



Oscillating between Propaganda and High Art: Dealing with Conflicts

in Indian English Poetry

Amarjeet Nayak

In this article, through a close examination of some selected poems by Kamala Das, Arun Kolatkar, and Syed Amanuddin, it will be my endeavour to unearth the existence of conflicts of varied nature that these poets have to deal with in their poetry. However, even while dealing with the conflicts, and sometimes seemingly taking a stand, ideological or otherwise, they have done so with subtlety, and it is this which elevates their poetry from mere propaganda to the level of high art.

Kamala Das's poem "My Grandmother's House" can be seen as an incisive affirmation of the existence of conflict in the life of an individual in varied forms. One can see it as a conflict between one's past and present – the lamentation of the beautiful moments that have passed one by leaving one with a present characterized by lovelessness and hypocrisy that one finds difficult to reconcile with, especially when juxtaposed with the idyllic past. In this poem, the grandmother represents the time gone by, a time marked by love and innocence. But "that woman died" and that marks the death of innocence and unconditional love. Juxtaposed with this endearing past is the poet's realization that she has "lost my way" into a world where she no longer finds that kind

of innocence, where love is no longer unconditional, and where she has to “beg now at strangers’ doors to / Receive love, at least in small change”. Moreover, the sense of belonging seems to have been replaced by a sense of being an outsider. Earlier, she was talking of grandmother’s “house” where as now she talks of the strangers’ “doors”. While the “house” grants one a place inside, the “door” represents a barrier to gain an entry inside the house, where one has to beg for permission to enter. In such a scenario, when there is a clear conflict between the past and the present, with all the baggage that they come accompanied with, the poet tries to find a bridge between the two. And that bridge is the reader who the poet confides with in a rather personal tone, addressing him / her as “darling”: “you cannot believe, darling, / Can you, that I lived in such a house and / Was proud, and loved...”. Here the “darling” reader becomes privy to both her past and present, becomes the bridge between a past marked by innocence and unconditional love, and a present marked by consumerist material concerns where even love is sought “in small change”.

“Spoiling the Name” is another poem by Das that derives its conflict by pitting society and its norms against individual assertions. The connotation of the title is culture-specific, and refers to the importance given to the individual’s societal role in Indian context. If an individual does not adhere to the prescribed modes of behaviour laid down by a mostly patriarchal and orthodox Indian society, then he/she is seen to be tarnishing the image of the family and his/her society; in other words (s)he ‘spoils the name’ of the family, and also of the society at large. The poem draws attention to this malice by challenging the authoritarian societal diktat through the

individual's need to live life on his / her own terms. Das writes, "...when you say / Don't spoil your name, I feel I / Must laugh, for I know I have a life / To be lived...".

The above mentioned conflict becomes more visibly prominent in one of Das's most acclaimed poems, "An Introduction". This poem has often been seen by critics as taking a clear stand against the hegemonic patriarchal structure of Indian society that imposes restrictions on individual liberty, especially if the individual happens to be a woman. As she points out, society expects woman to "Fit in...Belong". And the very last line of the poem asserts the individuality of the poet in the strongest possible terms: "...I too call myself I." However, in spite of such seemingly obvious declaration of the poet taking a clear stance of putting the individual above society, a close analysis of the poem brings into light some subtle allusions to ambivalence. One such instance is when the poet says "I am sinner, I am saint", and thus decides not to take a holier-than-thou stance. This is what elevates the poem from the level of unadulterated propaganda to the level of high art. So, even though the poet does take a stand, she does it with enough allusions to ambivalence and does not commit the same mistake that the society does, that of being judgmental.

The above analysis elucidates in no uncertain terms Kamala Das's preoccupation with the conflict between society's desire to impose and the individual's struggle to free herself from any such impositions that infringes on her freedom. A similar concern can be seen in Arun Kolatkar's

poetry, especially in “Jejuri”, where the poet is trying to deal with the conflict arising out of a tension between religious practice, and its effect on individuals. Through his poetry, Kolatkar deals with the various dogmas, superstitions that accompany any institutionalized religion and how individuals are affected by this. In the poem “The Priest’s Son”, one can clearly see how the indoctrination of faith and religion starts from the very childhood. The title itself identifies the child by a religious marker, that of being the son of a priest, a man of religion, indicating how the identity of an individual is shaped by societal constructs such as religion. The poem shows the child to be a guide to the place steeped with religious markers at every step. For the child, the five hills there do not symbolize the beauty or grandeur of nature, instead he says: “these five hills / are the five demons / that khandoba killed”. From descriptions such as this, it is easy to brand Kolatkar as a sceptic who sees religion as stripping a child off its innocence.

