

# Colonial Cousins in Poetry

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This paper takes a brief look at Hindi poetry in India during the period of British rule, and South African poetry written by black poets in English during South Africa's period of apartheid.



Literature as an art form holds most relevance to society if it is a critical reflection on the society it writes about. The poetry of South Africa and India during their respective periods of colonial rule reveals two separate societies that gradually but steadfastly spoke out against oppression. Although these two corpuses of poetry were written on two different continents, they reveal extremely interesting similarities in terms of themes, literary movements and political idealism, and imagery and myth.

A comparison of the history of the said countries is important within the context of the discussions that follow.

Whilst India gained her independence in 1947, the period of apartheid in South Africa spanned from 1948 to 1994. Of significance is that both the countries experienced a shift in their colonial hegemonic history. India had been colonised by the Muslims prior to being colonised by the British. The South African experience is similar in that there was a shift from British colonial rule to the hegemonic status of the Afrikaners – a group comprising of Dutch and other European settlers and immigrants. In both cases the indigenous people were subject to foreign rule. Thus, whilst colonialism in the Indian context relates specifically to British rule in India, apartheid in South Africa relates to an extension of foreign hegemony. After the retreat of the British in South Africa, the country was governed by the Afrikaner National Party that was committed to preserving Afrikaner interests.

The policies of the ruling powers in the two countries tried to maintain supremacy through economic exploitation, rendering the indigenous popula-

tions victims of cultural and especially economic suppression. However, the major significance in this political paradigm is that the British were not permanent residents in India. They ruled from Britain, their focus being economic exploitation and the colonial subjection of India. Jawaharlal Nehru comments on its effects on India. He says:

Despite British policy, powerful forces were at work changing India, and a new social consciousness was arising. The political unity of India, contact with the west, technological advances, and even the misfortune of a common subjection, led to new currents of thought, the slow development of industry, and the rise of a movement for national freedom. The awakening of India was two-fold: she looked to the west and at the same time, she looked to herself and her own past (Nehru 1982:292).

The liberation struggle comprised of multiple movements which adopted different ideologies. It attempted to thwart British hegemony in India. Lokmanya Tilak's 'Home Rule Movement' and Subhash Chandra Bose's 'Indian National Army' for example, lent force to the liberation struggle. Ultimately all these efforts resulted in a free India.

In South Africa, however, the situation differed in the sense that the ruler was part of the social fabric of the country, and that the ruling party's Calvinistic beliefs inspired it to proclaim itself the superior race without focussing on the 'moral obligation' of such discursive superiority. Every policy of the government of the time was intended to keep the non-white suppressed. Any attempt at addressing injustices in a racially fractured society by the victims was approached with total opposition. Whilst race determined the power structure, this structure was severely challenged in all the years of the apartheid regime. The demands of the powers in question resulted in mass mobilisation intended to destabilise the government. The banning of political parties and their activities, the control of the press and imprisonment without trial, effectively enforced the suppression of the masses. However, the eventual achievement of freedom was not without an armed struggle.

The shared hegemonic experiences of South Africa and India lay in the absolute measures taken by the governments of the day to ensure that absolute power was retained. This involved imprisonment without trial to anyone who chose to contest the governments' right to inhumane treatment of people, the banning of organisations that fought for human dignity and liberation, and

economic exploitation on an abominable scale that condemned millions of people to a life of poverty.

## Themes

Significant to the poetry of India and South Africa at a thematic level, was the preoccupation of poets with the glorious past of both India and South Africa. This was significant to the liberation struggle because the emphasis was on the freedom that the countries enjoyed before having been colonised. In Hindi poetry, constant reference was made to mythological characters of the Ramayana simply because the illiterate masses knew verses of the Ramayana by heart and that their conversations were full of references to the heroes of the Ramayana. Within the epic paradigm, references were also made to the characters of the Mahabharata. Mythological inferences are important to the Indian context considering the Hindu belief that Rama, the principal character of the Ramayana, and Krishna, one of the principal characters of the Mahabharata, are believed by Hindus to be two of the many incarnations of God. They were given mortal status in order to protect devotees from injustice. According to the stories of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, Ram and Krishna were given the status of heroes because they conquered the evil doers in order to restore dignity and peace. Reference was also made to people in Indian history who stood out as saviours of Indian society like Chanakya who was largely responsible for having driven out the Greeks from India.

