

Elements of Literature and Creative Communication
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Lecture - 21

Indian English Poetry: The Beginnings

Hello all of you, welcome to the 5th week of the course Elements of Literature and Creative Communication. Last week we discussed poetry with specific reference to poetry written in England - British poetry. So, in this class, we are going to focus on Indian English Poetry. In fact, if you can recall over the last couple of weeks we have been discussing poetry, different elements of poetry, different types of poetry, and genres of poetry. And in continuation to that of course, we discuss Indian English poetry this week. So, let us focus on the beginnings of Indian English poetry. Because well of course, right at the outset you may have wondered why is this Indian English poetry, what is this Indian English, what does this signify and all that. Well, before we discuss the origins or the beginnings of Indian English poetry a word may be said at the outset. This Indian English basically refers to Indian poetry written in English. You can call this Indian poetry written originally in English. So, I guess that should make these things clear.

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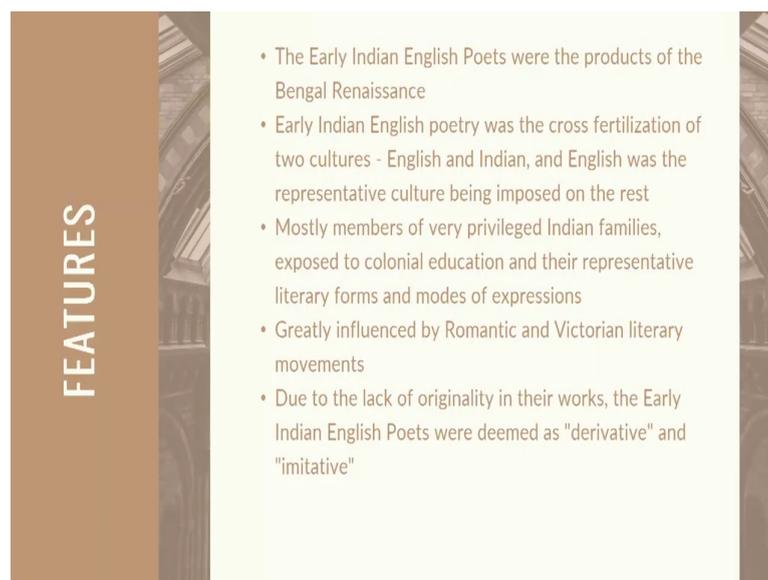


Focus Points

- ✓ Impetus behind the rise of Indian English Poetry during the 19th century
- ✓ What social classes did these poets belong to?
- ✓ What were the formal and technical specifications of their works?
- ✓ Which overseas poets and movements influenced the Indian poets the most?
- ✓ Why were these Early Indian English Poets deemed as merely imitative in nature?
- ✓ How did these poets carve out a niche for themselves with new forms and techniques?

So, now let us focus on the beginnings of Indian English poetry. When we say the beginnings what are the things that we are going to focus on here. Well, what are those forces, what are the driving forces that resulted in the creation of Indian English poetry during the 19th century? These are some of the questions that we are going to pick up during our discussion of this class. So, we try to answer some of these questions here. And then, who are the poets who wrote in English during the 19th century what social classes do these poets belong to. And what kind of background do they write this kind of poetry in, and what are the formal and technical specifications of their works? And so on. Or if they have been influenced by any overseas poets, who are those poets or if they have been influenced by certain movements poetry movements outside India what are those movements and how solid was Indian English poetry especially when it began. So, these are some questions we hope to seek answers to during the course of this lecture.

