

The Evolution and Major Trends in Commonwealth Poetry – A Study



P. Suneetha

Assistant Professor
BVRIT Narsapur, Medak Dist,
Telangana, India

ABSTRACT: This Paper deals with evolution and major trends in Commonwealth Poetry. It introduces the major Commonwealth writers and their works. Also, an evaluation of the literary merit of Commonwealth Poetry as evidenced in the works of some significant writers is included for a comprehensive understanding of Commonwealth Poetry.

Keywords: Commonwealth, Poetry, emigrated, culture

COMMONWEALTH POETRY: AN INTRODUCTION

Commonwealth Literature written in the Commonwealth countries outside the Anglo-American tradition. It is experimental and symbolizes "new literatures" in English, ranging from Australian, Canadian, and New Zealand literatures to West Indian (Caribbean) and African literatures and also Asian writing in English including Indian writing in English. It is referred to as "New Literatures in English," "Third World Literature," and "Post-colonial Literatures in English." For our study we use the term "Commonwealth Literature." It represents socio-cultural subsystems. The picture that emerges out of this variegated network is that of a group of writers in search of identity, unity, and modernity. Commonwealth Literature is rich in poetry and fiction but poor in drama, non-fiction prose and literary criticism. Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, Anita Desai, Mulk Raj Anand, Kamala Markandeya, A. K. Ramanujan, Vikram Seth, Nissim Ezekiel, Jayanta Mahapatra, Dom Moraes of India, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Nadine Godimer, Roy Campbell, David Nicholl, Clark of Africa, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy of Sri Lanka, Derek Walcott, Lamming, Harris, V. S. Naipaul, Brathwaite of the West Indies, Patrick White, A. D. Hope, Judith Wright of Australia, Margaret Atwood, Morley Callaghan of Canada, Katherine Mansfield of New Zealand to name a few have enriched Commonwealth Literature. Much of the literature of the Commonwealth thus arises from the need to reconcile the tension between one's own culture (native) and that of the invading culture (foreign). The study of Commonwealth Literature, "offers the best means of pooling the resources of many cultures as suggested by Achebe's vivid phrase 'humanity's heirloom' and of breaking the national barriers so as to make them available to all of us in the hope of supplementing each other's deficiencies and correcting the warps" (C. D. Narasimhaiah *Essays in Commonwealth Literature: Heirloom of Multiple Heritage* 45).

We shall now read a broad overview of Commonwealth Poetry in English.

Commonwealth poetry is primarily a twentieth century phenomenon. The early poetry written by settlers in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Canada is of two kinds. On the one hand, we have the ballad-style narrative, which springs naturally from the life of hardship, adventure and incident, and on the other, we have the nostalgic, often sentimental, poetry of the homesick emigrant, echoing the rhythms and phrases of the poems known in youth which have a historical importance as a source of inspiration to others. In course of time many natural poets emerged, whose genuine poetry has been augmented by successive generations.

Commonwealth poets tend to assume any one or two of the following voices in their poetry: individual voice, national voice and cosmic voice and the national voice that gives a distinct character to their poetry. A poet's response to the landscape of his country, his sense of tradition and culture of his native land and many other factors go into forming an identity of his own. These are the features of Commonwealth Poetry. The poets of Africa, for example, are conscious of their national identity. The image of "Africa" comes alive in the poetry of Roy Campbell, David Nicholl, Michael De Anang, Dennis Brutus, Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark, Christopher Okigbo, David Rubadiri and others. The "image" of Australia in Australian poetry has changed considerably since William Wentworth wrote his poem "Australasia." The landscape and the life of the land have become the central themes in modern Australian poetry. A. D. Hope, Judith Wright, Mary Gilmore, Douglas Stewart and

James McAuley are some of the outstanding Australian poets. Their preoccupation with the "native land" and the "native idiom" are characteristics, which are common to all commonwealth poets.

