



# M.A. ENGLISH II SEMESTER

## Hard Core-1.4

### MODERN INDIAN POETRY IN ENGLISH

#### Block-1

##### Nissim Ezekiel:

Night of the Scorpion

Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher

##### Kamala Das:

My Grandmother's House

Punishment in Kindergarten

##### A.K. Ramanujan:

A River

Ecology

## Preface

Welcome to the Department of Studies and Research in English, Karnataka State Open University, Mukthagangothri, Mysuru.

### **HARD CORE-1.4: Modern Indian Poetry in English**

#### **Block-1**

**Nissim Ezekiel:** Night of the Scorpion; Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher

**Kamala Das:** My Grandmother's House; Punishment in Kindergarten

**A.K. Ramanujan:** A River; Ecology

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Wish you all the best.

**Dr.Nataraju.G**

The Chairman

Department of Studies and Research in English

Karnataka State Open University, Mysore

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**M.A. English**  
**Second Semester**  
**HC 2.4: Modern Indian Poetry in English**  
**BLOCK – I**

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**UNIT - 1: INDIAN POETRY IN ENGLISH**

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**Structure**

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 History of Indian Poetry in English
- 1.3 Emergence of Modern Indian Poetry in English
- 1.4 Self-check exercise
- 1.5 Summing up
- 1.6 Critical Insights
- 1.7. Questions for Self-study
- 1.8 Refrences

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## 1.0 Objectives

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The objectives of this unit are to introduce you

- to the history of Indian poetry in English
- to some of the finest Indian poets who wrote in English and
- to the emergence of Modern Indian poetry in English.

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## 1.1 Introduction

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The unit introduces you to the Indian poets who wrote in English beginning with Louis Vivian Derozio (1809–1831) who is considered the first Indian poet in English. The unit also brings to the fore the other pioneer poets who wrote in English. The emergence of Modern Indian English poetry beginning with Nissim Ezekiel is dealt with elaborately. The post-independence poets writing in English are introduced.

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## 1.2 History of Indian Poetry in English

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Indian poets who wrote in English were initially guided by the spirit of imitation and this took nearly a century for them to overcome. The first Indian poet to write in English was Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809–1831), the son of an Indo-Portuguese father and an English mother. He was the first to sing of India's freedom and eulogize the past glory of India in his poems, "To India – My Native Land" and in "Harp of India". His volumes of poetry, *Poems* (1827) which predates even Macaulay's *Minute* (1835) and *The Fakeer of Jungheera: A Metrical Tale and Other Poems* (1828) show the strong influence of British Romantic poets. Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824–1873) was a bilingual poet who converted to Christianity. A gifted poet, his best known works are *The Captive Lady*, a metrical romance and "Visions of the Past". His works were influenced by the English romantics, especially, Byron. Then there is Toru Dutt (1856–77) who adapted post-Romantic models of tone, style and diction to suit the indigenous themes that she used for her poems. She mastered Bengali, French, English and Sanskrit at a young age. Her best known work is *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*. The poet and critic R. Parthasarathy remarks that she "has an undisputed claim to be regarded as the first Indian poet in English. She put the emphasis back on India, although her verse glows with English romanticism of the mid-nineteenth century." (*Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets* 1-2) K.R. Ramachandran Nair describes Toru Dutt as "the first Indo-Anglian poet to interpret the spirit of India to the West". He remarks, "She left behind such a glory and legacy that even today we think of her as the marvellous young girl who died before her prime after blazing an immortal trail in Indo-Anglian poetry."(14)

During the first phase of in Indian English poetry (upto 1900) there were also other pioneer writers such as Kashiprasad Ghose (1809–1873), Rajnarain Dutt (1824–1889), Romesh Chunder Dutt (1848–1909), who were trend-setters strongly influenced by the Romantic and Victorian poets and wrote on Indian history, myths and legends.

In the second phase (1900–1947) there are poets like Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Sarojini Naidu and others. The early twenties witnessed some noteworthy poets like Manmohan Ghose, Roby Dutta and Harindranath Chattopadhyaya. The poets of this phase were also nationalists caught in the turmoil of the Indian freedom movement. In their poetry is the impressive summing up of India's ancient culture and spiritual legacy. They attempted to nativize English language in order to make it a means suitable for the expression of Indian sensibility. The most prominent in this group of writers are Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950), and Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949). Tagore, who wrote in Bengali and English, got the Nobel Prize for literature for his *Gitanjali* in 1913. Tagore was greatly admired by Yeats and Ezra Pound. Aurobindo, a philosopher, saint, revolutionary and a nationalist founded the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1926. Inspired by Milton, Aurobindo's epic poem, *Savitri* (24,000 lines) was written in Shakespearean blank verse. Prof. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar writes, "Sri Aurobindo is the one incontestably outstanding figure in Indo-Anglian literature" and "as a poet and critic of poetry, Sri Aurobindo would still rank among the supreme masters of our time." (153). Sarojini Naidu was hailed as the *Nightingale of India*, when her first collection of poems, *The Golden Threshold* was published in 1905. A review in *The Times* said, "Her poetry seems to sing itself as if her swift thoughts and the strong emotions sprang into lyrics themselves." (quoted in Srinivas Iyengar 215)

At the turn of the century, poets like Tagore, Aurobindo and Vivekananda wrote poetry of devotion and spiritual enlightenment. Vivekananda, India's spiritual ambassador to the West, wrote poems both in English as well as Bengali. His poems reflect Bhakti and Advaita philosophy. The themes, style and language employed by these renowned poets who wrote prior to independence appeared obsolete and far-fetched to many later poets. The themes which were made use of by poets like Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu were shaped by the influence of the British writers and also the freedom movement in India. But some critics considered them distant and vague. Writers like Dilip Chitre and the Marathi novelist Bhalchandra Nemade, sceptical about the possibility of an authentic Indian tradition of creative writing, described early Indian writers in English as 'creative travel writers', 'artificial western flowers', 'necromancers, creating something out of nothing', and rejected their writing as dependent on 'an English language mirror to know its face', or simply overvalued 'just like a fair skinned woman [is] in our society'. (quoted in Devindra Kohli) Though all these writers have admirers both in India and among overseas readers, many post-Independence Indian poets did not subscribe to their poetry and were even critical in strong terms.

Indians have been writing verse in English at least since the 1820s and it goes under many ludicrous names – Indo-English, India-English, Indian English, Indo-Anglian, and even Anglo-Indian and Indo-Anglican. 'Kill that nonsense term', Adil Jussawalla said of Indo-Anglian, 'and kill it quickly.' The term may not be easy to destroy, but much of the poetry it describes, especially that written between 1825 and 1945, is truly dead. Later poets have found no use for it, and a literary tradition is of no use to anyone else. (Arvind Krishna Mehrotra Introduction 1)

For Indian poets writing in English there was a strong need for change – innovation, novelty and originality. Indian English poetry which stood for the entire range of Western intellectual influences had to be revamped. Thus the 'new' poets resisted and defied the dominant forms and conventions, especially the Victorian ideals of literature and the "ornately quasi-classical Sanskrit-like modes of literary expression". (Laetitia Zecchini 41)

British texts and models enforced by the system of English education introduced in India by Macaulay which presented Keats, Shelly and Wordsworth as literary icons, turned out to be outdated and inadequate. The need was to introduce the commonplace realities in everyday language.

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### 1.3 EMERGENCE OF MODERN INDIAN POETRY IN ENGLISH

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The third phase which is often regarded as the experimental phase, started after independence, when Indian poetry in English embarked on a new journey. The new poets writing in the 1950s and 1960s no longer portrayed a generalized, stereotyped and glorified India, but wrote with a profound awareness of their environment. Renowned critic, M.K. Naik remarks, “The era of hope, aspiration and certitude was gone; an urge of merciless self-scrutiny, questioning and ironic exposure commenced.” Indian English poetry, post-independence, witnessed a crucial break from the tradition put in place by the pre-independence writers and moved ahead with innovations in both themes and techniques. Bruce King describes how this poetry “is part of the process of modernization which includes, urbanization, industrialization, mobility, independence, social change increased communication (in the form of films, television, radio and radio, journals and newspapers), national and international transport networks ... mass education” (3). King also comments on how English was no longer the language of the colonial rulers, on the contrary, it became the language of modern India “in which words and expressions have recognized national rather than imported significances, alluding to local realities, traditions and ways of feeling”. (3) Poets used an English language that is simple and colloquial and wrote about the everyday life and realities of people of all walks of life – from politicians to snake-charmers and beggars.

Modern Indian English poetry began with the publication of Nissim Ezekiel’s first collection of poems titled, *A Time to Change* (1952), in London. Critic Rosinka Chaudhuri’s remarks are pertinent here:

[F]or Indian poetry in English that *annus mirabilis* was 1952, when Nissim Ezekiel published his first volume of poetry, called, appropriately, *A Time to Change* – an event that, like a pebble that created an avalanche, set in motion a train of publications of astounding quality in the succeeding years.” (13) (*annus mirabilis* is a Latin term which means, wonderful or remarkable year )

In a way Ezekiel inaugurated the Modernist revolution in Indian poetry in English. Like T.S. Eliot who wrought the modernist form of English poetry, Ezekiel accorded a name for the post-independence Indian English Poetry, initiated a new style of writing and a new mode of thinking. As the poet Adil Jussawala points out, “Ezekiel is perhaps the first Indian poet consistently to show Indian readers that craftsmanship is as important to a poem as its subject matter”. Challenging the romanticism of the pre-independence Indian English poets, along with poets such as Purushottam Lal (P. Lal), R. Parthasarathy, Keki Daruwalla, Ezekiel rejected an inclination towards “mystical obscurantism”, and promoted “precision of expression and a sceptical rationalism”. This established a new tradition for Indian poetry in English. Thus these poets effectively “defamiliarized” the elitist English which was used till then and used the spoken language as a means of poetic expression. Once language was freed from the control of prosody, poets started exploring a wide range of themes.