In South African poetry, reference is often made to King Shaka to remind the nation that there was a period in history where the indigenous people of South Africa had a history where they were in control of their own lives and cultures. Lines like 'by our power break the boundaries of our horizons/ people have power, people tear the garments of the night', from Kunene's poem 'Emperor Shaka the Great' illustrate the fact that former great personalities in African history encouraged a sense of ownership in South Africa. These references to a resplendent past were important messages. However, oppression aimed at removing the glories of the land. For purposes of liberation, and for the creation of the conditions of possibility for freedom, therefore, it was essential to reinstate this glory.

Part of the process of the freedom struggle was the decolonisation of the mind which featured as a theme in both South African poetry and Hindi poetry. An extremely pertinent discussion to the liberation movement was the sense that many had valued that which was part of the social fabric of the colonial powers.

In India decades before Mahatma Gandhi campaigned for the use of locally produced goods, poets wrote lines like 'We have become slaves to foreign weavers'. In a very oftenly quoted poem, 'Bharat Bharti', Maithili Sharan Gupta wrote:

Whatever you see carries the logo  
Made in England, Italy, France, America, Japan,  
People become overjoyed  
But we have become lifeless (Chaturvedi 1976:9).

Sumitranandan Pant displayed a different kind of sensitivity. Given the conservativeness that is expected of Indian woman, he wrote about women influenced by western values in the following lines:

Like an unsteady ripple you dance longingly,  
Like a butterfly you flirt from flower to flower  
O you don't love soul surrender

....  
Modernity, if nothing else, you are a woman (Pant 1940:23).

Pant's commentary is a scathing attack on the changing values of Indian women influenced by western liberalism.

South African poetry was also informed by the psyche of the colonised mind. As early as 1950, Ezekiel Mphahlele projected the white man as a God created by the black man himself. In the poem 'The Formal Ways of God' he confesses the extent to which the black person would go to in order to please the white man. The following line is from the said poem, published in the anthology 'The Return of the Amasi Bird':

I swear and lie to them and my own self to buy their approval  
(Cousens 1989:156).

Mafika Gwala's poem 'Getting off the Ride' is perhaps the most scathing critique of colonised sensibilities. The following are a few lines from the said poem:

We learn no Latin from faked classics  
When 2x2 economics show me it's part of the trick teaching me how to  
starve.

When Coco Cola, Pepsi Cola ads all the sweet things are giving me  
Wind in the belly;  
I ask once again, what is black?  
Black is getting off the ride'  
Black is a point of self realisation  
Black is the point of: No National deception (Chapman 1982:138).

In these ways poets pointed out to people that by accepting a culture and way of life that was foreign to them, they were indirectly making the goal of freedom difficult.

Another major theme within the poetry of the political paradigm under discussion is human and economic exploitation and its effects on freedom. The focus on the results of exploitation was visible from the first phase of nationalism in poetry. Bharatendu in one of his riddles wrote:

Sucking stealthily the entire juice from within  
Smilingly grasping the body, heart and wealth;  
So adept in making a glip profession,  
is it your husband? No it's the Englishman (Chandra 1992:32).

The sexual innuendoes employed in describing exploitation are hardly subtle in the above lines. Bharatendu was informed not only by the economic drain that India was experiencing, but also the detribalisation process witnessed during the period of colonial rule.

Tripathi, in his poem 'The Traveller', summarises the effects of exploitation in the following lines:

Flames of poverty blaze everywhere  
No flesh, just feeble breaths.  
What's left are bones in a frame  
No food, no clothes, no home;  
Nobody has any friends (Bhavuk 1995:56).

These lines serve as a critique on people's inability to take care of themselves or their fellow human beings as a result of their having lost everything of value.

Mtshali's poem 'An Abandoned Bundle' very poignantly interprets human poverty due to exploitation in the following lines:

Scavenging dogs  
draped in red bandanas of blood  
fought fiercely  
for a squirming bundle (Mtshali 1972:60).

The above lines round off a poem that speaks of the inability of a young mother to take care of a child she bore.

Mafika Gwala's poem *Jol'likomo* perhaps most clearly portrays that exploitation can only be rid of if there is a change of mindset. The following lines are an extract from the aforementioned poem:

Change in minds, change  
Change in social standings, change  
Change in means of living, change  
Change in dreams and hopes (Chapman 1986:137).

Unquestionably, freedom would be a recurrent theme in any corpus of poetry that deals with the shaking off of any kind of hegemony.

