
Indian Literature in English: An Introduction

Lecture 4:

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Indian English Poetry, Before and After Independence

1

William Wordsworth (1802)
Upon Westminster Bridge
Sept. 3, 1802

EARTH has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still.

2

D.L. Richardson (1830)
Evening on the Banks of the Ganges

I wandered thoughtfully by Gunga's shore,
While the broad sun upon the slumbering wave
Its last faint flush of golden radiance gave.
And tinged with tenderest hues some ruins hoar.
Methinks this earth had never know before
A calm so deep – 'twas silent as the grave.
The smallest bird its light wing could not lave
In the smooth flood, nor from the green-wood soar
(If but the tiniest branch its pinions stirred,
Or shook the dew-drops from the leaves,) unheard.
Like pictured shadows 'gainst the western beam
The dark boats slept, while each lone helmsman stood
Still as a statue! – the strange quietude
Enthralled my soul like some mysterious dream!

3

H.L.V. Derozio (1827)
To the Students of the Hindu College

Expanding like the petals of young flowers
I watch the gentle opening of your minds
And the sweet loosening of the spell that binds
Your intellectual energies and powers
That stretch (like young birds in soft summer hours)
Their wings to try their strength. O! How the winds
Of circumstance, and freshening April showers
Of early knowledge, and unnumbered kinds
Of new perceptions shed their influence;
And how you worship truth's omnipotence!
What joyance rains upon me, when I see
Fame in the mirror of futurity,
Weaving the chaplets you have yet to gain,
And then I feel I have not lived in vain.

4

Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1849)
Satan

A form of awe he was – and yet it seemed
A sepulchre of beauty – faded, gone,
Mouldering where memory, fond mourner, keeps
Her lonesome vigils sad – to chronicle
The Past – and tell its tale of coming years.
Or like a giant tree in mighty war
With storm on whirlwind car and fierce array
Blasted and crushed – of all its pride bereft.
Or like a barque which oft had walked the deep
In queenlike majesty – and proudly brave –
But by the fiery hand of some dread fiend
Nursed in starless caves of ocean, shorn
Of all its beauty in the boundless surge
A phantom of departed splendour lone.

5

From: *The Queen of Delhi's Dream* (1849)

Methought there came a warrior-maid,
With blood-stain'd brow and sheathless blade;
Dark was her hue, as darkest cloud,
Which comes the Moon's fair face to shroud,
And 'round her waist a hideous zone
Of hands with charnel lightnings shone,
And long the garland which she wore
Of heads all bath'd in streaming gore
How fierce the eyes by Death unseal'd
And blasting gleams which they reveal'd.
I shudder'd – tho' I knew 't was she,
The awful, ruthless Deity,
On whose dread altar like a flood,
There flows for aye her victim's blood!
I shudder'd - for, methought, she came,
With eyes of bright consuming flame,
'Daughter,' – she said, - 'farewell! – I go:
'The time is come, - it must be so
'Leave thee and thine I will to-night,' –
Then vanish'd like a flash of light!

6

W. Trego Webb (ca. 1880)
The Nautch Girl

Swaying slow she quits her station.
All one silken undulation,
Past the rows of swarthy faces, cresser-lit, that line the walls,
With a sleek and sliding motion,
Like the glowy swell of ocean,
Like a cataract's water gliding oily-smooth before it falls.
Silvery-golden gleams and glances,
Dancing with her as she dances,
Flash, like fire-flies, from her jewelled ankle, arm, and throat, and ear;
Gemed with light she glisters darkling,
As a dusky billow sparkling.
Sown with phosphorescent lustre in a tropic midnight clear.
Clasping folds of gauzy vesture,
Float her hands in wavy gesture,
As she winds in snaky wreathings to the droning of the hymns;
Till the truth is lost in seeming,
And our spirits fall a-dreaming,
'Neath the spell of rhythmic paces and the mist of woven limbs.
Like the sea-foam's glittering daughter,
Like an image carved of water,
Trembling into hues of opal, darkly flushed with radiance rare,
There she circled in her splendour,
While a passionate light and tender,
Smote upon us from her dark eyes and the ripples of her hair.

7

A.C. Lyall (1889)
The Land of Regrets

...What lured him to life in the tropic?
Did he venture for fame or for pelf?
Did he seek a career philanthropic?
Or simply to better himself?
But whate'er the temptation that brought him,
Whether piety, dullness, or debts,
He is thine for a price, thou hast bought him,
O Land of Regrets! ...

From the East came the breath of its odours
And its heat melted soft in the haze,
While he dimly descried thy pagodas,
O Cybele, ancient of days;
Heard the hum of thy mystic processions
The echo of myriads who cry,
And the wail of their vain intercessions,
Through the bare empty vault of the sky...

He was touched with the tales of our glory
He was stirred by the clash and the jar
Of the nations who kill *con amore*
The fury of races at war;
'Mid the crumbling of royalties rotting
Each cursed by a knave or a fool,
Where kings and fanatics are plotting
He dreamt of power and a rule;
Hath he come now, in season, to know thee;
Hath he seen, what a stranger forgets,
All the graveyards of exiles below thee,
O Land of Regrets?

Has he learned how the honours are rated?
Has he cast his accounts in thy school?
With the sweets of authority sated,
Would he give up his throne to be cool,
Doth he curse Oriental romancing,
And wish he had toiled all his day,
At the Bar, or the Banks, or financing,
And got damned in a common-place way?