Like Australian poetry, Canadian poetry is deeply entrenched in its geography and landscape. In Canada, poetry is written both in French and English. While Canadian poetry draws a great deal from the British and American tradition, it also seeks to locate itself firmly in a Canadian setting. E. J. Pratt, Duncan Campbell Scott, A. J. M. Smith, P. K. Page, Margaret Avison, Margaret Atwood, Anne Wilkinson, Robert Finch, Dorothy Livesey and A. M. Klien are some of the important Canadian poets.

Indian English poetry has made a significant contribution to Commonwealth Poetry and is known for its originality and authenticity. The sub-continent of India with its vast and ancient culture has created an indigenous literary tradition. Modern poets like Jayanta Mahapatra, A. K. Ramanujan, R. Parthasarathy, Arun Kolatkar and Kamala Das, to name a few, have felt the need to turn inward with questions of identity to get to their roots. Like other Commonwealth poet's Indian poets have also felt the need to acclimatize English language to an indigenous tradition in order to find a voice unique to their culture.

In New Zealand poetry, the landscape of the country and the preoccupation with the isolate, individual self are the two important characteristics that these poets share with other Commonwealth poets. Also some poets have taken up the theme of love and metaphysical concern. Important New Zealand poets include Allen Curnow, William Pember Reeves, A. R. D. Fairburn, Edward Tregear, James Baxter, and Gordon Chellis. The West Indies/Caribbean poets are largely dispossessed of their past. However, Derek Walcott, Evan Jones, Edward Brathwaite, have created a new idiom in their poetry. Apart from India, Africa, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and West Indies, we have poems from other countries like Pakistan, Singapore, Malaysia and Sri Lanka. Now, we shall look at the work of a few poets of some of the Commonwealth nations.

We shall now classify Commonwealth poetry in English from across the globe according to regions and countries:

- Africa
- Australia
- Canada
- Caribbean
- Indian sub-continent
- New Zealand and Pacific Islands

AUSTRALIAN POETRY

Australia was first colonized in 1788, and literature of some distinction was written before the end of the nineteenth century. The development of Australian poetry could be divided into three periods:

- First phase begins with the colonial period extending up to the last decade of nineteenth century;
- Second phase spans over a period of a quarter of a century from the 1890s to the end of First World War;
- Third and recent phase beginning with the 1920s to this day.

The first poems in Australia were produced by two different types of settlers. First on campfire ballads or the bush ballads, telling of the hardships, adventures and tragedies and the verse written by intellectuals — the journalists, professors and administrators. Their themes were either descriptive of the country, or were nostalgic and often sentimental, full of longing and patriotism for the mother country.

Subject might be inspired by Australia, but style was invariably influenced by the British models. The years 1850-1860 are important years for Australian poetry. Henry Kendall belongs to this period. In contrast to the poetry of Kendall is Adam Lindsay Gordon. He created Australian form of verse from balladist. 1890 is particularly significant in Australian literary history. From 1890 onwards came a flood of genuine Australian poetry from poets like Victor Daley, George Essex Evans, Roderic Quinn, Mary Gilmore, Shaw Neilson, and Christopher Brennan who wrote lyrical, reflective and philosophical poems. Bush ballads poems are composed by men like Andrew Barton ("Banjo") Paterson, Henry Lawson and C. J. Dennis.

Twentieth century poets like A. D. Hope, Robert D. Fitzgerald, Kenneth Slessor, Douglas Stewart, Judith Wright, James McAuley and Rosemary Dobson. Judith Wright is undoubtedly the best woman poet in Australia. Her poetry brings out her response to the social situation, geographical location and above all to the landscape of her country. A. D. Hope (winner of the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1958) has produced poetry, which has a rare distinction in Australian literature. Given below are a few lines from Judith Wright and A. D. Hope "The Birds" Judith Wright writes:

If I could leave their battleground for the forest of a bird I could melt the past, the present and the future in one and find the words that lie behind all these languages then I could fuse my passions into one clear stone and be simple to myself as a bird is to the bird.

