “conform to some set of standards, aesthetic principles, pedagogical theories” (Lauter 102). He asserts to make a certain number of selections from a vast array of texts and writers renders the making of an anthology a problematic exercise. He further argues, “Let us, then imagine ourselves walking freely—as in fact we are—in a world of many hundreds of authors and thousands of pages of texts. We recognize some old friends, we nod familiarly here and there, we are startled by a few unforeseen apparitions and we are always asking, ‘Of these many...what few do we take back with us into fifteen week class?’” (Lauter 102). However, he rightly opines that this selection “is not foreordained by God” and hence “a spectacular and dangerous world of choices opens before us” (101-102). The anthological or curricula selection validates “certain experiences at the expense of others” (102), but this selection is “subject matter”,

³ Neelima Srivastava in the essay “Anthologizing the Nation: Literature Anthologies and the Idea of India” argues that “literary anthologies are thus tend to be seen as a ‘pedagogical’ genre, with especially close links to canon formation in the university context” (Srivastava 151). She argues that anthologies serve as a bridge between readers and literary works because what anthologies create is “a narrative assemblage of texts” (151). In the essay she argues how literary anthologies of Indian Writing in English fashion “ideas of India for the reading public both home and abroad”. For details, see Srivastava, Neelam. “Anthologizing the Nation: Literature Anthologies and the Idea of India.” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 46.2 (May 2010): 151-163. Print.

and therefore it becomes imperative “to propose a wider set of experiences for our curricula” (103).⁴

In the context of Indian literary scene, anthologies have played a remarkably significant role in constructing an exclusive canon of Indian English poetry. Literary critics note that Peeradina and Parthasarathy’s anthology seemingly put a seal to the canon of Indian English poetry. This canon was further validated by Vilas Sarang’s *Indian English Poetry Since 1950: An Anthology* (1988), published by Disha Books. The eighteen poets included here were: Ezekiel, Mahapatra, Ramanujan, Kolatkar, Parthasarathy, Das, Daruwalla, Moraes, Dilip Chitre, Eunice de Souza, Jussawalla, Gieve Patel, Vilas Sarang, Saleem Peeradina, Mehrotra, Manohar Shetty, Santan Rodrigues and Darius Cooper. Interestingly, as pointed by Makarand Paranjape in his review of Bruce King’s *Modern Indian English Poetry* (1987), Indian English poetry was ostensibly dominated by the Bombay group of poets. There was hardly any poet that was included from any other region of India. Talking particular of the region West Bengal, there was barely any visibility of any poet from this land which had a steady proliferation of Indian English poets. Paranjape notes, “Certainly, no Indian scholar would have accepted the hegemony of the Bombay poet so unreservedly. Out of the fifteen-odd poets that King’s considers in more detail, about two-thirds- Ezekiel, Jussawalla, Patel, Chitre, Kolatkar, Peeradina, Rodrigues, de Souza, Shetty, and Silgardo- are from Bombay. I have heard from many younger poets from the rest of India characterising this group as the ‘Bombay mafia’” (Paranjape 438). Prasanta Das in his article reiterates similar argument and contests that the canon of Indian English poetry has been constructed with immense prudence so as not to project India in any grim light. He posits, “Indian English poetry has been relatively formal and unadventurous. Indian English poetry has chosen to be limited. The emphasis on the personal with attendant values like understatement and irony has meant that Indian English poetry has consciously turned its back on a role that poetry has often fulfilled in non-Anglo Saxon countries” (Das 20).

⁴ Lauter draws these arguments for the canon formation in American literature, but they hold validity for this present study as well. Lauter argues that how “some of the most popular texts in American literature present hunting- a whale or a bear- as paradigms of for “human” exploration and coming of age, whereas menstruation, pregnancy, and birthing somehow do not serve such prototypes... A significant portion of canonical literature presents men pushing toward frontiers, exploring, conquering, and exploiting the resources of sea and land. But for many immigrant and female writers, removal to the frontier represents a tearing up for roots; their concern is less self-discovery or conquest of new territory than the reestablishment of family, community, and a socially productive way of life” (103). For details, see Lauter, Paul. *Canon and Contexts*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. Print.

