

Indian Literature in English: An Introduction

Lecture 6:

Indian Poetry in English (after Independence)

P. Lal, *The New Poets' "Manifesto"* (1959)

Aus: *Modern Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology and a Crudo* (Calcutta, 1969, 21971), x-xii. Der erstmals im *Sunday Standard*, Bombay (1951) veröffentlichte Essay erhielt als "Introduction" von Lals Anthologie *Modern Indo-Anglian Poetry* (Delhi, 1959) den Charakter eines Manifests für den 1958 gegründeten Calcutta Writers Workshop. In der Folge war dieses programmatische Bekenntnis zu einer "modernen", selbstbewußten indo-englischen Dichtung die Grundlage zur Orientierung, wie auch zur Auseinandersetzung, für eine ganze Generation von Autoren und Kritikern. Einen Eindruck davon geben die Texte 39 und 40.

A poet here and a poet there do not add up to a revival. Yet most of us included in this anthology are, after all, working towards an end in many respects common; we practise the same craft; we suffer similar ridicules and receive similar doses of light applause; and we do manage off and on to get published, in India and outside. It is a sorry thing to have to gang up in order to get somewhere, but if each continues to move permanently in his own tight little private world, obeying his own tight little laws, there is a strong likelihood that the blurred and rubbery sentiments of a Sri Aurobindo will slowly clog our own poetry. We cannot let that happen. There is no compulsion to adhere to all the regulations, but the bases must be recognised. And I suggest that the bases for this unofficial Poets Workshop be adherence to these principles of language, method, and intention:

1) We affirm our faith in a vital language as sufficient to write poetry in. A vital language may be in modern idiom or "ancient", but it must not be a total travesty of the current pattern of speech. We consider all expressions like "the sunlight sweet", "deep booming voice", and "fragrant flowers upon the distant lea" to be ridiculous. King's and Queen's English, yes; Indian English, permissible; pidgin, bombastic and gluey English, no.

2) We think that poetry must deal in concrete experience. That experience may be intellectual or emotional or historical-tragical-pastoral-comical, but it must be precise, and lucidly and tangibly expressed. It is better to suggest a sky by referring to a circling eagle in it than to say simply "the wide and open sky".

3) Poetry must be free from propaganda. This means simply that the poet must be honest. In a sense, it means that we shall not write odes in honour of the army chief or sonnets to the Prime Minister. Nor shall we accept Akademi prizes.

4) We recognise the value of discipline, but commend the effort to experiment, so long as it does not lead to excessive obscurity, eccentricity for eccentricity's sake, and perverse legpulling.

5) We condemn all forms of imitation and suggest five whip strokes as punishment for the editor who lets pass a monstrosity of imitation.

6) We claim that the phase of Indo-Anglian romanticism ended with Sarojini Naidu. "I bring for you aglint with dew a little lovely dream". Now, waking up, we must more and more aim at a realistic poetry reflecting, poetically and pleasingly, the din and hubbub, the confusion and indecision, the flashes of beauty and goodness of our age. And leave the fireflies to dance through the *neem*.¹⁹

7) We realise the full-time nature of the poet's vocation if he is to do a good job, and pray that benevolent industrialists see it a duty to patronise poets and poetry without compelling them to write couplets on soaps and toothpastes.

8) Lastly, we emphasise the need for the private voice especially because we live in an age that tends so easily to demonstrations of mass approval and hysteria. For this reason we celebrate the lyric form as the best suited for a capsule-minded public, and we commend it to poets because it makes a direct appeal to that personality of man which is distinct, curious, unique and idealistic; and we realise that it is to this personality, and not to the mass psychology, that poetry must really appeal.

1

P. Lal (ca. 1963)
Famine

Ghosts whisper on the staircase at Firpo's.
At Chung Wah they speak over fried rice and sweet-
and-sour pork;
Sitting near a window with noodles in cream,
The noodles are eyes, gaunt, of an innocent child.

And swing bands on Sunday afternoons
Squeeze light jive for jaded executives in rayon shirts
He sits by a window and sees, ah, skeletons
Perform on the floor in a danse macabre.

And the music dissolves, the dancers
Stand in knots and clap, each with a tubercular rattle
He reads the menu and the bright names murmur:
Saurashtra, Bihar, Cochin, the Sunderbans.