Further, *Writer's Workshop*, founded by Purushottam Lal in Calcutta in 1958, played a critical and resourceful role in bringing post-independence Indian English poetry to the fore by giving preference to experimental works by young and unpublished writers. In addition, *Clearing House*, which was a poetry publishing collective, established in the 1970s by the poets, Adil Jussawalla, Gieve Patel, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, and Arun Kolatkar also had a crucial role to play in the resurgence of modern Indian poetry in English. Poets like Shiv K. Kumar, Nissim Ezekiel, Jayant Mahapatra, A. K. Ramanujan, P. Lal, Arun Kolatkar, R Parthasarathy, Kamala Das, Keki Daruwalla, Dom Moraes, Adil Jussawalla, Gieve Patel, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Pritish Nandy and others who later contributed to the genesis and evolution of Modern Indian English Poetry emerged on the scene. Later it was Bombay in the 1970s, with Dom Moraes, Nissim Ezekiel, Arun Kolatkar, Dilip Chitre, Adil Jussawalla, Eunice de Souza, Gieve Patel, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra and Kamala Das, where Indian poetry in English was reborn in an independent India. The 1960s and the 1970s turned out to be the high point of Indian English poetry in English.

Most of the post-Independence Indian poets, be it Kamala Das, A.K. Ramanujan or Ezekiel and the Bombay poets such as P. Lal, Keki Daruwalla, Adil Jussawalla, R. Parthasarathy and Arvind Krishna Mehrotra rejected the model of poetry that was articulated by Aurobindo, Tagore and Sarojini Naidu, rejected writings in blank verse or rhymed verse which was an emulation of the Romantic and Victorian poets. The real issues that concerned postcolonial India, the themes and sensibilities of independent India were to be comprehended and articulated in a different way. It was then that the British and American modernist poets, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot became the new models or exemplars for the post-independence Indian poets in English. Modernist poets, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and Amy Lowell too considered much of Romantic and Victorian poetry as redundant and contradictory to the values and issues of their times. These imagist poets who experimented with free verse and who urged the poets to break the parameters and write anew were the dominant critical influences on the post-independent Indian poets. As Laetitia Zecchini puts it, modernism soon turned out to be a “a paradigm for emancipation and for dissent” which also aimed at “trying out different alternatives outside and beyond *inhibiting* British traditions, romantic or revivalist conventions, and fashioning free verse” (43)

Nissim Ezekiel (1925–2004) and Dom Moraes (1938–2004) introduced a contemporary tone into Indian poetry in English. Both published their books of poems in the 1950s which were significant for they were the first volumes of poetry post independence. There was considerable opposition to Indian poets writing in English. For instance Bengali writer Buddhadeva

Bose in his caustic commentary on the use of English language by Indian poets quoted W.B. Yeats's remarks that “no man can think or write with music and vigour except in his mother tongue” and that “Indo-Anglian poetry is a blind alley... leading nowhere”. Marathi novelist Balachandra Nemade was also sceptical about the use of English in creative writing. He writes, “By encouraging a foreign language system to be a fit medium for creative writing we bring our already low-value culture still lower. It is doubtful whether this writing will add any ‘Indianness’ to World writing in English”. (quoted by Rajeev S. Patke 59 – 60).

Ezekiel is often credited for unfettering modern Indian English poetry from the romantic predisposition of the poets of pre-independent India and also the influence of the Romantic and Victorian poets. Ezekiel's poetry was a revolt against romanticism and narcissism which were inherent impediments that prevented Indian

English poetry to be a critique of life. Further, Ezekiel used irony as a powerful tool to mirror the social evils, the idiosyncrasies of the people around him and the deep-rooted corruption in the society. Poetry in Ezekiel's hands was more inward-looking and soul-searching than contemplative and meditative, thus making poetry not just realistic and authentic, but also a means to critically interrogate the rhythms of a rapidly growing nation. His wry wit, clinical examination of life and its happenings which rise above the limitations of time and space gave a new sense of direction and purpose to Indian poetry in English.

The language of Indian poetry in English has its own register, and it mirrors the position of English in India. As Tabish Khair puts it in his essay, "Language in English Poetry in English", "The best of Indian poetry in English has always had to negotiate its own distinctive relationship to English, to other Indian languages and to the world". (255-256) R. Parthasarathy writes how Indian poets defamiliarized the elitist language of poetry by manipulating the spoken language as a medium for lyrical expression. He further remarks,

What is refreshingly new about these poems is not only their informal tone or their employment of the colloquial language and unconventional imagery, but their impressive use of imagery.

Kamala Das, like Nissim Ezekiel and Dom Moraes is recognized as a significant contemporary Indian poet in English as well as Malayalam. An iconoclast, she started the tendency towards openness and forthrightness in the treatment of a subject. Her poems are about adulterous love, lonesomeness and quest for fulfilment in love. Very often critics are quite judgemental and even disparaging of her writing, labelling her poems as erotic and neurotic. Yet her outstanding achievement is in the use of an English that suited the Indian sensibility. Bruce King's remarks are pertinent here:

Kamala Das's most remarkable achievement, however, is writing in an Indian English. Often her vocabulary, idioms, choice of verbs and some syntactical constructions are part of what has been termed the Indianization of English. This is an accomplishment. It is important in the development of a national literature that writers free themselves from the linguistic standards of their colonizers and create a literature based on local speech. (King 153)

Poets like Aravind Krishna Mehrotra, Gieve Patel, Eunice de Souza, Arun Kolkatkar, Agha Shahid Ali and Shanta Acharya are some of the several poets whose writings have embellished and glorified Indian English poetry by adding an entirely new dimension to it. Every Indian poet writing in English is significant in the evolution of modern Indian English poetry as each writer contributes to the enrichment of the Indian English idiom. Each one of these poets has in his/her own way augmented the sense of Indianness in the Indian English poetry. These poets have brought Indian English poetry to its present glory. As R. Parthasarathy remarks in his *Indian Poetry Today*,

what is refreshingly new about these poems is not only their informal tone or their employment of the colloquial language and unconventional imagery, but their impressive use of irony.

A distinctive feature of modern Indian poetry in English is the Indianness and the Indian sensibility that the poets reflect in their poems. The use of myths, folklore and legends, history and nationalism all together create a distinct Indian idiom. Most poets write in a vibrant contemporary English idiom and their poetry address a wide range of concerns and themes that are specific to Indian society. As Parthasarathy observes, "The Indian

poets continue a tradition of engagement with society that has historically characterized Indian poetry.” (*Indian Poetry Today*)

Many of these poets published anthologies which brought a wider readership. *Modern Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology and Credo* (1969) by P. Lal, and *Indian Poetry in English* (1972) by Prithvi Nandy, *Contemporary Indian Poetry in English: An Assessment and Selection* (1972) by Saleem Peeradina, *Ten Twentieth-Century Indian Poets* (1976) by R. Parthasarathy, *Two Decades of Indian Poetry: 1960-80* (1980) by Keki N. Daruwalla and *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (1992) by Aravind Krishna Mehrotra are some of the noteworthy anthologies of Modern Indian Poetry.

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#### **1.4 Self-check exercise**

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1. Write a note on the pioneers of Indian poetry in English.
2. Comment on the contribution of Henry Derozio and Toru Dutt to the emergence of Indian poetry in English.
3. Discuss Tagore, Aurobindo and Vivekananda as poets who wrote poetry of devotion and spiritual enlightenment.

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#### **1.5 Summing up**

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The unit introduces you to the origin of Indian English poetry. It elaborates on the pre-independence Indian English poets who were inspired by the British Romantics, their themes and style. It also introduces you to the emergence of Modern Indian poetry in English after independence and to the poets of this period, the most prominent among them being Nissim Ezekiel, Jayanta Mahapatra, A.K. Ramanujan. These poets ignored the Romantic tradition, adopted modernist elements influenced by Ezra Pound, W.B. Yeats, and T.S. Eliot and also went back to their own poetic tradition. They modernized language, style and theme. They were successful in creating a vibrant contemporary Indian English idiom, explored a wide range of subjects and issues specific to the Indian situation and even used the colloquial language as a medium for poetic expression. Nissim Ezekiel emerged as a model for the poets of this period.

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#### **1.6 CRITICAL INSIGHTS**

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##### **Bruce King**

Bruce King *Modern Indian Poetry in English*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Of the group of poets attempting to create a modern English poetry Nissim Ezekiel soon emerged as the leader who advised others set standards and created places of publication. His main significance is not, however, as a promoter of poetry; it is in his will to be a poet, his continuing involvement in the poetry scene and the ways in which the developing body of his work expresses his quest for a satisfactory way of living in the modern world. Whereas previously Indian English verse was a hobby, something done in spare moments, Ezekiel made it central to his life. Others wrote poems he wrote poetry. The difference is reflected in his craftsmanship and purposefulness; this is as much a matter of will as of talent. Ezekiel brought a sense of discipline, self-criticism and mastery to Indian English poetry. He was the first Indian poet to have such a professional attitude.

He knew very early what he wanted; he wanted precision of diction and imagery and what I would describe as moral purpose which was structurally embodied in the rounding off of a poem with an observation. He aimed at a contemporary manner which would voice modern concerns and which in style and theme avoid the dated provincialism of colonial verse. When styles throughout the English speaking world changed in the 1960s from formality to openness, Ezekiel's poetry took a parallel direction. He constantly renewed himself in his work and kept up with the times. (Bruce King 91)

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### 1.7 Questions for Self-study

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1. Discuss in detail the origin of Indian poetry in English.
  2. Write on the features and themes of the poetry of the pre-independence period.
  3. Discuss in detail the emergence of modern Indian poetry in English.
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**M.A. English**  
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**BLOCK – I**

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**UNIT – 2 : NISSIM EZEKIEL “Night of the Scorpion” & “Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher”**

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**Structure**

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
  - 2.1.1 Introduction to Nissim Ezekiel
  - 2.1.2 Nissim Ezekiel’s Poetry
- 2.2 Critical Insights
- 2.3 Text of the poem “Night of the Scorpion”
  - 2.3.1 Critical analysis of “Night of the Scorpion”
- 2.4 Text of the poem “Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher”
  - 2.4.1 Critical analysis of “Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher”
- 2.5 Self-check exercise
- 2.6 Summing up
- 2.7. Questions for Self-study
- 2.8 References

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## 2.0 Objectives

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The objectives of this unit are to introduce you

- to understand the imagery, style and technique in the poems “Night of the Scorpion” & “Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher”
- to critically evaluate the poems of Nissim Ezekiel

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## 2.1 Introduction

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This unit introduces you to the poet Nissim Ezekiel who pioneered the beginning of modernism in Indian poetry in English. The life and the works of Nissim Ezekiel and a critical appreciation of his poems, “Night of the Scorpion” and “Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher” form the core of this unit.