The establishment of British rule in India stemmed from the mutiny in the areas in which Britain had a stronghold. Thus, for the indigenous movements, freedom was the ultimate goal from the inception of British rule. In the developmental stages of Hindi poetry Balbakshi Charan wrote:

May our children become wise  
Only then will this country change  
This thought recurs in my mind.  
Let's run this country with our own hands,  
He who can do this and survive  
Will be blessed with a wonderful child (Bhavuk 1995:25)

As freedom consciousness grew, much of the poetry was informed by a greater awareness of freedom. Self-sacrifice and Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence had become the guiding principles in the quest for freedom, although the option of an armed revolt was not ruled out. Makanlall Chaturvedi summed up the general sentiments in his poem 'We will Take Freedom':

We'll not listen to anyone, we'll take our freedom  
We are no less than anyone in the world

We'll never remain slaves and be oppressed by others  
We've yielded for too long, we'll take our freedom (Bhavuk 1995:181).

Gradually, protest poetry revealed a more forceful drive for freedom, inspired surely by the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and Lokmanya Tilak, whose words 'freedom is our birthright' did much to inspire a greater consciousness of freedom.

The raising of freedom issues within the South African situation was not a recent phenomenon either. Protest against foreign rule is believed to have been voiced (and written down) as early as the sixteenth century. However, during the apartheid era, the cry for freedom took a rather different turn. The following lines are from Keorapetse Kgotsile's poem, 'My Name is Africa':

We claim that the soil of our home  
runs in our blood yet we run  
around the world, the shit of others  
drolling over our eyes (Kgotsile 1971:28).

Kgotsile's anger at the denial of freedom is obvious. However, there was also the kind of thinking that indicated that freedom is the birthright of all individuals. The following lines are from Kunene's poem 'Mother Africa':

Why should those at the end of the earth  
Not drink from the same calabash  
And build their homes in the valley of the earth  
And together grow with our children? (Kunene 1970:92).

During the latter part of the apartheid era, poets did not take Kunene's humanist stand though. Mtshali states clearly that if fighting for one's dignity and freedom meant giving up one's life, that so it must be. The following lines are the concluding lines of his poem, 'Weep not for a Martyr':

Weep not for him.  
He was a brave warrior;  
Let him rest on the buffalo-hide bed  
Where his forefathers slept (Mtshali 1980:24).

## **Literary Movements and Political Idealism**

Although the counter-poetry of the apartheid era began in the wake of India's freedom, the literary movements in the poetry under discussion are very similar. The challenges facing the poetry emanating from repressive societies are evident in the poetry of both countries.

The earliest period of Hindi poetry which was inspired by Bharatendu Harishchandra, focussed on the moving away from the traditional styles of writing. Handa (1978:288) comments:

The foremost thing which strikes one in Bharatendu's poetry is that he brought it down to earth from ethereal heights and pulled it out of the slough of emotional symbolism in order to make the common man feel interested in it.

Bharatendu's fellow poets followed the trends that he set. Apart from the change in writing styles, the focus was India's political position and social reform. With the progression of time, however, poets began favouring a more formal, symbolist style of writing, which became known as *chhayavad* – the English equivalent of romanticism. This generation of poets responded to the new challenges of poetry within the existing political construct of the time by interpreting old myths in the light of contemporary issues.

However, as romantic symbolism had become a luxury, the *chhayavad* movement could not last within the then contemporary political paradigm. The shift to progresivist poetry was essential for poetry to remain informed by the issues of the day and to remain accessible to the masses. Nonetheless, the influence of romantic symbolism did not disappear entirely.

The South African poetry under discussion is very similar in its development. The initial years of poetry were influenced by the symbolist mode. In what is commonly known as Soweto poetry and Worker poetry, the poet employed his verse to further the ideals of dialectical materialism and black nationalism – as in the Hindi progressivist poets. Again, similar to Hindi poetry, the language used was familiar to the people – even though not in their mother-tongue. Thus, words like 'shit' that go against orthodox expectations of poetry, serve the purpose of familiarising an experience in a particular socio-political construct. However, some writers also remained influenced by the romantic tradition.



## Imagery and Myth

Subroto Ray in his article 'Analysis of Imagery and Myth: A Vital Tool in Comparative Literature', maintains that:

Between the purely personal and entirely external, lies the broad region of acquired collective social experience .... This is what forms the tradition or cultural heritage of the artist; in this store-house, various private and personal experiences also accumulate and remain side by side with the collective experiences .... It is in this region of the mind that religious beliefs, historical pride, ancient myths, personal vision and a thousand other things rub shoulders .... This is where images and myths already within the artist's knowledge, take their place in literature as a valuable means of expression (Lang 1985:91).