However, it is important to note that while the mainstream canon of Indian English poetry was being formed, P. Lal, ostensibly, was engaged in the formation of a counter canon of Indian English poetry. Through Writers Workshop, Lal published the following anthologies in 1970s: *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (1971) edited by P. Lal; *Hers: Verse by Indian Women* (1978) edited by Mary A. Dasgupta; *Indian Verse in English* (1971) by Shiv K. Kumar; *Indo- English Poetry in Bengal* (1974) edited by K.C. Lahiri; *New English Poetry by Indian Men* (1978) edited by P. Lal; *New English Poetry by Indian Women* edited by P. Lal (1979), etc. Therefore, it is discernibly perceptible that in order to shape a particular identity of Indian English poetry only those poets were selected who delineated on similar themes and issues and addressed similar concerns in their poetry. All the other poets whose poetry exhibited any disarray from the mainstream canon were relegated to the periphery. The engagement of the mainstream canon with particularly modernist ideologies and stifling other themes and issues as secondary created a lacuna in the canon of post-independence Indian English poetry. Consequently, the modernist ideologies that these “Bombay poets” demonstrated in their poetry “also became reified, almost attaining the status of a dogma. Poets found not conforming to the rigorous standards of exclusiveness and purity were purged from the canon” (Paranjape 1998 1054). Akshay K. Rath in his article notes how “the nativisation of Indian English poetry and the obsessive discussion on the issue of language” (Rath 5) had adverse effect on the development of Indian English poetry as a whole. He notes how Padamsee’s *Poems* (1975), “modelled after Elizabethan lyrics and love poems, sometimes in themes and sometimes in forms” (5), had nothing to do with India’s “contemporary ‘freedom struggle’ or ‘Indianness’ though he was interested in the reconstruction of Indian through theatre and painting” (5). Rath further concludes, “Poets who dealt with different themes and issues in their poetry came to the poetry circle only when they had something to do with issues like ‘language debate’ or/and ‘Indianness’. Any poet who wrote something apart from these two issues hardly went to a press; or if at all his/her poetry was published, it was ignored to the maximum degree” (Rath 5). Further, Lal in his critical work *The Alien Insiders: Literary Notes by P. Lal* (1987) expressed his bewilderment as well as anguish as to how and why some brilliant poets still remain out of the canon:

It remains a source of mystery to me why some have not received the acclaim they deserve. Lawrence Bantleman, for instance: four books of poems and a play by this Calcuttan Anglo Indian who captures exquisitely the lyrical nuances of life on and around Free School Street. Kewlian Sio,

of Chinese Sikkemese parents: two books of stories, *A Small World and Dragons*- perfect cameos of sharply observed detail of object and feeling. Padma Hejmadi: most of her stories appeared first in *The New Yorker*; yet the excellence of her craft in *Coigns of Vantage*, the book we published in 1972, went largely unnoticed. Nasima Aziz: a book of poems, *One More*, and a play, *No Metaphor, Remember*, yet who appreciated her scalpel-clear simplicity and honest, disturbing insights into Hindu Muslim relationship? (Lal 1987 242).

It therefore is very important to unearth the archives and open up and demystify the canon of Indian English poetry. More to the point, the Bengali identity which remains absolutely unacknowledged needs to be reinstated in the canon of Indian English poetry. Focussing primarily on K.C. Lahiri's anthology titled *Indo- English Poetry in Bengal* (1974)⁵, which particularly focussed only on Bengali poets writing in English, the existence of a distinguished Bengali identity must be deliberated upon. Lahiri housed a total of forty-six poets in his anthology, mentioning a few here: Margaret Chatterjee, Harindranath Chattopadhyay, Sukanta Chaudhuri, Prafulla Ranjan, Ira De, Rupendra Guha Majumdar, Dhan Gopal Mukherjee, Prithwindra N. Mukherjee, Pritish Nandy, Lila Ray, Dilip Kumar Roy, P.K. Saha, Jotindra Mohan Tagore, Monika Verma, etc.⁶ In the preface to the anthology Lahiri categorically enunciates to his readers what this anthology embodies. He states,

It will be apparent to the casual reader that the editor's principle of selection has been a preference for the lyric to other types of poetry, for Bengal's muse has all along, in the adopted medium as much as in her own language, sung most naturally in the lyric strain. Emotional purity and delicate sensibility, intensity of feelings and shading of moods, richness of imagery and mellifluousness of rhythm, rather than narrative skill, subtlety of thought, and grandeur of style relevant to more dignified forms of verse, have been the criteria of choice (Lahiri xvi).

⁵ Please see appendix 1 to see the complete list of poets and verses included in K.C. Lahiri's anthology *Indo English Poetry in Bengal* (1974).