2

Nissim Ezekiel (ca. 1960)
Background Casually

1
A poet-rascal-clown was born.
The frightened child who would not eat
Or sleep, a boy of meagre bone.
He never learnt to fly a kite,
His borrowed top refused to spin.

I went to Roman Catholic school,
A mugging Jew among the wolves.
They told me I had killed the Christ,
That year I won the scripture prize.
A Muslim sportsman boxed my ears.

I grew in terror of the strong
But undernourished Hindu lads.
Their prepositions always wrong,
Repelled me by passivity.
One day I used a knife.

At home on Friday nights, the prayers
Were said. My morals had declined.
I heard of Yoga and of Zen.
Could I, perhaps, be rabbi-saint?
The more I searched, the less I found.

Twenty-two: time to go abroad.
First, the decision, then a friend
To pay the fare. Philosophy,
Poverty and Poetry, three
Companions shared my basement room.

2
The London seasons passed me by.
I lay in bed two years alone,
And then a Woman came to tell
My willing ears I was the Son
Of Man. I knew that I had failed

In everything, a bitter thought.
So, in an English cargo-ship
Taking French guns and mortar-shells
To Indo-China, scrubbed the decks,
And learned to laugh again at home.

How to feel it home, was the point.
Some reading had been done, but what
Had I observed, except my own
Exasperation? All Hindus are
Like that, my father used to say,

When someone talked too loudly, or
Knocked at the door like the Devil.
They hawked and spat. They sprawled around.
I prepared for the worst. Married,
Changed jobs, and saw myself a fool.

The song of my experience sung,
I knew that all was yet to sing.
My ancestors, among the castes,
Where aliens crushing seed¹ for bread
(The hooded bullock made his rounds).

¹ Bene Israel tradition has it that their ancestors took to oil pressing soon at their arrival in India. Hence, *shanwar tel*, Saturday oil-presser cast.

3

One among them fought and taught,
A Major bearing British arms.
He told my father sad stories
Of the Boer War. I dreamed that
Fierce men had bound my feet and hands.

The later dreams were all of words.
I did not know that words betray
But let the poems come, and lost
That grip on things the worldly prize.
I would not suffer that again.

I look about me now, and try
To formulate a plainer view:
The wise survive and serve – to play
The fool, to cash in on
The inner and the outer storms.

The Indian landscape sears my eyes.
I have become a part of it
To be observed by foreigners.
They say that I am singular.
Their letters overstate the case.

I have made my commitments now.
This is the one: to stay where I am,
As others choose to give themselves
In some remote and backward place.
My backward place is where I am.

3

Nissim Ezekiel (c. 1977)
Very Indian Poem in Indian English

I am standing for peace and non-violence.
Why world is fighting fighting
Why all people in the world
Are not following Mahatma Gandhi.
I am simply not understanding.
Ancient Indian wisdom is 100% correct.
I should say even 200% correct.
But modern generation is neglecting –
Too much going for fashion and foreign thing.

Other day I'm reading in newspaper
(Every day I'm reading *Times of India*
To improve my English language)
How one goonda fellow
Throw stone at Indirabehn.
Must be student unrest fellow, I am thinking.
Friends, Romans, countrymen, I am saying
(to myself)
Lend me the ears.

Everything is coming –
Regeneration, Remuneration, Contraception.
Be patiently, brothers and sisters.

You want one glass *lassi*?
Very good for digestion.
With little salt lovely drink.
Better than wine;
Not that I am ever tasting the wine.
I'm the total teetotaler, completely total.
But I say
Wine is for drunkards only.

What you think of prospects fro world peace?
Pakistan behaving like this,
China behaving like that,
It is making me very sad, I am telling you.
Really, most harassing me.
All men are brothers, no?
In India also
Gujaraties, Maharashtrians, Hindiwallahs
All brothers

Though some are having funny habits.
Still, you tolerate me,
I tolerate you.
One day, *Ram Rajya* is surely coming.

You are going?
But you will visit again
Any time, any day,
I am not believing in ceremony.
Always I am enjoying your company.

4

Kamala Das (1969) ***An Introduction***

I don't know politics but I know the names
Of those in power, and can repeat them like
Days of week, or names of months, beginning with
Nehru. I am Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one. Don't write in English, they said,
English is not your mother-tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Every one of you? Why not let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
It is as human as I am human, don't
You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my
Hopes, and it is useful to me as cawing
Is to crows or roaring to the lions, it
Is human speech, the speech of the mind that is
Here and not there, a mind that sees and hears and
Is aware. Not the deaf, blind speech
Of trees in storm or of monsoon clouds or of rain or the
Incoherent mutterings of the blazing
Funeral pyre. I was child, and later they
Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs
Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair. When
I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask
For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the
Bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me
But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.