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### 2.1.1 Introduction to Nissim Ezekiel

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Nissim Ezekiel (1924 – 2004), considered the first among the “new poets”, was a prolific poet, playwright, critic, broadcaster and social commentator. An Indian-born poet of Jewish (Bene-Israel) descent, he has often been regarded as the “father of post-independence Indian poetry in English”. His father, Moses Ezekiel, was a professor of Botany at Wilson College in Mumbai and his mother was the Principal of the school that she herself had started. He attended Wilson College where he was awarded a first class honours degree in literature and completed his M.A. in English Literature from Mumbai University. Later he studied philosophy at Birbeck College, London.

He had a varied career as an English teacher in India, England and the United States. He wrote plays, was a broadcaster on *All India Radio* and contributed many critical articles to the literary sections of *The Illustrated Weekly of India* and other magazines and newspapers including *The Times of India*. He took to teaching in 1961, and retired from service as Professor of English at the University of Bombay.

In 1952 Nissim Ezekiel’s first collection of poems titled, *A Time to Change* was published by Fortune Press (London). His other poetry collections include *Sixty Poems* (1953), *The Third* (1959), *The Unfinished Man* (1960), *The Exact Name* (1965) and *Hymns in Darkness* (1976), *Latter-Day Psalms* (1982) and *Collected Poems 1952-88* (1989). *Latter-Day Psalms* was selected for the Sahitya Akademi Award of 1983. He was awarded the Padma Shri in 1988.

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### 2.1.2 Nissim Ezekiel’s Poetry

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In the second half of the twentieth century, Nissim Ezekiel was the pioneer among the poets who inaugurated the Modernist revolution in Indian poetry in English. Critic Rosinka Chaudhuri in her *History of Modern Indian Poetry in English* remarks that for “Indian poetry in English that *annus mirabilis* was 1952, when Nissim Ezekiel published his first volume of poetry, called, appropriately, *A Time to Change* – an event that, like a pebble that created an avalanche, set in motion a train of publications of astounding quality in the succeeding years.” (13) Jeet Thayil in his introduction to Nissim Ezekiel remarks that he was the face of Indian poetry both in India and abroad and was a mentor to four generations of poets. One of post-independence India’s finest poets, Nissim Ezekiel along with poets like Keki N. Daruwalla, Purushottam Lal, Rajagopal

Parthasarathy, discouraged and worked against the inclination towards mystical obscurantism and romanticism as seen in the works of Aurobindo and others. He also resisted and rejected the lyrical romanticism of the earlier generation of Indian poets who wrote in English.

Ezekiel and his contemporary poets infused Indian English poetry with a new gravity and earnestness, with a “precision of technique and a modernity of outlook” and with “an insistence on precision of expression and a sceptical rationalism that advocated a break with the past.” At the same time the inimitable singularity and uniqueness of his own poetry cannot be disputed. John Thieme in an assessment of Ezekiel’s poetry in his introduction to the *Nissim Ezekiel: Collected Works* remarks,

Ezekiel is a poet whose verse defies easy categorization. His distinctive poetic practice draws on a range of traditions – Judaic and Hindu, ancient and modern, Western and Eastern – to create a highly personal Indian landscape, albeit one that also has broader resonance as an embodiment of post-independence secularism. (xxi)

Bruce King describes how the standards of Nissim Ezekiel were responsible for the creation of the main critical discourse which others developed much later:

Ezekiel’s concern with craftsmanship, intellectualized observations of life, moral realism and integration of personality ousted the amateurism, late romanticism, aestheticism, nationalist subject matter and vague spiritualism which were characteristic of Indian English poetry before and at independence. (89)

Nissim Ezekiel’s poetry is mostly lyrical bordering on the satirical. The themes are often simple, the language usually unadorned and unpretentious. There is always a note of the personal and the psychological as the poems often arise out of a personal crisis or dilemma. To conclude, Nissim Ezekiel is one of the most studied and critically acclaimed Indian poets writing in English who is credited for giving an impetus to the post-independence school of Modern Indian poetry in English.

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## 2.2 Critical Insights

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### **Bruce King**

Bruce King *Modern Indian Poetry in English*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001.

There are varied tensions in Ezekiel’s discussion of poetry.... He wants the economy and precision, aesthetic distance and unified vision of the major early twentieth century poets. But he also wants poetry invested with moral awareness, truth, self-knowledge and mature experience. The former kind of poetry has been the major accomplishment of the modernist movement; in theory and tendency it has aimed at purifying itself of claims to knowledge and truth. Ezekiel’s view of poetry would seem to, and does, put more emphasis on poetry as the communication of insight and experience, expressed in concentrated, precise forms. While representative of the modern mind it will be centered on the self’s engagement with its environment. To speak of truth, meaning and knowledge in poetry does not return it to versified feeling and ideas, but does mean that it will be more immediately, concretely related to society and situations, and more moral and spiritual in its tendency than art which aims at purity or meta-poetic statements about itself and the nature of the imagination ... Although Ezekiel’s view of poetry is influenced by his own spiritual yearning and intellectual awareness, it was extended by other poets to further areas of social, political and cultural concern. (78)

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### 2.3 Text of the poem “Night of the Scorpion”

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#### NIGHT OF THE SCORPION

Nissim Ezekiel

I remember the night my mother  
was stung by a scorpion. Ten hours  
of steady rain had driven him  
to crawl beneath a sack of rice.

Parting with his poison - flash  
of diabolic tail in the dark room -  
he risked the rain again.

The peasants came like swarms of flies  
and buzzed the name of God a hundred times  
to paralyse the Evil One.

With candles and with lanterns  
throwing giant scorpion shadows  
on the mud-baked walls  
they searched for him: he was not found.  
They clicked their tongues.  
With every movement that the scorpion made his poison moved in Mother's blood, they said.

May he sit still, they said  
May the sins of your previous birth  
be burned away tonight, they said.  
May your suffering decrease  
the misfortunes of your next birth, they said.  
May the sum of all evil  
balanced in this unreal world

against the sum of good  
become diminished by your pain.  
May the poison purify your flesh

of desire, and your spirit of ambition,  
they said, and they sat around  
on the floor with my mother in the centre,



the peace of understanding on each face.  
More candles, more lanterns, more neighbours,  
more insects, and the endless rain.  
My mother twisted through and through,  
groaning on a mat.  
My father, sceptic, rationalist,  
trying every curse and blessing,  
powder, mixture, herb and hybrid.  
He even poured a little paraffin  
upon the bitten toe and put a match to it.  
I watched the flame feeding on my mother.  
I watched the holy man perform his rites to tame the poison with an incantation.  
After twenty hours  
it lost its sting.

My mother only said  
Thank God the scorpion picked on me  
And spared my children.

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### 2.3.1 Critical analysis of the poem “Night of the Scorpion”

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“Night of the Scorpion”, first published in 1965 is one of Ezekiel’s finest compositions. Acclaimed as “a flawless piece of poetic masterpiece” and one of his best-known poems, “Night of the Scorpion” is a narrative poem with a poetic persona who might be the poet himself. The poet perhaps draws from an incident from his childhood/youth. It captures the attitude of the peasant folk, the father, the holy man, the mother and the narrator at a time of crisis. It is thus a rendering of the varied responses to the mother being stung by a scorpion. Here poetry emerges from a commonplace reality (the mother being stung by a scorpion) as observed, known, felt, experienced firsthand rather than being written from the intellectual ability of the poet to envision and make up a situation. The poem is also reflective of Ezekiel’s insightful skill in evoking rural landscapes.

The mother in the poem is stung by a scorpion on a rainy day when she goes to collect rice from a sack for the evening meal. Soon the members of the family and the people of the village gather around her in large numbers concerned about the pain she goes through and anxious to comfort her and bring her relief. The villagers who gather are simple people who believe in the effectiveness of prayer. Prayer, according to them, can ward off all evil, bring succour and give relief.

The peasants came like swarms of flies  
and buzzed the name of God a hundred times  
to paralyse the Evil one.

They search for the scorpion in vain with candles and lanterns which create giant scorpion shadows on the wall. Steeped in their own belief system, they believe that with every movement that the scorpion makes, the poison also runs its course in the mother's blood. They fervently hope that the scorpion remains motionless for it would stall the poison from moving forward in the mother's blood.

May he sit still, they said  
May the sins of your previous birth  
be burned away tonight, they said.  
May your suffering decrease  
the misfortunes of your next birth, they said.  
May the sum of all evil  
balanced in this unreal world  
against the sum of good  
become diminished by your pain.

Then there is the world of science, rationalism and skepticism epitomized by the father who tries "every curse and blessing, powder, mixture, herb and hybrid." There is the holy man who performs a ritual to alleviate the pain and bring relief to the mother. Yet it is only after twenty hours that the poison loses its potency and the pain finally subsides.

Written from a very specific Indian viewpoint, it deals with a particularly private experience. The poem offers a social vision and is a commentary on some sections of Indian life. It brings to life, in R. Parthasarathy's words, "immemorial rhythms of village India in all its beauty and simplicity." (*Indian Poetry Today*) The poetic persona as an observer regards his social world with a degree of detachment and aloofness. Ezekiel's remarkable skill in evoking rural landscapes is explicit in this poem. The poem draws on an incident from his childhood and is evidently about the responses of a father, the peasants of the village and the mother herself to the mother being stung by a scorpion. This is typical of Ezekiel's poetry: a personal as well as a social poem. There is the simple faith of the peasants of the village juxtaposed against the father's ambiguous rationalism. The tone of the poem is neutral, non-committal and non-judgmental.