Imagery, defined as figurative illustrations, is also open to symbolic interpretations. Although there is a perception that symbols and imagery are universal, the poetry under discussion challenges some of the universally accepted symbols. Poets are informed by their specific cultural, religious and current social experience, which finally result in literary expression. Thus, much of the Hindi references are informed by Hinduism, Indian history and colonial experiences, while many of the South African references are derived from Christianity.

The symbolic Hindu references include names like Luxmi and Saraswathi. These references convey positive implications as these figures belong to supernatural influences intent on doing good. Luxmi and Saraswathi are important as they are deities who are representative of wealth and music respectively. Sridhar Patak in the poem 'Nobility' salutes the Luxmis and Saraswathies who gave up their jewellery and past-times which were dedicated to playing the lute to help the cause of freedom.

In Mtshali's 'An Abandoned Bundle', the manger imagery is an example of religious symbolism in South African poetry. Generally, the baby in the manger symbolises the birth of Christ, and the joy surrounding His birth. Mtshali's reference in 'oh baby in the manger, sleep well on human dung', does not carry the elation that one would associate with this symbolism. In fact, it carries with it the message of pain an innocent child, born in a prejudiced society, would suffer. Mtshali's reference is significant in its ironic implication that the oppressor's faith is also influenced by this symbolic reference.

Both India and South Africa are often referred to as 'mother' in protest poetry. African and Hindu mythology confer the supernatural status of mother on the land, symbolising the nurturing quality of a mother. Lines like 'The corrupt rule held mother India by the hair'; 'Tears flow from her eyes, her body devoid of clothes | Looking towards you, the mother becomes impatient'; 'my brother, hearing the mother's call' are some examples of the symbolic references to India as the mother.

Serote's poem 'Mother Alexandra' is also an example of the mother symbolism in South Africa as displayed in the following lines: I cry Alexandra when I am thirsty | Your breasts Ooze the dirty waters of your dongas'. In both these references the mother is seen as bruised, exploited and seeks the help of her child. This significant reference shows the rearrangement of mythological concepts in order to highlight the position of the oppressed.

There is also an interesting reference to essential 'icons' in both the religions. 'Raam naam' in Hinduism is said to elevate one towards God consciousness. The cross in Christianity symbolises God consciousness too. However, both these symbolic references are perceived differently. Bharat Bhakt in his poem 'A Resplendent End' writes:

When on the lips of the warrior come the sound  
Of freedom  
Rather than Raam naam,  
Even my corpse will be thrilled and forget all  
Previous glooms (Bhavuk 1995:87).

Christopher Van Wyk in *The Chosen Ones* writes:

Some people  
have to carry  
their crosses  
for the rest  
of their lives

Others think  
they can get away  
with it  
simply by  
throwing theirs

in the ballot box (Chapman 1986:49).

In both the references there is a biting aphorism on accepted religious-specific symbols. In both, there is a suggestion that it is not religion that will liberate the oppressed, but as Marx says, 'it is man, real, living man who ... possesses [the power] and fights'.

Pant and Serote use closely related symbols to describe capitalist effects on their society. Pant in his poem 'Picture of a Village', presents the following picture:

Here men live from age to age cursed  
Nurtured in slush, without food, clothes, pained (Pant 1940:16).

Serote describes his township in 'City Johannesburg' as follows:

My dongas, my dust, my people, my death,  
*Where death lurks in the dark like a blade*  
In the flesh (Serote 1994:22).



Whilst the study of comparative literature receives a great deal of criticism, it is a very significant area of study that provides a broadening of one's perspective in the approach to single works of literature. It is a way of looking beyond boundaries of national frontiers in order to discern trends and movements in various cultures and to see relations between literature and other spheres of human activity.

The focus of the poetry in this paper is on the degree to which poetry is a social and historical manifestation, and the way in which poetry can be regarded as a perception and structure of the 'universal' human mind. Considering the political constructs of India and South Africa, there is no doubt that the poetry of these two colonised countries is a critical record of the historical events of the societies represented in the poetry.

Very essential to human existence is how societies evolve and what catalysts engineer this evolution. If literature is seen as a recording of human reaction to historical events, particularly on a comparative basis, a great deal can be gleaned about the human mind.

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