However, though superficially his poetry may seem to be a celebration of life and individual freedom denouncing the religious beliefs as mostly superstitious, yet a closer look shows that the poet is not really showing allegiance to either the deeply religious or the skeptic. This sort of ambivalence can be seen in the way the poem ends with the priest’s son being enthused by a butterfly, even while performing his duty of a religious guide. The child “...happens to notice / a quick wink of a movement / in a scanty patch of scruffy dry grass / burnt brown in the sun / and says / look / there’s a butterfly / there”. So, one can say that in spite of the indoctrination of faith and religion, innocence of the child still lives on. This conflict, by extension can be seen to be between the natural state of affairs and an attempt to artificially alter one’s identity. A conflict of

this sort is again highlighted in “Chaitanya”, another poem by Kolatkar. The poem “Chaitanya” shows the fifteenth century Bengali saint talking to a stone “in stone language” and asking it to “wipe the red paint off your face”. He wants the stone to remain in its natural state, and not be altered by any artificial painting or colouring. This can be read as the poet’s distaste against the sacrifice of the natural state. This interference with natural order by artificial human intervention has been a major concern with poets and critics in Indian English Literature for a long time. As Sayantan Chakraborty opines, “...human power over physical nature is increasing gradually and thus the perception of natural order and the realization that of human relation to it are being dwindled.” (2009: 24) The conflict of Nature Vs. Nurture, and organized religion Vs. individual identity run as two predominant themes all through the thirty one short pieces in Kolatkar’s “Jejuri”, and the poet deliberately takes an ambivalent position, without showing any overt allegiance to either side.

At this point, it is pertinent to note that not taking a definitive stand and sitting on the fence has its own pitfalls. For Paulo Freire, the renowned Brazilian educator and influential theorist of critical pedagogy, “Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral.” (from web resource) However, unlike a social scientist, a scholar in humanities needs to understand that a work of art does not have to be propagandist. It can bring home its points in unobtrusively perceptive ways. A piece of poetry can be a harbinger of truth. Toeing a particular ideology in overt ways can lead to monotonous reading and will degrade the poem to the level of mere propaganda. At the same time, it is the

foremost duty of a poet to bring to light a particular conflict, or conflicts, without having to take a side.

Having established the existence of conflicts as a predominant theme in the Indian English poetry through an examination of some of the poetry produced by such poets as Kamala Das and Arun Kolatkar, it will be now informative to see as to what the Indian English poets have to say regarding their own art, that of writing poetry in English in India, and if there is any conflict that they have to deal with there as well.

While trying to describe her own writing practice, Kamala Das clearly states her choice of instinct over lumbering, of the natural outpouring over artificial decorum as her preferred style of writing: “How does a baby think, an infant who hasn’t learned any language, who has no vocabulary? I rely only on that: I am always guided by one guru, that is my instinct.” (Das 2006: 142) Even while deciding to choose a more instinctive approach over a cerebral one, Das has had to deal with another type of conflict when it comes to the choice of her language for writing poetry. Her choice of English ahead of Malayalam, her mother tongue has been subjected to a lot of criticism by critics. “...Don’t write in English, they said, / English is not your mother tongue.” (Das 1990: 47). She considers this as yet another trope by society to impinge on her freedom. And she asserts her individuality by asking the critics and society at large to leave her alone, to

make her own choices. “...Why not leave / Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins, / Everyone of you?...” (47)

It is not just the conflict of society’s interference in the choice of language for an Indian English poet that the poet has to deal with. The poet also has to deal with the nomenclature, the very act of naming. The Indian English poet has been called at different times as “Anglo-Indian poet”, “Indo-Anglian poet”, and “Indian English poet”. In all these names, one can see both ‘Indian’ and ‘English’, either in full form or in their abbreviated forms. This conflict of belonging or sense of allegiance to one nationality and another language is something that the Indian English poet has had to live with because of the very act of naming that has been thrust on him by the critics. Just as Das criticizes this parochial attack on the poet’s freedom to choose any language as his preferred medium to express his thoughts, Syed Amanuddin too rebels against such artificial labeling.

they call me indo-anglian

it’s true i write in english

dream in the language of shakespeare n keats

but i am not an anglo my friend

i am a POET

(Amanuddin 1990: 51)

Amanuddin's deliberate avoidance of capital letters to even identify the proper nouns in this poem is reminiscent of African American writing and hence follows a similar kind of desire to make the language one's own. The only time he uses capital letters is when he calls himself a POET, underlining the fact that any sort of labeling is an artificial way of bringing in a conflict where there exists none. But even then the poet has had to deal with conflicts, even the artificial ones, by not turning away from them, but by facing them and bringing them into light through the medium available to him – poetry.

Whether it is Kamala Das, Arun Kolatakar, Syed Amanuddin, or any other Indian poet in English, they all have to deal with conflicts of different kinds in their poetry. They have dealt with this conflict in their own unique ways. The afore-mentioned analysis of the poems shows how conflict is the essence of poetry. Moreover, the poet does not have to provide a solution to the conflict; rather it is his job to bring the conflict into light. It is not easy, and nor is it always desirable for a poet to come up with a distinct preference pattern. In a conflict between two seemingly contradictory positions, the poet may be inclined towards one, without having to completely abandon the other. Whether it is natural vs. artificial, tradition vs. modernism, individual vs. society, or conflict of any other kind, it always exists and is an absolute necessity. As Paniker says, "Tradition that cannot absorb conflict, and cannot get itself transformed through facing successive challenges, will soon become moribund. Tension is the price one has to pay for being sensitive." (Paniker 2000: 140)

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About the Author

Amarjeet Nayak, Assistant Professor, IIT, Indore, India

E-mail-n.amarjeet@gmail.com