The poem is at one level the dramatization of the events that unfold after the mother is stung by a scorpion and at the other it is also a dramatization of the encounter between rationalism and blind faith and belief in certain viewpoints that border on superstition. Ezekiel gives to the narrative a dramatic intensity and richness of imagery rarely seen in Indian English poetry. The poem brings out Ezekiel's interest in the everyday human events. It is a perfectly accomplished narration of a personal experience brought to a close with the mother exclaiming, "Thank God the scorpion picked on me/and spared my children" which might suggest that it is a poem about mother's love. It is also a compelling depiction of opposing and disparate belief systems in conflict at a point of crisis in a family. On the one hand there are the simple-minded villagers who put forward their chorus of views on the reason and effect of the scorpion's sting. Then there is the father, a rationalist and a sceptic with his conflicting attitude towards the entire episode. He even poured some paraffin upon the bitten

toe and burnt it. Alongside the rational attempts of the father to mitigate the mother's pain, there was also the priest performing his rites to "tame the poison". Ultimately, it was only after twenty hours that the poison lost its sting and the mother recovered from the pain.

There is an unmistakable overtone of irony in the mother's words too, for it overrules the responses of the villagers, the father and the holy man. The irony lies in the fact that it is not the endeavour of these people that finally helps in the recovery of the mother, but the poison loses its sting naturally after twenty hours. R. Parthasarathy's remarks are pertinent here:

'Night of the Scorpion' evokes superstitious practices we haven't still outgrown. It enacts an impressive ritual in which the mother's reaction, towards the end, to her own sufferings ironically cancels out earlier responses, both primitive and sophisticated. The relationship between the domestic tragedy and the surrounding community is unobtrusively established. (28)

The narrator himself exhibits total objectivity and detachment throughout the poem, thus effectively camouflaging his own feelings and perspectives. He observes the entire event impassively and objectively while the peasant's world of superstitions is juxtaposed against his father's world of skepticism and rationalism. Critic John Thieme remarks, "The tone is enigmatic and non-judgmental, suggesting ironic detachment from the peasants' faith, but also, as is virtually always the case in Ezekiel's verse, neutral enough to leave a range of possible attitudes open".

John Thieme's comment is apt here:

(Nissim Ezekiel's) verse offers a social vision which moves outwards from his urban experience and minority background to provide optics on many areas of Indian life. As with several other major Indian poets of his generation who use English as their main medium of expression, his work is centrally concerned with perception and his poetic persona is both that of an observer who regards his social world and his own behaviour with a degree of amused detachment, and that of a complete insider. As has frequently been noted, the dominant tone of his poetry is ironic scepticism. It is this scepticism – and this point has been made less frequently – that makes it possible to see his poetic practice as a metonym for the discourse of the new secular nation to which he returned in the early 1950s. For the most part he avoids writing about his 'Indianness', but in so doing he communicates a particular view of Indian identity. (John Thieme)

The poem is Ezekiel's endeavor to unite and order experience through a suitable style in which imagery is integral to thought.

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## 2.4 Text of the poem "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher"

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### POET, LOVER, BIRDWATCHER

Nissim Ezekiel

To force the pace and never to be still  
Is not the way of those who study birds  
Or women. The best poets wait for words.  
The hunt is not an exercise of will

But patient love relaxing on a hill  
To note the movement of a timid wing;  
Until the one who knows that she is loved  
No longer waits but risks surrendering -  
In this the poet finds his moral proved  
Who never spoke before his spirit moved.

The slow movement seems, somehow, to say much more.  
To watch the rarer birds, you have to go  
Along deserted lanes and where the rivers flow  
In silence near the source, or by a shore  
Remote and thorny like the heart's dark floor.  
And there the women slowly turn around,  
Not only flesh and bone but myths of light  
With darkness at the core, and sense is found  
But poets lost in crooked, restless flight,  
The deaf can hear, the blind recover sight.

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#### **2.4.1 Critical analysis of the poem “Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher”**

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“Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher” is a thought-provoking poem, much anthologized and critically acclaimed. The poem is about the creative process of writing a poem. The poet expresses his views on the art of poetry through brilliant and vibrant images. The speaker compares the course of writing a poem to the course of being a lover or a birdwatcher. Both the birdwatcher and the lover cannot hasten in their endeavour to study birds or to court a woman. Immense patience is what is required in both these endeavours. ‘The best poets wait for words’. What underlies the art of writing poetry is true inspiration, a moment of enlightenment and an endless patience to experience it and be motivated to finally find the apt words. While mediocre writers might use mundane and commonplace expressions, the best poets wait for the moment of illumination to inspire them to pen down the finest poems. This waiting is a complex process, often tortuous and painstaking. “To force the pace” or to hasten in one’s endeavour and “Never be still” cannot be the way to either write a poem or woo a woman or even study a bird. All three pursuits are equally austere and rigorous requiring immense patience and perseverance. The quest for the right word, the rare bird or true love can be fulfilled only at the cost of continual vigil and alertness.

The poet continues to say that the hunt is not just an “exercise of the will”, but it borders on a spiritual quest which gives the pursuer a sense of profound peace and relaxation. Thus the wait, far from being a painstaking enterprise is “patient love relaxing on a hill” waiting for “the movement of a timid wing”, the moment of poetic creativity. The wait, far from being burdensome, is relaxing and entails diligence and persistence.

The quest for the rare birds takes the birdwatcher to the ‘deserted lanes’ through untraversed trails “Remote and thorny like the hearts dark floor”. The lines also refer to the uncharted terrains of the human heart which a poet needs to traverse to find the inspiration that triggers poetic creativity. The thought that labour and hard-work is required of a birdwatcher in search of rare birds, a poet in search of the right words and the lover in search of love is reiterated here.

And there the women slowly turn around,  
Not only flesh and bone but myths of light  
With darkness at the core, and sense is found

The woman of the lover’s quest then turns out to be not just a being of flesh and blood but a radiant spirit. She is also the muse who inspires the creative process. In the words of John Thieme,

Poetry is... a form of erotics, a kind of lovemaking that quietly waits for the Muse to make the first move, a medium that is both reticent and suggestive. Perhaps the poem relates to a particularly Indian form of courting inspiration; assuredly it reveals the way Ezekiel’s poetic ‘fire’ is inspired. (*Nissim Ezekiel: Collected Poems* 29)

R. Parthasarathy’s comment sums up the theme of the poem:

In ‘Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher’, the search for love and the word presented in the person of a birdwatcher. The image is appropriate in the context, where it helps to control a ‘potentially explosive situation’. Both love and words visit the poet without his knowledge. There is no pursuit, only waiting. In fact, the waiting itself becomes a form of pursuit, a strategy. It is only then that the revelation occurs. The analogies, separately explored, now come together, and the metaphor used to suggest this fusion is light. In ‘Poetry as Knowledge’, Ezekiel tells us, ‘What the poet knows makes the poem what it is, if the poet’s knowledge is alive and his art fully extended while he writes the poem.’ ‘Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher’ epitomizes Ezekiel’s

search for a poetics which would help him redeem himself in his eyes and in the eyes of God. (28-29)

K.S. Ramamurthi in his *Twenty-five Indian Poets in English* observes that Ezekiel’s perception of the act of poetic creation is akin to the traditional Indian belief that the poet has to wait for the ‘descent of the divine’. (38) Ezekiel considers the art of writing poetry as a painstakingly acquired talent which can never be attained in a hurry. It is a protracted process which requires sustained effort that also involves long periods of wait until inspiration dawns on the poet. It is also similar to the exultation experienced by the lover who finally wins over his lady love or the bird-watcher who at last catches a glimpse of the bird he was looking for.

As for the structure, the poem is twenty-lined with two ten-lined stanzas. The rhyme scheme for each stanza is ABBAACDCDD. There is a guarded use of punctuations and enjambment.

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## 2.5 Self-check exercise

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1. Examine how the poem, “Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher” is about the creative process of writing a poem.
2. Critically examine the varied responses to the mother’s pain in the poem, “Night of the Scorpion”.
3. Comment on the irony in the words of the mother in the poem, “Night of the Scorpion”.

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## 2.6 Summing up

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Among the modern Indian English poets, Ezekiel emerged as a role model for the later poets by enriching the Indian English idiom, by bringing in a sense of Indianness to the modernist trend that started emerging in Indian English poetry in the post-independence period and by giving, in Bruce King's words, "a sense of discipline, self-criticism and mastery to Indian English poetry".

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## 2.7. Questions for Self-study

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1. Examine Nissim Ezekiel's contribution to Indian English poetry.
2. Critically evaluate the poem, "Night of the Scorpion".
3. Comment on Nissim Ezekiel's views on the art of poetry writing as reflected in "Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher".

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**M.A. English**  
**Second Semester**  
**HC 2.4: Modern Indian Poetry in English**  
**BLOCK – I**

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**UNIT - 3: KAMALADAS -“My Grandmother’s House”& “Punishment in Kindergarten”**

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**Structure**

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
  - 3.1.1 Introduction to Kamala Das
  - 3.1.2 Kamala Das’s Poetry
- 3.2 Critical Insights
- 3.3 Text of the poem “My Grandmother’s House”
  - 3.3.1 Critical analysis of “My Grandmother’s House”
- 3.4 Text of the poem “Punishment in Kindergarten”
  - 3.4.1 Critical analysis of “Punishment in Kindergarten”
- 3.5 Self-check exercise
- 3.6 Summing up
- 3.7 Questions for Self-study
- 3.8 References

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### 3.0 Objectives

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The objectives of this unit are to introduce you

- to understand the imagery, style and technique in the poems “My Grandmother’s House” & “Punishment in Kindergarten”
- to critically evaluate the poems of Kamala Das

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### 3.1 Introduction to the poet

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Kamala Das (1934 – 2009) was born into an aristocratic Nalapat Nair family in Punnayurkulam, Kerala. Her father was the editor and managing director of a leading Malayalam newspaper *Mathrabhoomi*, and her mother, Balamani Amma was a renowned Malayalam poet. Kamala Das’ publications include six books of poems and several novels, short stories both in Malayalam and English an autobiography, *My Story* (1976). Kamala Das founded and ran Bahutantrika, a forum for writers, especially poets and artists who met monthly for readings and performances. In 1963 she was honoured with the Asian Poetry Award sponsored by the Manila Centre of the PEN. She won the Sahitya Akademi award for her poetry collection, *Collected Poems* in 1985. Late in life she converted to Islam, and changed her name to Kamala Suraiya.