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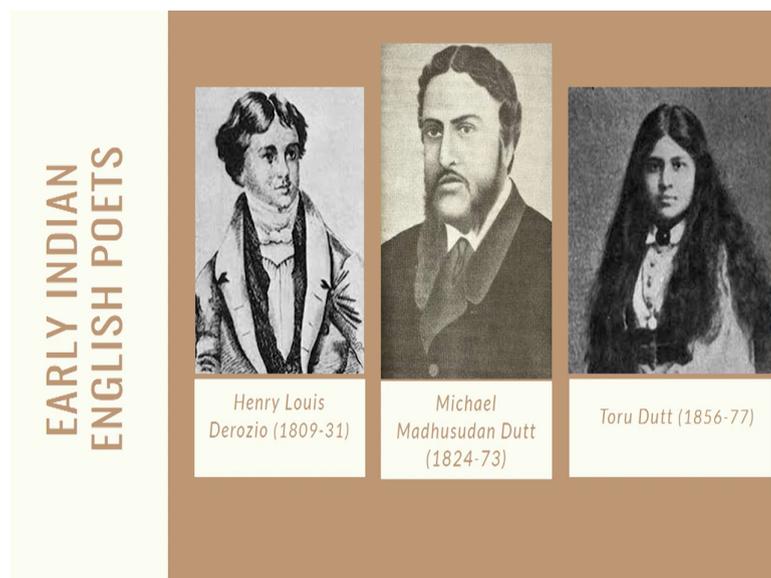
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- The Early Indian English Poets were the products of the Bengal Renaissance
- Early Indian English poetry was the cross fertilization of two cultures - English and Indian, and English was the representative culture being imposed on the rest
- Mostly members of very privileged Indian families, exposed to colonial education and their representative literary forms and modes of expressions
- Greatly influenced by Romantic and Victorian literary movements
- Due to the lack of originality in their works, the Early Indian English Poets were deemed as "derivative" and "imitative"

We can say that Indian English poetry is a product of the Bengal renaissance that began in the late 18th century and spread and was prevalent till let us say the middle of the 20th century. So, it's a product of the Bengal renaissance. If you recall what is Bengal renaissance - a kind of a socio-political cultural awakening that began in Bengal in the 19th century during the colonial occupation of the land during the British occupation of the land. And because of exposure to the western culture as well as the strong anti-colonial struggles that were taking place, many poets or many families that had access to English education that had a kind of exposure to western values society culture began writing poetry in English. So, to answer one

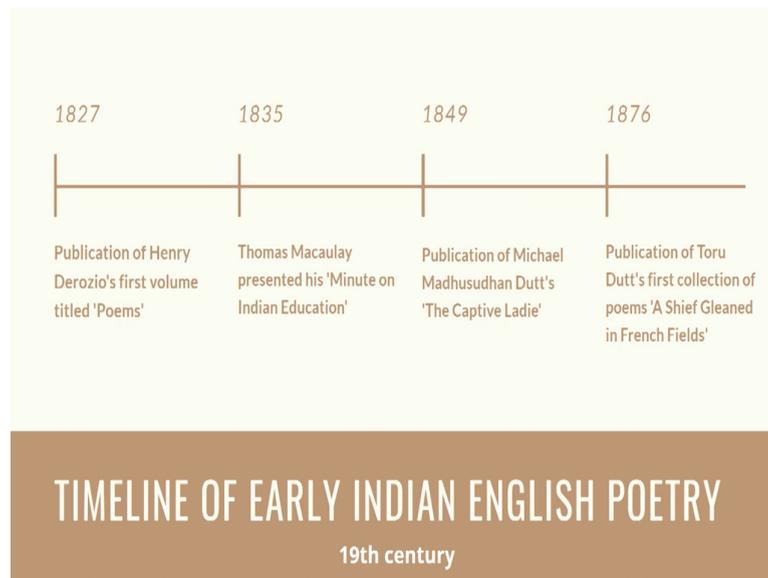
of the questions we raised in the previous slide, people who began writing in English were the ones who had exposure to western education or upper-middle-class or upper-class people. So, you can say that they were members of the privileged class and they were greatly influenced by the romantic poets and Victorian poets; though their attempts at writing in English were noteworthy. Well, today, of course, it's been more than a century since we have had this kind of poetic enterprise. Now looking back we can say that though these were noble attempts they lacked merit; because overall they were imitative in nature or they had a derivative value not so much as an innovative value. So, this is a kind of an overall picture. Of course, it does not mean to say that there were no significant poets or poetry this is just a general character trait that we have to keep in mind. But, what we can say is the ground that these poets paved resulted in some extraordinary poets practising in this language.