The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. I shrank
Pitifully. Then I wore a shirt and my
Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored
My womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl,
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. Oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers. Don't sit
On walls or peep through our lace-draped windows.
Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or, better
Still, be Madhavikutty. It is time to
Choose a name, a role. Don't play pretending games.
Don't play at schizophrenia or be a
Nympho. Don't cry embarrassingly loud when
Jilted in love.... I met a man, loved him. Call
Him not by any name, he is every man
Who wants a woman, just as I am every
Woman who seeks love. In him the hungry haste
Of rivers, in me...the oceans' tireless
Waiting. Who are you, I ask each and everyone,
The answer is, it is I. Anywhere and,
Everywhere, I see the one who calls himself
If in this world, he is tightly packed like the
Sword in its sheath. It is I who drink lonely
Drinks at twelve, midnight, in hotels of strange towns,
It is I who laugh, it is I who make love,
And then, feel shame, it is I who lie dying
With a rattle in my throat. I am sinner,
I am saint. I am the beloved and the
Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours, no
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I.

5

Kamala Das (1967) ***Nani***

Nani the pregnant maid hanged herself
In the privy one day. For three long hours
Until the police came, she was hanging there
A clumsy puppet, and when the wind blew
Turning her gently on the rope, it seemed
To us who were children then, that Nani
Was doing, to delight us, a comic
Dance.....The shrubs grew fast. Before the summer's end,
The yellow flowers had hugged the doorway
and the walls. The privy, so abandoned,
Became an altar then, a lonely shrine
For a goddess who was dead.

Another
Year or two, and, I asked my grandmother
One day, don't you remember Nani, the dark
Plump one who bathed me near the well? Grandmother
Shifted the reading glasses on her nose
And stared at me. Nani, she asked, who is she?
With that question ended Nani. Each truth
Ends thus with a query. It is this designated
Deafness that turns mortality into
Immortality, the definite into
The soft indefinite. They are lucky
Who ask questions and move on before
The answers come, those wise ones who reside
In a blue silent zone, unscratched by doubts
For theirs is the clotted peace embedded
In life, like music in the Koel's egg,
Like lust in the blood, or like the sap in a tree....

6

Arun Kolatkar (1976) ***An Old Woman***

An old woman grabs
hold of your sleeve
and tags along.

She wants a fifty paise coin.
She says she will take you
to the horseshoe shrine.

You've seen it already.
She hobbles along anyway
and tightens her grip on your shirt.

She won't let you go.
You know how old women are.
They stick to you like burr.

You turn around and face her
with an air of finality.
You want to end the farce.

When you hear her say,
'What else can an old woman do
on hills as wretched as these?'

You look right at the sky.
Clear through the bullet holes
she has for her eyes.

And as you look on,
the cracks that begin around her eyes
spread beyond her skin.

And the hills crack.
And the temples crack.
And the sky falls

with a plateglass clatter
around the shatterproof crone
who stands alone.

And you are reduced
to so much small change
in her hand.

7

Vineet Gupta (1986)
Had I Been Poor (or Rich)

had I been poor
would be squandering
on the mud,
loitering in the streets
fighting over marbles,
pickpocketing sometimes
smoking *bidis*
drinking hooch

playing cards or gambling
on roadsides,
thinking of cars and
houses and bank balances
and a beautiful girl
would never come
into my mind
for I would know
what I am
and what would
I always be
and leave all those fantasies
for the next birth.

had I been rich
very, I mean,
father would
always be
away
to manipulate and increase
his black money,
otherwise busy in rummy or
scotches or five stars
or sleeping with
beauties;
mother would be
attending kitties and clubs
and hairdos and garments
and jewellery shops
neither would I have
time for them
neither they
for me
I would be dating
fourteen girls
in seven days
and feel free
over dad's unaccounted money,
life and luxury
(who cares for necessities)
would be taken
for granted;

but I am
what I am
and what would
I always be –
neither this
nor that
hanging somewhere
between the two
which makes
all the difference
leading me nowhere,
but compose this poem
for myself.