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#### 3.1.2 Kamala Das’s poetry

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A bilingual poet like Arun Kolatkar, Kamala Das is often hailed as an outstanding contemporary Indian poet in English whose works remarkably reflect the political, cultural and literary changes that impacted the Indian English poetry of the 1960s and 1970s. Aravind Krishna Mehrotra describes how her “poetry spoke with fierce and unsparing honesty about the difficulties of being a woman and a wife in a time and for a culture which had trained women to a long tradition of silence.” (*History of Indian Literature in English* 251) Her first collection of fifty poems, *Summer in Calcutta*, published in 1965, was a landmark book. Kamala Das’s unpretentious down-to-earth style, her speech rhythms, that pays no heed to the traditional iambic line of English verse, her imagery drawn directly from her experience of the ordinary and the commonplace, her distinctively individual tone struck a refreshingly novel and innovative chord in Indian English poetry. With her two successive volumes which followed, *The Descendants* (1967) and *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), her poetry cleared the way for new promises both in content and style. The poet Eunice de Souza remarks that to Kamala Das the women writers owe a particular debt, for it was she who “mapped out the terrain for postcolonial women in social and linguistic terms.” Kamala Das was not really conversant with the spirited modernist experiments in English literature in general. She had a profound interest in the nineteenth century poet Whitman. The driving impulse behind her poetry was, as Rajeev S. Patke puts it, “precisely to



erase the boundaries between poetry and ordinary speech, and to write in recognizable speech rhythms of the poet herself.” (Introduction)

Before her marriage at the young age of fifteen, Kamala Das was home-tutored and later studied at the St. Cecilia European Catholic School in Calcutta. She was not a university graduate, unlike the other poets who wrote during the same time. Her summer holidays were spent at her ancestral house in Punnayurkulam, Kerala with her grandmother with whom she formed a deep bond. Apart from writing Kamala Das had a keen eye for painting and an aptitude for the theatre. She started composing poems about dolls when she was barely six, followed by the short story, “Kushtarogi” (The Leper) when she was just twelve, “Avalude Katha” (Her Story), and “Stree” (Woman) in 1947. In 1953, she adopted the pseudonym, Madhavi Kutty and it was at the same time that she started writing her poems.

Kamala Das, as a young writer found “a kindred spirit” in the American poet, Walt Whitman, the poet who promoted free verse. She was the first woman writer in India to write in English with forthrightness and openness about feminine sexuality. In her poem “An Introduction” she writes,

... I speak three languages, write in  
Two, dream in one. Don't write in English, they said,  
English is not your mother-tongue.  
[ . . . ]  
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 . . .

She ousted the iambic line and spun poetry in her own unconventional form. She was not trained in literary theory or in the principles of poetry, but she considered the creative act as a natural mode of self-expression laying emphasis on imagination and intuition than on poetics and theory. Yet she had an inherent theory of her own, a theory that guided her themes about language, love and gender. She is primarily “a poet of love and pain”. She rarely moves out of her private space of pain and love. Her poems exhibit a profound confessional strain and her main preoccupation is with the themes of love and disillusionment, loneliness and despair, and sexuality and sickness.

The two poems selected for study express a strong sense of sorrow springing out of the nostalgic longing for the warmth and solace of her lost home and the innocence of childhood.

She chose English rather than Malayalam to write her poems. In her poetry Kamala Das subverted the traditional male paradigm claiming her place as a woman poet by refusing to conform to socially defined roles. Kamala Das, spontaneously, wrote as a woman and about being a woman. She uninhibitedly explores the themes of love and sex, of death and of the need for empathy in her poems. To quote M.K. Naik, “the total impression Kamala Das’s poetry produces is one of a bold, ruthless honesty tearing passionately at conventional attitudes to reveal the quintessential woman within.” She was an iconoclast who started the trend towards openness and forthrightness in the treatment of subjects which were taboo and unimaginable for women poets

to explore. Her poems are about love, lonesomeness and quest for fulfilment in love. Anisur Rehman in his paper on Kamala Das writes, “This bold act of frank and free expression was quite clearly liable to be mistaken for the flaunting of her lust. Far from being the poetry of lust or erotica, Das’ poetry glosses upon the pangs of love rather than the raptures of flesh. (189)

Thus by destabilizing “the stereotypical and initiating a new discourse on freedom, sexuality, and female identity” Kamala Das presents a characteristic resistance in her poetry. She is often compared to Sylvia Plath in her quest for identity.

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## 3.2 Critical Insights

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### 1. K. Satchidanandan

K. Satchidanandan. “Redefining the Genre: Kamala Das (1934-2009)”. *Indian Literature*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (251) (May/June 2009), pp. 49-55 Published by: Sahitya Akademi.

Kamala Das’s very first collection of poems, *Summer in Calcutta*, broke new ground in Indian poetry in English dominated until her entry by men from Nissim Ezekiel and Dom Moraes to Adil Jussawallah and A. K. Ramanujan who had already de romanticized poetry and liberated it from its earlier flamboyance and verbosity. Here was a voice that was feminine to the core, often confessional in vein, that spoke uninhibitedly about woman’s desire and her unending search for true love. She had little respect for tradition and yet many traditions went into the making of her poetry: the rebellious spirituality of the women Bhakti poets, the sonorous sensuousness of the Tamil Sangam poets, the empathy with the down-trodden and the hatred of violence central to the great poetry of her mother, Balamani Amma, the melancholy tempered by a larger vision of life characteristic of the poetry of her uncle Nalappatt Narayana Menon. “An Introduction”, her most discussed and paradigmatic poem with its defense of her trilingualism, her opposition to male power, her rejection of the traditional roles of the house-wife and the cook, and her longing for love was a clear announcement of her arrival on the scene.

### 2. Anisur Rahman.

Anisur Rahman. “Contextualizing Kamala Das”. Smitha Agarwal. Ed. *Marginalized: Indian Poetry in English*. Rodopi: Amsterdam, 2014.

In spite of being deeply rooted in a sacrosanct socio-cultural background and heritage, she chose to express herself boldly and uninhibitedly at a point of time when no one else had thought of doing so. This bold act of frank and free expression was quite clearly liable to be mistaken for the flaunting of her lust. Far from being the poetry of lust or erotica, Das’ poetry glosses upon the pangs of love rather than the raptures of flesh. After reading the tame verse of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu, approaching a poet like Das could not have been an easily acceptable experience for most readers. Das was the first Indian woman poet writing in English to have found her material and medium to express herself in these terms. Hers was an iconoclast’s approach and this could not have been appreciated easily even by serious readers or academic critics brought up on Victorian and colonial parameters of assessing the female role or texts produced by women writers. Misrepresentations

of Das as a poet started because her readers had yet to be initiated into a new worldview and were not still ready to appreciate the new poetics of resistance and representation. Das had offered a unique resistance by altering the stereotypical and initiating a new discourse on freedom, sexuality, and female identity. She did not allow herself to be appropriated as merely

a preserve in the male domain: she wished to be taken as a participant in the act of sharing the pleasures of a life. (189 – 190)

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### 3.3 Text of the poem “My Grandmother’s House”

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#### MY GRANDMOTHER’S HOUSE

Kamala Das

There is a house now far away where once  
I received love..... That woman died,  
The house withdrew into silence, snakes moved  
Among books, I was then too young  
To read, and my blood turned cold like the moon  
How often I think of going  
There, to peer through blind eyes of windows or  
Just listen to the frozen air,  
Or in wild despair, pick an armful of  
Darkness to bring it here to lie  
Behind my bedroom door like a brooding  
Dog... you cannot believe, darling,  
Can you, that I lived in such a house and  
Was proud, and loved.... I who have lost  
My way and beg now at strangers’ doors to  
Receive love, at least in small change?

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#### 3.3.1 Critical Analysis of the poem, “My Grandmother’s House”

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“My Grandmother’s House” is Kamala Das’s brilliant homage to her grandmother with whom she had a strong emotional bond. It is also a tribute to the lost matriarchal traditions, as well as to the tradition of strong family relationships. Her warm reminiscences of the ancestral family house in Malabar and the cherished childhood experiences connected to it form the central theme of many of her poems.

The poet wistfully goes back in time to her childhood days, to the solace of her grandmother’s house. In a nostalgic mood she recollects her life in her family home in Malabar where she was in the protective care of her grandmother. Those were the happiest days of her life, nurtured by the love of her grandmother. The poet associates the old family house with the presence of her warm and generous grandmother whose munificent ways often brought people visiting. When the grandmother died she left behind an unfathomable emptiness in Kamala Das’s life. The house too “withdrew into silence” as though it had lost its voice with the loss of the grandmother. The house deserted now, appeared to share her loss and grief. This is a highly suggestive image. Being too young to read she felt the books were repulsive and vile like the snakes. Her blood became “cold

like the moon” as there was no one who loved her with the same warmth and candour as her grandmother did. The poet now lives in a distant place, away from the beloved house which so passionately nurtured her and her emotions. The longing to return to the house and to look through the “blind eyes of windows” haunts her. The image of the window is suggestive here as it is a conduit to her past – to her desires and dreams for the future. It is also suggestive of her desire to go back to the comfort of her childhood days which now is impossible. She longs to sit by the window and listen to the frozen air. The image of the frozen air suggests desolation and desperation as there is no movement towards a life-affirming future. He thinks of going back to the house where she can only “pick an armful of/ Darkness to bring it here to lie /Behind my bedroom door like a brooding /Dog...”. She can retrieve only the darker side of her life which is devoid of any hope. The armful of darkness is suggestive of burden of the sad and painful memories she harbours in her heart and which would accompany her like a “brooding dog” through her life. The house which had once given a sense of direction to her life is now desolate and frozen in time. Her own life has lost its way and hungry for empathy and warmth she begs at strangers doors for love – if not in profusion like her grandmother’s love, at least “in small change” . Nobody gives her the life-affirming love which she desperately yearns for.