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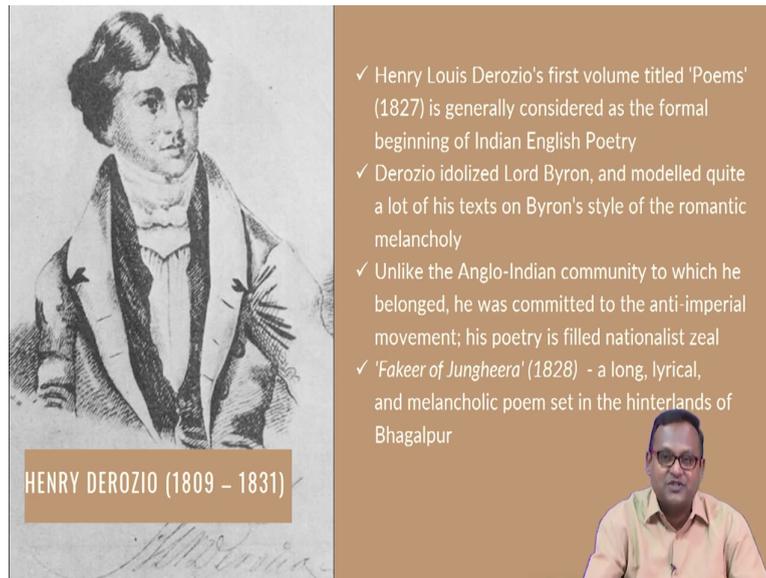
Who were some of the significant poets who began writing poetry in English? So, these were some of our significant poets. In fact, you can call Henry Louis Derozio the first major poet who began writing in English in India. So, he is a kind of the father of Indian English poetry though, of course, the formal credit for that goes to someone else later we can say that he is the pioneer with him begins Indian English poetry, followed by the likes of Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Toru Dutt and others. So, let us go and discuss what they write and some of their significant contribution to Indian English poetry before that you can just make yourself familiar with a broad timeline of early Indian English poetry.

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So, once you acquaint yourself with this timeline, of course, things become clear they fall in line. The first publication of Henry Derozio happened in 1827. So, in that sense, 1827 marks the beginning of Indian English poetry because Henry Derozio publishes his first collection of poetry just called Poems. 1835 is a significant year because you can recall Thomas Macaulay's *Minutes on Indian Education*. So, this is the one, in fact, our contemporary education system is based on the 'minutes on education system' that Thomas Macaulay presented in 1835. If you can quickly recall your history lesson that until that point in time education was broadly in the local languages the regional languages. So, for the first time backed by the efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and other renaissance figures, Thomas Macaulay introduced English education the purpose of that was different. However, because of the thrust given to English education in India of course, helped to flower Indian English poetry and Indian English literature in a significant way. So, 1849 is another significant year because Michael Madhusudan Dutt's "The Captive Ladies", which is his first poetry collection appeared in 1849. And 1876 publication of Toru Dutt's first collection "A Shief Gleaned in French Fields". So, these are some kinds of landmarks as far as Indian English poetry is considered you can consider them as kind of landmarks.