8

Adil Jussawala (1976)
The Exile's Story

It makes no sense. Wadia's thumping talks
on working for the happiness of those
unborn generations and my kids;
Bund Garden picnics, tempers, squabbles, slaps,
all boil down to grease stains in a pan.
Four rooms in London – broken taps, no rugs –
meters gulping shillings by the shoal,
Mother sinking in a Willesden home,
the children sulking with the telly gone,
and me among a suitcaseful of notes,
three-thousand years of notes – one manuscript
containing words as dead as all my dead
ancestors unpacked in silent towers.

I thought it was my life's one task, you see,
to disabuse the West of fantasies
about the ways of prophets, what they taught;
to prove a gentler vision to my own
than Nietzsche seemed to see. Those sordid years,
when Hitler lashed his name's electric whip
across the backs of caterwauling Jews,
the concentration of my hopes began.
Nietzsche did not know that Superman
Zarathustra was the Jew's first brother.

Such folly, such thick wit. I still worked on.
Then suddenly the Mahatma and his crowd
got what they wanted. Uncertainties
about the growth of 'parasites'
(so a Hindu called us then), an excitable
Wadia advising us to pack,
I came to London – my scholarship a tail
I'd learn to wag in public fairly soon.
Hilda says I'm sitting on it still.

I have a lovely family, of course.
Silloo's tongue a pipe of poisoned darts,
Nozer of his rocker for his June,
Ordering a gross of condoms by the post...
They've learnt too much too soon.
Smacked Niloufer
for calling Eric 'nigger'
and she so dark herself.
I see the boys are fighting shy of her,
an ugly child but one with a brilliant voice
that falls about my mornings like those coins
Grandfather let me throw at peasants once.
I'd send her to a singing school, of course,
but what can a girl do
with a trained voice and looks so wrong an black?
I wish the pop she picks up would not stick.

The little one will probably succeed
if he sticks to what he wants to be:
a fireman.
I must see Abe or Clive about that will.

Three shirts to wash. And Silloo's nosh-ups
always stew.
What does she find in that Miss Eruchshaw
To talk a Sabbath through? Me. I suppose...
'bread loser', 'running dog'... I've heard it all.

Dressing Nozer's nose last night, I shook.
They beat him 'cause they thought he was a Jew.
Facial similarities – further notes – must work –
forget my fears – must start work again –
must work.

9

Agha Shahid Ali (1987)
Postcards from Kashmir

Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox,
My home a neat four by six inches.

I always loved neatness. Now I hold
the half-inch Himalayas in my hand.

This is home. And this the closest
I'll ever be to home. When I return,
the colors won't be so brilliant,
the Jhelum's water so clean,
so ultramarine. My love
so overexposed.

And my memory will be a little
out of focus, in it
a giant negative, black
and white, still undeveloped.

(for Pavan Sahgal)

10

Imtiaz Dharker (1989)
Purdah (1)

One day they said
she was old enough to learn some shame.
She found it came quite naturally.

Purdah is a kind of safety.
The body finds a place to hide.
The cloth fans out against the skin
much like the earth that falls
on coffins after they put dead men in.

People she has known
stand up, sit down as they have always done.
But they make different angles
in the light, their eyes aslant,
a little sly.

She half-remembers things
from someone else's life,
perhaps from yours, or mine –
carefully carrying what we do not own:
between the thighs a sense of sin.

We sit still, letting the cloth grow
a little closer to our skin.
A light filters inward
through our bodies' walls.
Voices speak inside us,
echoing in the places we have just left.

She stands outside herself,
sometimes in all four corners of a room.
Wherever she goes, she is always
inching past herself,
as if she were a clod of earth
and the roots as well,
scratching for a hold
between the first and second rib.

Passing constantly out of her own hands,
into the corner of someone else's eyes . . .
while the doors keep opening
inward and again
inward.

11

Vikram Seth (1986) ***The Golden Gate***

1.1

To make a start more swift than weighty,
Hail Muse, Dear Reader, once upon
A time, say, circa 1980,
There lived a man. His name was John.
Successful in his field though only
Twenty-six, respected, lonely.
One evening as he walked across
Golden Gate Park, the ill-judged toss
Of a red Frisbee almost brained him.
He thought, "If I died, who'd be sad?
Who'd weep? Who'd gloat? Who would be glad?
Would anybody?" As it pained him,
He turned from his dispiriting theme
To ruminations less extreme. [... a verse novel in 590 sonnets/Onegin stanzas]

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