The poem also reflects ironically the contrast between the poet’s childhood and her adult life. Her loveless present makes even the darkness of the house a solace and a comfort. The poet even feels that she would gladly gather up a handful of darkness from her grandmother’s house and take it back with her for she believes that the memories of the Old House and its soothing darkness would perhaps ironically give her the assurance and succour to face the harsh reality of her adult life.

The grandmother’s house becomes a metaphor for the guileless world of innocence and purity and unconditional love . It is a world away from the world of deceit and deviousness of exploitation and corruption. It symbolizes an abode of love which is distant from the world of harsh and unforgiving reality. The image of the window is highly suggestive and metaphorical. It suggests a connection with her past and also symbolizes her fervent desire to go back to the world of her dreams, a perfect retreat where she always found the warmth of genuine love and security.

The Grandmother’s House is a symbol of nourishing love and a symbolic retreat from the harsh realities of life. The poet also juxtaposes the world of innocence and purity with the world of abuse and exploitation. The house as a sanctuary of love is strikingly ‘absent’ in her adult world. “A Hot Noon in Malabar” and “Evening at the Old Nalapat House” and “Blood” are the other poems in which she writes about her grandmother’s house. The poems reveal that familial memories have a soothing and curative effect on the uneasy and troubled mind of Kamala Das and it helps restore her peace and tranquillity. Like Kamala Das, yet another poet who employs this theme is A.K. Ramanujan, the next poet whom we are going to study later.

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### 3.4 Text of the poem “Punishment in Kindergarten”

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#### PUNISHMENT IN KINDERGARTEN

Kamala Das

Today the world is a little more my own.  
No need to remember the pain  
A blue-frocked woman caused, throwing  
Words at me like pots and pans, to drain  
That honey-coloured day of peace,  
“Why don’t you join the others, what  
A peculiar child you are!”

On the lawn, in clusters, sat my schoolmates sipping  
Sugarcane, they turned and laughed;  
Children are funny things, they laugh  
In mirth at other’s tears, I buried  
My face in the sun-warmed hedge  
And smelt the flowers and the pain.

The words are muffled now, the laughing  
Faces only a blur. The years have  
Sped along, stopping briefly  
At beloved halts and moving

Sadly on. My mind has found  
An adult peace. No need to remember  
That picnic day when I lay hidden  
By a hedge, watching the steel-white sun  
Standing lonely in the sky.

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#### 3.4.1 Critical Analysis of the poem “Punishment in Kindergarten”

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“Punishment in Kindergarten” is an autobiographical poem in which the writer recollects a painful experience from her childhood. A child’s experiences are often trivialized and taken lightly by the adults. The truth is that we carry the burden of a painful experience of our early days through our lives. It never ceases to hurt us occasionally, though we relegate it to the past. It is one such experience that the poet shares with her readers here.

Kamala Das recalls the day when the children from the kindergarten were taken on a picnic. She herself was one among the children. The children had a good time, had lots of fun sipping sugarcane juice, playing and chatting among themselves. Kamala Das, being a shy and reserved child stayed away from the

others and kept to herself reluctant to mingle with her classmates. The teacher, a blue-frocked woman, noticing her keeping away from the others shouted at her rudely asking her to join the others, with a caustic comment that she is “a peculiar child”.

“Why don’t you join the others, what  
A peculiar child you are!”

Her schoolmates who sat in groups on the lawn sipping sugarcane and having fun only turned and laughed her. Kamala Das comments that children are “funny things” and they laugh joyously at others pain and misery. This is perhaps because they are too young to understand the pain and anxiety of others. The poet explains how the day was one of both pleasure and pain for her:

... I buried  
My face in the sun-warmed hedge  
And smelt the flowers and the pain.

And the pain she experienced that day in a seemingly insignificant incident is profound. It is deeply etched in her memory and she is in truth unable to forget this pain. The poem begins with the lines,

Today the world is a little more my own.  
No need to remember the pain...

Yet, the pain is imprinted so profoundly in her memory that she is compelled to remember the hurt. The question is whether we can ever assert that the world is our own at any time.

The poet goes on to say that years have rolled by since then and the hurtful words are subdued now and the laughing faces of her classmates only a blur. As time went by stopping briefly when she experienced joyous or sad moments and speeding along otherwise, this incident from her childhood remained with her. She says the words are “muffled” and no longer hurt her. Yet the truth is that the incident was, in reality, never forgotten altogether, though the poet strongly professes that there is no need for her to remember the pain as she has finally found an adult peace.

My mind has found  
An adult peace. No need to remember  
That picnic day when I lay hidden  
By a hedge, watching the steel-white sun  
Standing lonely in the sky.

Ironically, by repeatedly telling herself that there is no need to remember the pain, the poet in fact only proves that the incident is not erased from her memory. Conversely, it remained with her and the pain has only grown with her as she remembers every detail of the day of picnic and the incident that deeply hurt her: the “blue-frocked woman”, “the honey coloured day”, children sipping sugar cane, “the sun-warmed hedge’, and “the steel white sun”. There is “no need to remember/That picnic day”, yet the incident is remembered to the minutest detail. Time does not always heal all wounds, the scars remain.

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### 3.5 Self-check exercise

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1. Comment on the element of nostalgia in the poem, “My Grandmother’s House”.
2. Describe the incident in the poem, “Punishment in Kindergarten”.
3. Comment on the metaphor of the house in “My Grandmother’s House”.

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### 3.6 Summing up

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Kamala Das, a significant contemporary Indian poet, was an iconoclast who started the trend towards openness and forthrightness in the treatment of subjects which were taboo and unimaginable for women poets to explore. Her poems are about love, lonesomeness and quest for fulfilment in love.

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### 3.7 Questions for Self-study

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1. The poem, “My Grandmother’s House” is symbolic of the poet’s eternal quest for love in a world of harsh reality. Comment.
2. Examine Kamala Das’s reminiscences of childhood as brought out in the poems, “My Grandmother’s House” and “Punishment in Kindergarten”.
3. Critically evaluate Kamala Das’s poetry.

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### 3.8 References

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**M.A. English**  
**Second Semester**  
**HC 2.4: Modern Indian Poetry in English**  
**BLOCK – I**  
**UNIT – 4**

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**A. K. RAMANUJAN: “A River” & “Ecology”**

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**Structure**

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
  - 4.1.1 Introduction to A.K. Ramanujan
  - 4.1.2 A.K. Ramanujan’s Poetry
- 4.2 Critical Insights
- 4.3 Text of the poem “A River”
  - 4.3.1 Critical analysis of the poem “A River”
- 4.4 Text of the poem “Ecology”
  - 4.4.1 Critical analysis of the poem “Ecology”
- 4.5 Self-check exercise
- 4.6 Summing up
- 4.7 Questions for Self-study
- 4.8 Additional Reading
- 4.9 References



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## 4.0 Objectives

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On going through this unit you should be able to

- Comprehend the life and poetry of A.K. Ramanujan
- critically evaluate the poems, “A River” and “Ecology”
- understand the imagery, style and technique in the poems, “A River” and “Ecology”

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## 4.1 Introduction

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The unit introduces you to A.K. Ramanujan, one of the pioneers of modern Indian English poetry and a towering literary figure. Ramanujan’s poetry is mostly autobiographical and evocative employing irony, humour and paradox. The unit also comprises a critical appreciation of his poems, “A River” and “Ecology”.

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### 4.1.1 Introduction to A.K. Ramanujan

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A. K. Ramanujan (Attipat Krishnaswamy Ramanujan) (1929 – 1993), a towering literary figure in more than one academic discipline, was a poet, translator, critic, linguist and an essayist. He was born into an orthodox Tamil-speaking Brahmin family in the princely state of Mysore. He had his formal education at the then illustrious Maharaja’s College, Mysore, and later went to the United States of America as a graduate student of Linguistics on Fulbright scholarship at Indiana University. Ramanujan’s doctoral dissertation on Kannada grammar got him a position of repute in the University of Chicago where he worked for 30 long years as a Professor of Dravidian Studies and Linguistics. When he died an untimely death in 1993 when he was barely sixty four, the flag in the quadrangle of University of Chicago flew half-mast.

Ramanujan is known for his translations of Tamil and Telugu texts into English. He lived his early life through the tumultuous period of freedom struggle and also of the formation of linguistic states, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. Hence his preoccupation with language and its effects form the dominant concern of his career and writings.

He took up a lifelong project of translation along with the documentation and translation of the oral folklore of Karnataka. His projects got him the MacArthur Prize Fellowship in 1983. He also earned the prestigious Padma Shri in 1976.

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### 4.1.2 A.K. Ramanujan’s Poetry

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One of the pioneers of modern Indian English poetry, his most significant works include six collections of poetry: *The Striders* (1966), *Relations* (1971), *Second Sight* (1986) in English and *Hokkulalli Hoovilla* (1969), *Mattu Itara Padyagalu* (1977), and *Kuntobille* (1990) in Kannada. Yet another collection, *The Black Hen*, was published posthumously. In addition, his many scholarly essays on Indian literature, culture, and folklore earned him great academic repute. He also translated many Kannada and Tamil works to English. Critic Nakul Krishna, in his essay, “My First, and Only, Sight: A. K. Ramanujan and the Five Senses” writes, [I]t is possible to place Ramanujan in several literary and intellectual lineages to equally illuminating effect. He appears, with Nissim Ezekiel and Dom Moraes, as one of the founding figures in the twentieth-century tradition of (“modernist”) Indian poetry in English. He appears also ... as a pioneering formal

experimenter in the tradition of twentieth-century Kannada poetry. He might, just as plausibly, be seen in terms of his formation against the backdrop of a modernist revolution in the twentieth century literatures of the two Indian languages he knew best, Tamil and Kannada ... In intellectual terms, he might be seen as a product of what might be called, on the model of the Bengali prototype, the Mysore Renaissance.