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- ✓ Henry Louis Derozio's first volume titled 'Poems' (1827) is generally considered as the formal beginning of Indian English Poetry
- ✓ Derozio idolized Lord Byron, and modelled quite a lot of his texts on Byron's style of the romantic melancholy
- ✓ Unlike the Anglo-Indian community to which he belonged, he was committed to the anti-imperial movement; his poetry is filled nationalist zeal
- ✓ 'Fakere of Jungheera' (1828) - a long, lyrical, and melancholic poem set in the hinterlands of Bhagalpur

From here let us go on to discuss Derozio we have already identified Derozio as the first Indian English poet - his first volume titled 'Poems' is the first poetry collection of Indian English poetry. In fact, Derozio was greatly influenced by Byron therefore, if you look at his poetry you can find a thick shade of Byronic poetry. Therefore, you can say that he begins imitating the Byronic poetry style. So, that is a significant one nevertheless its imitative of course, that has to be kept in mind. Derozio was also a major poet because he made use of his English poetry to awaken the nationalist consciousness of his readers. Therefore, you can say that his poetry is filled with a kind of fervent nationalistic zeal, and "Fakere of Jungheera" which was published in 1828 is another significant achievement - a kind of a lyrical melancholic poem set in the hinterlands of Bhagalpur another contribution of Derozio to Indian English poetry.

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HENRY LOUIS DEROZIO

The Harp of India

Why hang'st thou lonely on yon withered bough?
Unstrung for ever, must thou there remain;
Thy music once was sweet—who hears it now?
Why doth the breeze sigh over thee in vain?
Silence hath bound thee with her fatal chain;
Neglected, mute, and desolate art thou,
Like ruined monument on desert plain:
O! many a hand more worthy far than mine
Once thy harmonious chords to sweetness gave,
And many a wreath for them did Fame entwine
Of flowers still blooming on the minstrel's grave:
Those hands are cold—but if thy notes
May be by mortal wakened once again
Harp of my country, let me strike!



Well if you want to have a kind of taste of Derozio a kind of a poem that again we discussed that his poetry tries to awaken patriotism and nationalist awakening in his readers. So, this poem is a kind of solid example of that.

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MICHAEL MADHUSUDAN DUTT
(1824-73)

- ✓ He was greatly influenced by the Romantic Poets and their ideals, and admired the younger romantic poets - Shelley, Keats, and Byron who were his British contemporaries
- ✓ He exclusively wrote in English in his earlier years, and his poems were extremely imitative in nature
- ✓ 'The Captive Ladie' was his most well known poem - a long narrative poem with clear Romantic influences
- ✓ He later shifted to writing in Bengali and earned his reputation there;
- ✓ Considered as the 'Father of Modern Bengali Poetry'



From Derozio let us move on to Michael Madhusudan Dutt. In fact, Michael Madhusudan Dutt plays a major role not just in shaping the contours of Indian English poetry, but in shaping the contours of Bengali poetry as well. Though Madhusudan Dutt began writing of course, having access to western education and because of his aristocratic background he was

privity to English education. Because of all these things although he began writing in English soon he realizes that he could not find his muse in English, on the other hand, he realized that he had his contribution elsewhere it's actually in Bengali; therefore, he began practising writing in Bengali afterwards. So, therefore, he is rightly called the Father of Modern Bengali Poetry. Nevertheless, his significance to or his contribution to Indian English poetry is equally important.