⁶ While some of the surnames mentioned here may not give an impression of a Bengali originally, however, their presence in this anthology remains unchallenged due to their sense of belongingness to this region. K.C. Lahiri in the preface to this anthology writes, "Some of the authors, with surnames not belonging traditionally to Bengal, are here in their own right acquired through long domicile in, association with, and emotional loyalty to the region. They are no less Bengalis in culture and spirit" (Lahiri xvi)

However, it is important to note that Lahiri's criteria of selection was primarily the reason for any of these poets not to be included in the canon of Indian English poetry, for the canon primarily emphasized particularly on the idea of Indianness and question of language. However, this exclusivity in the canon needs to be contested for a country as pluralistic as India the genre of Indian English poetry cannot afford to have only one single identity. The canon of Indian English poetry is bound to be multiple in its identity. A study of Lahiri's anthology demonstrates myriad themes and issues addressed by the Bengali poets. For instance, Margaret Chatterjee laments the death of her lover in the poem "Ballad in the Twentieth Century":

...Nor did I share
 These things with you
 When the death train passed the station
 I was the guard
 That waved it on.
 As your skin shrivelled
 I attended wedding feasts
 While you lay
 In a common grave
 I cover reams of paper
 With empty words (Chatterjee 2).

Rupendra Guha Majumdar brings in the element of deep-rooted pathos in his verse "The Homecoming Soldier" where he poignantly draws a picture of the soldier returning to his home to find his mother is dead. In another verse, Dhan Gopal Mukherjee addresses lord Siva, supplicating him to end his mortal life in order to liberate from the miseries of the world. He states,

Come black Lord, come, Kala-
 Take me the death-dumb land;
 Take me though my sorrow is young
 And my laughter has the strength of tigers... (Mukherjee 128).

Another poet Modhusudan Sanyal in "Life and Death of a Valley: Immersion of Durga in a Village in the Dooars" delineates on the immersion of the deity in the following words:

It was an image lying low
 Lower in water I see it now
 Her dress melted, soon her shift had slid

The third vertical eye is just blurred
 The water was a lilac fresh
 The sky spoke to me through it in full voice
 All these moments I loved her
 What?
 The black round her nipples
 Spread every four sun-ups
 Till we could melt her only now
 My days cancer that gripped me
 From viral they
 FLESH... (Sanyal 150).

Therefore, it is important to assert that the canon of Indian English poetry is bedeviled by parochialism and is exceedingly myopic in nature. It is very important for the canon of this genre to be more inclusive in nature, and instead of embodying one single identity, it should aim for multiple identities. The burden that the canon of Indian English poetry levies on itself of representing the entire India needs to be dissipated. The act of canonisation is basically a two edged sword: firstly, in the process of canon formation many deserving poets are removed from the literary canon; and, secondly, the ones who are removed are considered to be worthless and not as meritorious as the ones who are canonised. This paper, therefore, is an attempt to show that this widely accepted notion needs to be reassessed. It needs to be understood that it is not always true that the ones who remain outside the parameters of canonicity are “bad” poets. The politics of exclusion and inclusion are intrinsically woven into the process of canon formation. In centralising a few poets or verses, the others are pushed to the periphery. However, there always remains a possibility to dig into the archives and reassess the “lost” writers and give them a place in the canon. In this day and age, when English has consolidated a strong position for itself in India, it is crucial to abandon the “language debates” issues and shun the obsession of “Indianness”. More to the point, the poets who in the previous generation did not align their poetry according to the poetics of mainstream canonical poetry should be reassessed and given a space in the canon. Dharwadker and Ramanujan in the preface to their anthology *The Oxford Anthology of Modern Indian Poetry* (1994) aptly say, “Anthologies...are opportunities: opportunities to sift, reevaluate, rethink ourselves and our traditions; or simply to assert our tastes, laying them on the line in the service of discussion, ‘the common pursuit of true judgment’, however elusive and

conflict-ridden these may be” (Dharwaker and Ramanujan xi). In conclusion to this section, it is important to state M. Prabha’s viewpoint on the canon of Indian English poetry:

The IPE [Indian Poetry in English] canon requires to be updated constantly and that, too, not through Oxford University Press alone. In 1976, OUP threw up *ten* names. These names have been psittacinely squawked in all campuses for more than 15 years. A sort of conspiracy of silence muffles all fresh voices. And in 1992, when OUP undertook a revision, there was hardly any change. The IPE canon has been plying its exclusive ‘Palace on Wheels’ on its narrow-gauge were ripped apart, and a new track laid for a broad-gauge canon (Prabha 251).

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