A.K. Ramanujan will be remembered most for his scholarship in his translations. He is regarded as the only Indian poet in English who has contributed so significantly to the area of translations from the ancient classics. His translated works include, *Speaking of Siva* (1973), *Hymns for the Drowning* (1981) and *Poems of Love and War* (1985) from ancient Tamil and Kannada, and also the translation of U.R. Anantha Murthy 's novel *Samskara* from Kannada to English. Further, very significantly some critics go on to say that he can even be regarded a part of the international tradition of poetic modernism in the lineage of poets like W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens and others. His scholarly trajectory as a poet, scholar, translator and critic lead to a variety of remarkable contributions.

When it comes to his exhaustive knowledge of varied subjects, few are a match to him. Though he was primarily a man of literature, his knowledge of philosophy, psychology, sociology and the cross cultural heritage of India is astounding. What is remarkable about his writing is that while referring to the multiple aspects of Indian history in terms of society, religion or culture, he is always aware of the contemporary realities. There are the mystic aspects of Hinduism in his poetry, and at the same time there are the contentious aspects related to subjects like Freudian psychology. Ramanujan himself admits that while “English and other scientific disciplines contributed in the formation of the body of his poetry, the soul has been formed from his early life in India and the knowledge about its customs, traditions, literature, culture, philosophy, religion and mythology.” (Subrat Kumar Samal) Ramanujan himself remarks,

English and my disciplines (linguistics, anthropology) give me my “outer” forms – linguistic, metrical, logical and other such ways of shaping experience; and my first thirty years in India, my frequent visits and field trips, my personal and professional preoccupations with Kannada, Tamil, the classics and folklore give me my substance, my “inner” forms, images and symbols. They are continuous with each other, and I no longer can tell what comes from where. (quoted in R. Parthasarathy)

Though he was all along in the United States, he was unquestionably a constant presence in India. It is because of his strong sense of belonging, constant and intense involvement with Indian culture and literature, his commitment to the translation of classical Tamil and Kannada poetry that Ramanujan is significant in the Indian literary scene. In Ramanujan 's own words, “In India today we do share, entirely unawares, a great stock of symbolism and mythology.” He was constantly engaged with Indian literature, both oral and written forms and thus the classical Tamil and Kannada Bhakti poets had a profound influence on his poetry. Ramanujan himself acknowledges the decisive influence of the Tamil poets and Kannada Bhakti poets on his writings. In this context critic Surjit S Dulai writes:

While it is certainly true that Ramanujan 's harking back to Indian experience has always played a fundamental role in the shaping of his poetic sensibility and the content of his poetry, as a whole his poetry embraces realities extending far beyond the boundaries of his native land. His poetry is born out of the dialectical interplay between his Indian and American experience on the one hand, and that

between his sense of his self and all experience on the other. Its substance is both Indian and Western.  
(quoted in Niranjana Mohanty)

Niranjana Mohanty in his analysis of Ramanujan's poetry underscores that staying away from India helped Ramanujan to have a discerning awareness of his native culture and to develop a certain sense of objectivity: "His achievement is because of the interaction, absorption and synthesis of two cultures i.e. the East and the West, and integration of two forms or substances, i.e. the inner and the outer".

Ramanujan's poetry is mostly autobiographical and evocative employing irony, humour and paradox. The oft employed theme in Ramanujan's poetry is family and its relationships viewed from different perspectives. Nostalgia, pathos, irony, humour and a deep sense of empathy are often reflected in his poems. Ramanujan mostly writes in free verse, often colloquial language, frequently making use of rhyme – in particular internal rhyme and assonance for building up his effects. At times he uses the short line, with as few as two syllables sometimes.

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## 4.2 Critical Insights

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### 1. U.R. Anantha Murthy

U.R. Anantha Murthy. "A.K. Ramanujan: A Connoisseur of the Arts of Life". *Indian Literature*.

No. 1 62: July August 1994. Vol. XXXVII, No.4. Published by the Sahitya Akademi.

It was the great Ananda Coomaraswamy who initiated creative studies of Indian culture. He held up the greatness of Indianness at a time when Europe, having grown fat on colonialism, considered Indian thought and Indian art to be primitive. But, Ananda Coomaraswamy's India was essentially the Sanskrit India. It was Ramanujan who opened the West's eyes to the other indigenous India and thus complemented Ananda Coomaraswamy's work.

What gave his achievement a certain edge was his creativity and the language he employed. Ramanujan who had mastered abstract concepts had the ability to communicate his thinking in the condensed form of an allegory, a story or a humorous episode. It is rare to find people like him who can talk about literature and culture in such a lively and perceptive manner without glossing over their finer points. Ramanujan was there among weighty scholars teaching oriental cultures abroad, explicating everything in an easy and breezy way, as if he was talking about things which were his own and in everyday use in his house. It was thus he made India relevant abroad. His translations of our Sharanas' Vachanas (in Speaking of Shiva) turned out to be among the great poems of English and influenced many an English poet. Ramanujan's achievement is no less than that of Ezra Pound who brought China into Europe.

### 2. Bruce King

Bruce King. *Modern Indian Poetry in English*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Ramanujan's poems [have] a highly accomplished, understated preciseness and economy of statement, symbol and narrative. Without an obvious finality of structure they seem perfectly formed and [show] a range of technique beyond that of any previous Indian English poetry. It was a technique Ramanujan had learned from his study of older Kannada and Tamil verse and modern Kannada poets who blended Indian and European models into new forms. He showed that Indian poets could both be modern and work from within their own literary traditions. The precision of language and image and the conciseness of each line with their unpredictable

changes in direction, were matched by a somewhat flat unreverberant, sometimes off-hand, sometimes irritated voice that suggested a complicated personality which implied more than was said. Ezekiel and Parthasarathy praised Ramanujan as the best of the Indian poets. As important as his technique, is his use of his southern Indian Brahmin roots as a source, contrasting his life in America (where he had taken up residence first as a research student, then as a teacher at the University of Chicago) with his Tamil upbringing to create images of contemporary alienation set in specific situations. The divided heritage, Indian and western, of Indian poets had not before been handled so subtly and without self-consciousness. (21-22)

### **Bruce King**

#### *Three Indian Poets*

[https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.172492/2015.172492.Three-Indian-Poets\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.172492/2015.172492.Three-Indian-Poets_djvu.txt)

His poetry blends the techniques and conventions of European, Indian, American and British literatures, with those of Kannada, Tamil and Sanskrit. A scholar and translator of Tamil and Kannada, he has been influenced by their conventions and the problems of translating Indian classical and medieval verse into modern English. The conciseness of his images and the way his tone sometimes seems distant and un-revealing may be as much influenced by the conventions of classical Tamil as by modern imagism. In such poetry images are symbols of an inner landscape. Often there are Indian influences or parallels to what seem modernist characteristics of his poetry. The poetry develops out of Ramanujan's own emotions and experience but is well polished by many revisions and is intellectual in its range of ideas and use of philosophical concepts. It is personal yet seems distant as if he were watching himself perform, or masking his feelings in irony; Ramanujan appears to have powerful emotions and tensions which are expressed in a controlled way through his art. He has a liking for impersonalizing the personal, for revitalizing conventions by treating them a bit off-centre. Many poems, for example, are near sonnets; he likes near rhymes; he plays with common-place expressions, finding ways to revitalize them as metaphors and images. (61)

### **3. Aravind Krishna Mahrotra**

Aravind Krishna Mehrotra. (Ed) *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets*.

Oxford University Press: 1992.

Like tricky Chinese boxes, A. K. Ramanujan's poems are difficult to open but of exquisite workmanship; they're objects to hold between fingers as much as they are printed lines to read with the eyes. You sense this from even the way they appear on the page, the left-hand margin carefully jagged, and the overall design often original to the poem. In this he resembles that other inventor of stanzas, George Herbert, who, it is worth remembering especially here, wrote 'My thoughts are all a case of knives'.

'It is interesting to speculate', W. H. Auden says in a footnote to his essay on Tennyson, 'on the relation between the strictness and musicality of a poet's form and his own anxiety. It may well be, I think, that the more he is conscious of an inner disorder and dread, the more value he will place on tidiness in the work as a *defense* ... 'Each time we read Ramanujan – whose work has the tidiness of a prize-winning garden and who concludes 'Anxiety' by saying 'anxiety / can find no metaphor to end it' -we speculate on that relation afresh. Something must give way if the poem is to come through; equally, someone has to make the imaginative leap into it.

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### 4.3 Text of the poem “A River”

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#### A RIVER

A.K. Ramanujan

In Madurai,  
city of temples and poets,  
who sang of cities and temples,  
every summer  
a river dries to a trickle  
in the sand,  
baring the sand ribs,  
straw and women’s hair  
clogging the watergates  
at the rusty bars  
under the bridges with patches  
of repair all over them  
the wet stones glistening like sleepy  
crocodiles, the dry ones  
shaven water-buffaloes lounging in the sun  
The poets only sang of the floods.

He was there for a day  
when they had the floods.  
People everywhere talked  
of the inches rising,  
of the precise number of cobbled steps  
run over by the water, rising  
on the bathing places,  
and the way it carried off three village houses,  
one pregnant woman  
and a couple of cows  
named Gopi and Brinda as usual.

The new poets still quoted  
the old poets, but no one spoke  
in verse  
of the pregnant woman  
drowned, with perhaps twins in her,  
kicking at blank walls

even before birth.

He said:

the river has water enough  
to be poetic  
about only once a year  
and then  
it carries away  
in the first half-hour  
three village houses,  
a couple of cows  
named Gopi and Brinda  
and one pregnant woman  
expecting identical twins  
with no moles on their bodies,  
with different coloured diapers  
to tell them apart.

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#### 4.3.1 Critical analysis of the poem “A River”

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“A River” appeared in Ramanujan’s poetry collection , *The Striders* in 1966. The poem is evocative of River Vaigai which flows through the heart of Madurai, the “city of poets and temples” and the seat of Tamil culture for more than two thousand years. The city of Madurai is of great spiritual significance and also a locus of creativity. Yet the magnificence and beauty of this place is soon subverted by bringing in the negative aspects of the river, its flaws and shortcomings coming to light every summer. The power, vigour and vitality of the river is juxtaposed with its state in summer when it “dries to a trickle”. Simultaneously, the river which is inextricably intertwined with the history and culture of Madurai becomes “a point of departure” for ironically juxtaposing the attitude of the old and new Tamil poets. As R Parthasarathy observes, the poem renders in an ironic tone the apathy of new poets towards the depressing reality of the river that they constantly romanticize.