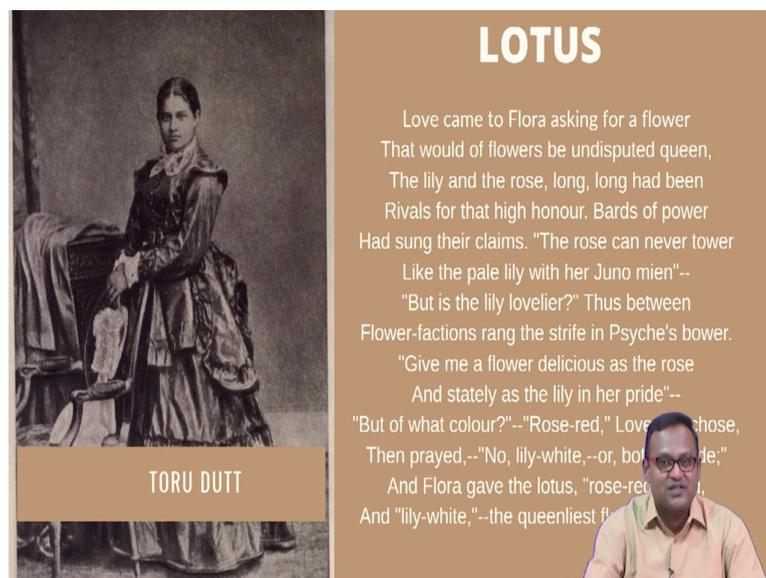
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From Michael Madhusudan Dutt if we come to the next significant phase it's Toru Dutt. In fact, Toru Dutt is an exemplary literary figure she did not just write in English in fact, but like Madhusudan Dutt Toru Dutt too was a polyglot. In fact, it's said of Michael Madhusudan Dutt that he was well versed in 7 to 8 languages he began writing in Sanskrit as well. So, he was well versed in Sanskrit, Bengali, French, English many other languages. So, similarly, Toru Dutt too was well versed in Sanskrit, French, English and Bengali she has significant contributions both in French and English. She has of course, we have already identified that all these poets belong to aristocratic background Bengali backgrounds nevertheless she had a solid grounding in Sanskrit literature. Therefore, Sanskrit poetry and poetics act as a kind of bedrock out of which her poems emerge and that is also true with French literature even because of her exposure to French literature. In fact, her first collection we have already identified her first collection "A Shief Gleaned in French Fields", a collection of her poems. In fact, a significant amount of these poems are her translations from french.

So, today, of course, she is well known for her other collection which was “Ancient ballads” and “Legends of Hindustan”, which unfortunately was published posthumously, of course, she did not get to see how it was received it was published in 1882. So, you can say that these ballads represent Indian ethos some of them are translations and adaptations from Sanskrit. Nevertheless, they succeed in imparting Indian values and Indian sensibilities to any modern reader of her poetry. Some of her well-known poems that you and I may have read here and there are ‘A Sea of Foliage’, ‘The Lotus Sita’, and ‘Our Casuarina Tree’.

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LOTUS

Love came to Flora asking for a flower
That would of flowers be undisputed queen,
The lily and the rose, long, long had been
Rivals for that high honour. Bards of power
Had sung their claims. "The rose can never tower
Like the pale lily with her Juno mien"--
"But is the lily lovelier?" Thus between
Flower-factions rang the strife in Psyche's bower.
"Give me a flower delicious as the rose
And stately as the lily in her pride"--
"But of what colour?"--"Rose-red," Love chose,
Then prayed,--"No, lily-white,--or, both side;"
And Flora gave the lotus, "rose-red"
And "lily-white,"--the queenliest flower.

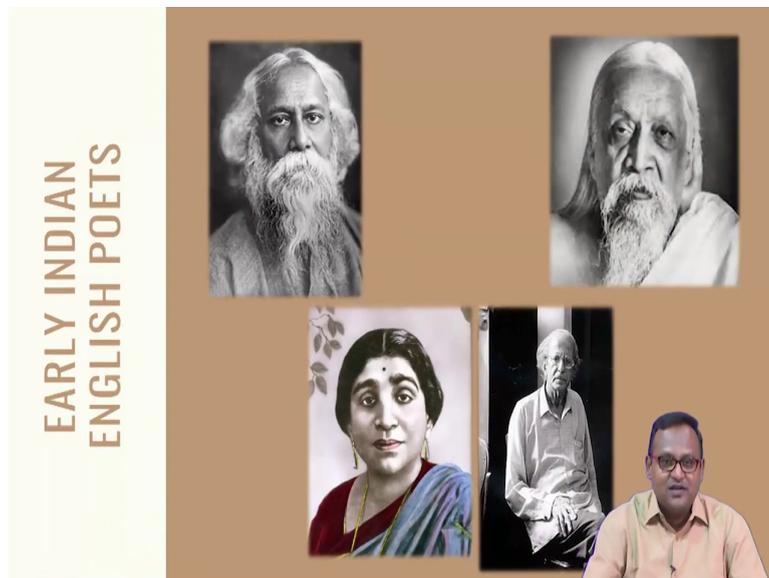
So, here we have an excerpt from her poem just in order to give you a first-hand account of the quality of her writing:

Love came to Flora asking for a flower
That would of flowers be undisputed queen,
the lily and the rose long had been
rivals for that high honor. Bards of power
had sung their claims. “the rose can never tower
like the pale lily with her Juno mien.”-
“But is the lilly lovelier?” thus between
flower factions rang the strife in psyches bower
“give me a flower delicious as the rose
and stately as the lily in her pride.”-

But of what color rose red love first chose
then prayed - “no, lily white or both provide
and flora gave the lotus rose red dyed
and lily white - “The queen the queenliest flower that blows

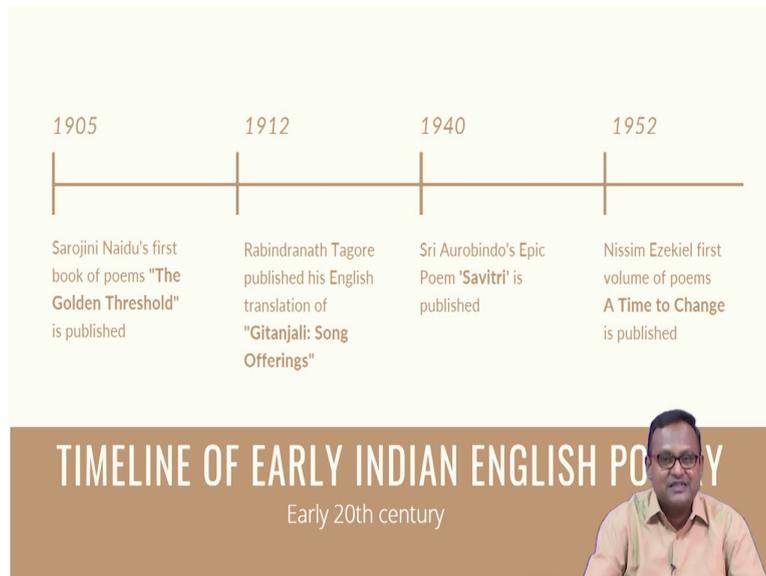
Just to give us a taste of how she writes. Of course, lotus is again you can there is a possibility that you can read some kind of symbolic you can attribute some kind of symbolic meaning to the lotus. Nevertheless, even if you leave those symbolic references it's a poem this poem can give you an idea of the kind of poet Toru Dutt was.

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If you can consider Toru Dutt, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, and Henry Derozio as the first wave of poets, the second wave begins with these four great writers. In fact, Indian English poetry gets a solid root in the poetry of Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Sarojini Naidu and Nissim Ezekiel; they act as some kind of the four solid pillars of Indian English poetry.

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Yeah, here if we can give a kind of a broad timeline this should help us in locating Indian English poetry. In 1905, in the early 20th century, Sarojini Naidu publishes her first book of poetry called 'The Golden Threshold' a very significant collection. In 1912 comes out the most celebrated Indian English poetry book ever "Gitanjali", Rabindranath Tagore publishes his English translation of Gitanjali of course, he had already written Gitanjali in Bengali. So, you cannot call these ones translations because you can call them free recreations from there or some new ones added to this. So, 1912 marks the publication of Gitanjali and very soon just in less than 2 years the very next year or just in a couple of years, he receives Nobel Prize for this particular collection. Therefore, in fact, it's to his credit that the first non-European literature prize goes to him. The 1940s becomes another landmark because Sri Aurobindo publishes his epic poem "Savitri", its a significant poetic achievement as far as Indian English poetry is concerned. In terms of its stature in terms of many other things it's a kind of an unparalleled work because even to this day we do not have anything that can match the style the grandeur of Savitri. Therefore, 1940 becomes a significant landmark. Then Nissim Ezekiel publishes "A time to change" in 1952. So, the sobriquet of the 'Father of modern Indian English poetry' goes to Nissim Ezekiel. So, if you can look at it 1952 post-independence this is probably the first significant poetry collection that comes out.