Thou hast tracked him with duns and diseases,
And he lies, as thy scorching winds blow,
Recollecting old England's sea breezes
On his back in a lone bungalow;
At the slow coming darkness repining
How he girds at the sun till it sets,
As he marks the long shadows declining
O'er the Land of Regrets.

Let him cry, as thy blue devils seize him,
O step-mother, careless as Fate,
He may strive from thy bonds to release him,
Thou hast passed him his sentence – Too Late;
He has found what a blunder his youth is,
His prime what a struggle, and yet
Has to learn of old age what the truth is
In the Land of Regret.

8

Rudyard Kipling (1899) ***The White Man's Burden***

Take up the White Man's burden -
Send forth the best ye breed -
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild -
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child.

Take up the White Man's burden -
In patience to abide,
To veil the threat of terror
And check the show of pride;
By open speech and simple,
An hundred times made plain
To seek another's profit,
And work another's gain.

Take up the White Man's burden -
The savage wars of peace -
Fill full the mouth of Famine
And bid the sickness cease;
And when your goal is nearest
The end for others sought,
Watch sloth and heathen Folly
Bring all your hopes to nought.

Take up the White Man's burden -
No tawdry rule of kings,
But toil of serf and sweeper -
The tale of common things.
The ports ye shall not enter,
The roads ye shall not tread,
Go make them with your living,
And mark them with your dead.

Take up the White Man's burden -
And reap his old reward:
The blame of those ye better,
The hate of those ye guard -
The cry of hosts ye humour
(Ah, slowly!) toward the light: -
"Why brought he us from bondage,
Our loved Egyptian night?"

Take up the White Man's burden -
Ye dare not stoop to less -
Nor call too loud on Freedom
To cloak your weariness;
By all ye cry or whisper,
By all ye leave or do,
The silent, sullen peoples
Shall weigh your gods and you.

Take up the White Man's burden -
Have done with childish days -
The lightly proffered laurel,
The easy, ungrudged praise.
Comes now, to search your manhood
Through all the thankless years
Cold-edged with dear-bought wisdom,
The judgment of your peers!

9

Rabindranath Tagore (1912)

Gitanjali

I

THOU hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again, and fillest it ever with fresh life.

This little flute of a reed thou hast carried over hills and dales, and hast breathed through it melodies eternally new.

At the immortal touch of thy hands my little heart loses its limits in joy and gives birth to utterance ineffable.

Thy infinite gifts come to me only on these very small hands of mine. Ages pass, and still thou pourest, and still there is room to fill.

II

WHEN thou commandest me to sing, it seems that my heart would break with pride; and I look to thy face, and tears come to my eyes.

All that is harsh and dissonant in my life melts into one sweet harmony – and my adoration spreads wings like a glad bird on its flight across the sea.

I know thou takest pleasure in my singing. I know that only as a singer I come before thy presence.

I touch by the edge of the far-spreading wing of my song thy feet which I could never aspire to reach.

Drunk with the joy of singing I forget myself and call thee friend who art my lord.

10

Sri Aurobindo
Thought the Paraclete

As some bright archangel in vision flies
Plunged in dream-caught spirit immensities;
Past the long green crests of the seas of life,
Past the orange skies of the mystic mind
Flew my thought self-lost in the vasts of God.
Sleepless wide great glimmering wings of wind
Bore the gold-red seeking the feet that trod
Space and Time's mute vanishing ends. The face
Lustred, pale-blue-lined of the hippogriff,
Eremitic, sole, daring the bourneless ways,
Over world-bare summits of timeless being
Gleamed; the deep twilights of the world-abyss
Failed below. Sun-realms of supernal seeing,
Crimson-white mooned oceans of pauseless bliss
Drew its vague heart-yearning with voices sweet.
Hungering, large-souled to surprise the unconned
Secrets white-fire-veiled of the last Beyond,
Crossing power-swept silences rapture-stunned,
Climbing high far ethers eternal-stunned,
Thought the great-winged wanderer paraclete
Disappeared slow-singing a flame-word rune.
Self was left, lone, limitless, nude, immune.

11

V.K. Gokak (1947)
English Words

Speech that came like leech-craft
And killed us almost, bleeding us white!
You bleached our souls soiled with impurities.
You bathed our hearts amid tempestuous seas
Of a purer, drearer, delight.

O tongues of fire! You came devouring
Forests of nightshade, creepers that enmesh,
Trees that never remembered to grow,
And shrubs that were but thornmills in our flesh.
You were the dawn, and sunlight filled the spaces
Where owls were hovering.

O winged seeds! You crossed the furrowed seas
To nestle in the warm and silent earth.
Like a warm swarm of fireflies that came
Pining for a new agony, a new birth.
You blossomed into a nascent loveliness.
You ripened into nectar in fruit-jars
That hung like clustered stars.

O winging words! like homing bees you borrow
Grown murmurous, the honey of delight,
Pollened within our hearts the coming morrow,
Sweetened within our souls for aeons bright:
You kindle in the far corners of the earth
The music of an ever-deepening chant:
The burthen of waneless, winterless spring,
The gospel of an endless blossoming.

Fathomless words, with Indo-Aryan blood
Tingling in your veins,
The spoils of ages, global merchandise
Mingling in your strains!
You pose the cosmic riddle:
In the beginning was the Word
And the Word was God.
The Word is in the middle
And the Word is Man.
In the end will be the Word
And the Word will be God in Man.

12

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).

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.

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.

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.

13

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.

14

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.

15

Arun Kolatkar (ca. 1980)
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.

16

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.