[T]he river becomes a point of departure for ironically contrasting the relative attitudes of the old and new Tamil poets, both of whom are exposed for their callousness to suffering, when it is obvious, as a result of the floods. (95)

The callousness and indifference of these poets to individual suffering is exposed through the trope of the river in floods. Unlike his poetic ancestors, Ramanujan chooses not to follow the tradition of describing the river when it is in spate. Instead of eulogizing the flooded river, Ramanujan in an unconventional manner graphically describes the tragic loss the people experience when the river is in floods. The poem is a denunciation of the uncritical acceptance of the tradition of describing the river and the stark indifference with which the human dimension of it is ignored.

The new poets still quoted  
the old poets, but no one spoke

in verse  
of the pregnant woman  
drowned, with perhaps twins in her,  
kicking at blank walls  
even before birth.

The river is closely linked with the life and traditions of the Tamil people. The river manifests itself in two different forms in two different seasons. It is totally dry in summer and is in flooded fury in the rainy season. As the poem opens with a series of stark and bleak images, the poet foregrounds the picture of the river and its complexities stating that poets both new and old gloss over and disregard it. The poet here is not just depicting the grim reality and the harsh images of the river bare to its sand bars during summer, but also brings out the inherent beauty of the river.

The first stanza is about the starkness of the river when it is turns as dry as a bone in the harsh summer heat exposing its grotesque ugliness. Even as the river is reduced to a mere trickle in the dry sand, revealing

... the sand ribs,  
straw and women's hair  
clogging the watergates  
at the rusty bars  
under the bridges . . .

The dry river uncovers the “sand ribs”, the watergates of the dam whose rusty bars are choked by straw and women's hair, and the patched repair work carried out under the bridge. Then there are the exposed wet stones which appear like sleepy crocodiles and the dry ones which are like shaven water-buffaloes. Far from romanticizing the river and conjuring up its beauty, the poet uses images of “sleepy crocodiles” and “shaven water-buffaloes” lazing in the sun. The poets, both old as well as new sang only of the beauty of the flooded river.

In the second stanza, the poet speaks of the river in spate due to the unrelenting rains and the “inches rising” (rainfall is measured in inches), the rising river flooding the cobbled steps of the bathing ghats. The river in spate becomes the talk of the town. The flooded river continues its journey with its enormous destructive power causing havoc in its path. It carries away,

... three village houses,  
one pregnant woman  
and a couple of cows  
named Gopi and Brinda as usual.

The poetic response of the poets is only awakened, ironically, when the river is in spate. The enormous human suffering and tragedy caused by the flooded river is overlooked and ignored.

Three village houses are washed away by the swelling waters of the river “in the first half-hour”, a pregnant woman and two cows Gopi and Brinda are drowned. Ironically, the pregnant woman is not named

while the cows are given names from Hindu mythology. The poet imagines that the drowned woman must have had twins in her womb. By using the words, “as usual”, the poet talks about the floods as a yearly phenomenon.

The new poets and the old poets alike considered the river fit to be versified and eulogized only once a year when it is in spate. They sang praises to the river extolling it as a life force, unmindful of the human dimension of the havoc caused by the floods. They are blind to the complex ramifications of the flooded river on the socio-economic fabric of human life. The writer resorts to sarcasm when he says,

the river has water enough  
to be poetic  
about only once a year

Ramanujan’s poems are pen portrayals with profound and insightful observations on people and situations. “A River” is one such poem. He has a keen and watchful eye for the minutest details of his chosen subject, which he then portrays with intricate detail. This is clearly seen in the way he visualizes the unborn children of the drowned pregnant woman who would have ‘no moles on their bodies,/ with different-coloured diapers/ to tell them apart’.

As Bruce King puts it Ramanujan’s poem stands in contrast to “poetic myth-making.” The poem expresses a ‘realistic debunking of the romanticization of traditional Tamil culture’ (Bruce King 210). Thus Ramanujan de-romanticizes River Vaigai with its historical and cultural associations to the ancient city of Madurai. Further, in a way the image of River Vaigai during summer is also representative of the depravity and the decadence of the modern world. It is also representative of the disintegration of the contemporary Indian culture and values. The ironic tone pervades the entire poem.

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#### 4.4 Text of the poem “Ecology”

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### ECOLOGY

#### A.K. Ramanujan

The day after the first rain,  
for years, I would home  
in a rage,  
for I could see from a mile away  
our three Red Champak Trees  
had done it again,

had burst into flower and given  
Mother her first blinding  
migraine of the season



with their street-long heavy-hung  
yellow pollen fog of a fragrance  
no wind could sift

no door could shut out from our black –  
pillared house whose walls had ears  
and eyes,

scales, smells, bone-creaks, nightly  
visiting voices, and were porous  
like us,

but Mother, flashing her temper  
like her mother's twisted silver,  
grandchildren's knickers

wet as the cold pack on her head,  
would not let us cut down  
a flowering tree  
almost as old as her, seeded,  
she said, by a passing bird's  
providential droppings

to give her gods and her daughters  
and daughters' daughters basketsful  
of annual flower

and for one line of cousins  
a dower of migraines in season

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#### **4.4.1 Critical analysis of the poem "Ecology"**

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The poem, 'Ecology' first appeared in Ramanujan's third volume of poems titled, *Second Sight*, published in 1986. The speaker who is either the poet himself or an unknown poetic persona is worried about his mother and her yearly migraine attacks when the red champak trees are in bloom. And every year foreseeing the migraine attack his mother would suffer with the Red Champak trees bursting into blossom with the first rains, he would go home to keep an eye on his mother. As he would reach home he would be in a frenzy of anger to see the Red champak trees in blossom from a distance. The yellow pollen from the blossom would be

“street-long” and “heavy-hung”, and wafting in the air along with the pollen would be the thick and intensely strong fragrance of the Red Champak flowers. This heavy fragrance and pollen would trigger off mother’s “first blinding migraine of the season”. It is the overpowering fragrance of the champak flowers and the foggy pollen that pervades the entire place which causes the migraine and cannot be kept away. The doors of the pillared house and its thick walls cannot filter the fragrance and the foggy pollen dust that hangs heavy all around the big house. The age-old big house is an imposing and daunting presence with its porous walls that had “ears and eyes/ scales, smells, bone-creaks, nightly/visiting voices”. The poet compares the house to “us” – he humanizes the house that has experienced and absorbed the enigma of human relationships within the family. When it comes to the question of cutting down the champak trees, the mother would angrily refuse to let the trees be cut down. Her temper is like “her mother’s twisted silver” and her “grandchildren’s knickers” that are wet like the cold pack on her forehead used to alleviate her pain. Vehemently, she would forbid cutting down the flowering tree. After all, the trees were an endless source of fragrant flowers to her gods and her daughters and her daughters’ daughters.

The poem centers around the Red Champak trees which bloom profusely every year after the long dry spell. The Red champak flowers with their bewitching fragrance are of great significance in South Indian Hindu families. There is an inextricable bond between these fragrant flowers and the women in the families. It is not just the fragrance of the flowers which binds the trees to the house, it is the very presence of the tree which has been a witness to generations of human relationships within the family. Thus the poet captures the indelible bond the champak trees share with the family. The migraine becomes inconsequential in the scheme of things for the mother.

Ecology is the study of the relationships between living organisms. It can also be the study of the relationship between humans and their environment. It is also about human emotions and their emotional bonding with their environment, here it is the emotional connect the women of the family have with the red champak tree. Hence the title “Ecology” is justified. There are many poems by A.K.Ramanujan that refer to the mother either directly or indirectly. Women and their needs and anxieties as they lead insignificant lives within the family are often considered inconsequential. This becomes an important aspect in Ramanujan’s poetry. Many of his poems give voice to the silent or unvoiced desires of women and gives them a distinctive place in the family. As the poet Parthasarathy rightly remarks, “The family, for Ramanujan, is one of the central metaphors with which he thinks.” Thus the poem “Ecology” foregrounds how relationships within the family become an important locus in Ramanujan’s poems.

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#### **4.5 Self-check Exercise**

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1. Comment on Ramanujan’s description of the river in his poem.
2. Discuss the poem “Ecology” as Ramanujan’s comment on the relationship between humans and their environment.

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#### **4.6 Summing up**

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Ramanujan's poetry is mostly autobiographical and evocative employing irony, humour and paradox. The oft employed theme in Ramanujan's poetry is family and its relationships viewed from different perspectives. Nostalgia, pathos, irony, humour and a deep sense of empathy are often reflected in his poems. Ramanujan mostly writes in free verse and colloquial language as seen in his poems "A River" and "Ecology".

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#### **4.7 Questions for Self-study**

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1. Comment on the family as an important metaphor in Ramanujan's poems.
2. Discuss the major themes in A. K. Ramanujan's poetry as they are reflected in the poems prescribed for study.
3. Critically comment on the relationships within the family as reflected in "Ecology".

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#### **4.8 Additional Reading**

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### **FELLING OF THE BANYAN TREE**

**Dilip Chitre**

My father told the tenants to leave

Who lived on the houses surrounding our house on the hill

One by one the structures were demolished

Only our own house remained and the trees

Trees are sacred my grandmother used to say

Felling them is a crime but he massacred them all

The sheoga, the oudumber, the neem were all cut down

But the huge banyan tree stood like a problem

Whose roots lay deeper than all our lives

My father ordered it to be removed

The banyan tree was three times as tall as our house

Its trunk had a circumference of fifty feet

Its scraggy aerial roots fell to the ground

From thirty feet or more so first they cut the branches  
Sawing them off for seven days and the heap was huge  
Insects and birds began to leave the tree  
And then they came to its massive trunk  
Fifty men with axes chopped and chopped  
The great tree revealed its rings of two hundred years  
We watched in terror and fascination this slaughter  
As a raw mythology revealed to us its age  
Soon afterwards we left Baroda for Bombay  
Where there are no trees except the one  
Which grows and seethes in one's dreams, its aerial roots  
Looking for the ground to strike.

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