Now, therefore, he is rightly called he is the father of modern Indian English poetry. So, this rough timeline should give us enough clues to locate the early Indian English poetry in the early part of the 20th century.

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RABINDRANATH TAGORE
(1861-1941)

- ✓ Rabindranath Tagore was born into a wealthy industrialist family who were also the pioneers of the Bengal Renaissance in multiple cultural forms
- ✓ Tagore established a school outside Calcutta, in Santiniketan and named in Visva Bharati. It was an experimental school which sought to combine Western and Indian pedagogies and cultures
- ✓ In 'Gitanjali', Tagore explored themes of divine and human love in a lyrical tradition; Manasi, Sonar Tori (Golden Boat), Balaka (Wild Geese) other collections; 2200 songs
- ✓ The Nobel prize (1913): "profoundly sensitive, fresh, and beautiful verse, by which, with consummate skill, he has made his poetic thought, expressed in his own English words, a part of the Literature of the west"

Tagore needs no introduction not just in the literary circles anywhere. In fact, Mahatma Gandhi Tagore too occupies a significant position in the cultural consciousness of India. In the collective cultural consciousness of India for various reasons, because Tagore was truly a multifaceted personality he was a kind of a genius an artistic genius. So, he is well known not just for his poetry he is well known for, his novels he is well known for his paintings, and he is well known for his as an academic. And he is well known for his music too; because he goes on to establish a different genre of music because until then you had Carnatic music and before that Hindustani music. Now, he contributes Rabindra Sangeet - the third significant contribution to the field of music. So, therefore, you can call him a versatile genius and he also establishes a university in Santiniketan and calls it Visva Bharati. Of course, modelled on the best of both the worlds, the western world as well as the eastern world, he establishes an experimental school that seeks to combine both the values of western and Indian pedagogies and culture. And as we have already identified "Gitanjali" as a major poetry collection, more than poetry it becomes a kind of a lyrical meditation it's a kind of lyrical meditation. The influence of Gitanjali was so much so, that WB Yeats acknowledges Rabindranath Tagore's poetry in general and he acknowledges that this particular collection has had a significant impact on his life and he even recommends this particular collection to many of his other friends, literary friends. And as the Nobel committee rightly identifies "Gitanjali", in its citation it says that this collection is profoundly sensitive, fresh and beautiful. By which of course, with consummate skill, Tagore has made his poetic thought

and he has expressed in his own English words a part of the literature of the west. In fact, the citation clearly identifies a healthy combination of the east and the west in his poetry.

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On the Nature of Love

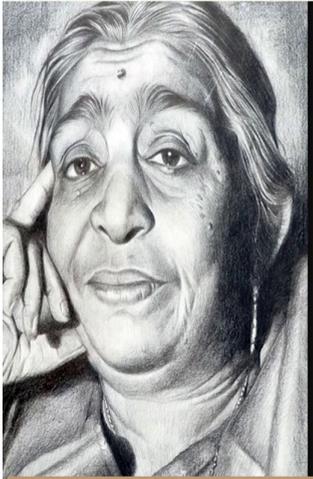
The night is black and the forest has no end;
a million people thread it in a million ways.
We have trysts to keep in the darkness, but where
or with whom - of that we are unaware.
But we have this faith - that a lifetime's bliss
will appear any minute, with a smile upon its lips.
Scents, touches, sounds, snatches of songs
brush us, pass us, give us delightful shocks.
Then peradventure there's a flash of lightning:
whomever I see that instant I fall in love with.
I call that person and cry: 'This life is blest!
for your sake such miles have I traversed!
All those others who came close and moved off
in the darkness - I don't know if they exist or not.

Again we have 'On the Nature of Love' one of the most anthologized poems by Tagore.

The night is black and the forest has no end;
a million people thread it in a million ways.
We have tryst to keep in the darkness, but where
or with whom of what of that we are unaware,
but we have this faith that a lifetimes bliss
will appear any minute with a smile upon its lips.

The poem goes on to talk about companionship love and the nature of true love all these things in a brilliant way.

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SAROJINI NAIDU (1879-1949)

- ✓ Sarojini Naidu - "Nightingale of India"
- ✓ She was a poet, and independence activist, and a child prodigy who went on to become the first women president of the Indian National Congress during the Independence movement.
- ✓ While studying in England, she published three expansive volumes of poetry which procured significant readership in both India and England
- ✓ Her poetry has distinctly Indian themes and setting
- ✓ The Golden Threshold (1905)
- ✓ The Bird of Time (1912)
- ✓ The Broken Wing (1927)
- ✓ The Feather of the Dawn (1961) posthumous work

From Tagore let us move on to Sarojini Naidu; because she is another important personality who foregrounds Indian English poetry and plays a major role in establishing Indian English poetry. So, she is considered the ‘nightingale of India’, as she was a poet she was an independence activist and a child prodigy who went on to become the first women president of the Indian national congress during India’s struggle for independence. And while of course, as I said again she belongs to an aristocratic background during her stay in England she publishes three important collections. “The Golden Threshold” becomes an important one, if we can recall the other ones “The Bird of Time” and “The Broken Wing”. And posthumously, of course, her daughter publishes all of her poems in a single volume and publishes it as the “Feather of the Dawn”.

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Indian Weavers

Weavers, weaving at break of day,
Why do you weave a garment so gay?
Blue as the wing of a halcyon wild,
We weave the robes of a new- born child.

Weavers, weaving at fall of night,
Why do you weave a garment so bright ?
Like the plumes of a peacock purple and green,
We weave the marriage veils of a queen.

Weavers, weaving solemn and still,
What do you weave in the moonlight chill?
White as a feather and white as a cloud,
We weave a dead man's funeral shroud.

SAROJINI NAIDU

So, just to give you again a taste of how she writes this is a remarkable poem ‘Indian weavers’, a brilliant poem. In fact, if you can read this poem you understand why I consider this poem as her significant contribution

Weavers, weaving at break of day
why do you weave a garment so gay?
blue as the wing of the halcyon wild
we weave the robes of a newborn child.

In fact, the entire life’s journey is brought out in this poem using the 3 stanzas, talking about the transience of human life and here these weavers again become symbolic. In fact, no wonder if you can consider these 3 words three weavers as the ‘trimurtis’ - who stand for the preservers, the creators, and destroyers.

Weavers weaving at fall of night,
why do you weave a garment so bright?
Like the plumes of peacock purple and green
we weave the marriage of veils of a queen
we weave the marriage veils of a queen.
Weavers weaving solemn and still
what do you weave in the moonlight chill?

white as a feather and white as a cloud
we weave a dead mans funeral shroud.

So, from cradle to grave the poem marks the journey of human beings from cradle to grave in such a simply elegant and artistic way. So, now before we call it a day let us quickly recall what we said in this class. We began with the origin of Indian English poetry, we identified the first wave and the contribution of Derozio, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, and Toru Dutt. And now we moved on to the second wave of Indian English poetry we began with Tagore and of course, Sarojini Naidu and of course, we discussed some important poems in this context and all this. So, in the next class, we begin with Nissim Ezekiel the 'Father of modern Indian English poetry'.

So, it is said that Indian English poetry finds a solid ground with the publication of Nissim Ezekiel poetry in 1952. So, in post-independent India that is the major poetic achievement. So, we will come up with the contribution of Nissim Ezekiel and his successors later in the next class.

Thank you.