And coming to A. D. Hope, here are the opening lines from his poem titled "The Wandering Islands:"

You cannot build bridges between the wandering islands; the mind has no neighbours, and the unteachable heart Announces its armistice time after time, but spends Its love to draw them closer and closer apart.

CANADIAN POETRY

Canadian poetry came to maturity slowly and with difficulty. The development of literature then followed more or less the same pattern as we observe in Australia and New Zealand. The writers of verse were professional men, most of them born and educated in Britain. Pioneers engaged in strenuous physical toil also wrote poetry. These first poems with Canadian roots were of a retrospective, self-evaluative kind, notably the type that the critic R. E. Rashley calls the "survey poem". During this colonial period (which ended in 1867), Canada had minor poets like Joseph Howe, Susannah Moodie, Alexander McLachlan, Charles Heavyside and Charles Sangster. The year 1867 - the year of the Confederation - is a great landmark in Canadian history as the four provinces of Quebec, Ontario, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia combined under one Federal Government to form the Dominion of Canada. This event instilled a sense of national pride and gave a great impetus to literature.

The pioneer settler took on the larger symbolic role of a nation builder. It carries the realms of imagination along with the description of the landscape, which explorers, settlers, builders and politicians were completing in other spheres of human activity, is the reason behind the quest for "Canadianism" in writers, which continues even to the present day. The poets of this period were Charles Mair, Bliss Carman, Archibald Lampman, Duncan Campbell Scott, Frederick George Scott, Tom MacInnes, William Wilfred Campbell and Marjorie Pickthall. Though it is true to the English verse tradition in form and expression, in subject and mood it was distinctly Canadian. Some of the best lyrics are those that give a description of the landscape. If geography produced a distinctive kind of poetry, it is true of Australia and Canada. In both these countries, the landscape and climate played an important part in shaping the poetry. Duncan Campbell Scott's poems, for example, use the verse forms of Europe to write about a land of vast abundance and huge extent, of forest, lake, river and prairie. He writes about savage life, pioneer life, country life and civilization. In 1907 Robert Service wrote his Songs of Sourdough and other ballads. His poems became well known in Britain, and created a great interest in the adventurous life of the pioneers and the vast and varied opportunities offered by the Dominion of Canada.

The 1930s bring us to the beginning of modern Canadian poetry. E. J. Pratt who stands apart by his use of the narrative/survey rather than the lyric form of poetry like "Towards the Last Spike" is a kind of national epic. In this sense, he was truly Canadian and independent of European influence. Unlike him, modernist poets like F. R. Scott and A. J. M. Smith were influenced by European conventions by way of the United States of America. This influence prevented them to a certain extent in finding and developing an individual identity and the poetry is inspired by the grandeur and variety of the land of Canada. The modernists introduced North American culture.

After World War II we have the strongly personal poetry of poets like James Reaney, Jay Macpherson, Leonard Cohen, and Daryl Hine. The contributions of the women poets, P. K. Page, Margaret Avison, Anne Wilkinson and Margaret Atwood, give us the impression that Canada has probably more women poets of distinction than any other country in the world. Duncan Campbell Scott's poem is "The Forsaken." It shows his narrative powers and his sense of the tragic in life:

*Once in the winter
Out on a lake
In the heart of the north-land,
Far from the Fort
And far from the hunters,
A Chippewa woman
With her sick baby,
Crouched in the last hours
Of a great storm.
Frozen and hungry,
She fished through the ice
With the line of the twisted
Bark of the cedar,
And a rabbit-bone hook
Polished and barbed;
Fished with the bare hook
All through the wild day,
Fished and caught nothing;*

"The Forsaken' and "At Gull Lake" are Scott's tragic narrative. More than any other writer of his period Scott contributed to the formation of national consciousness in Canadian poetry. E. J. Pratt wrote memorable sea tales "The Cachalot," "The Titanic" and others. Pratt's poems also take up contemporary realities directly and he comes through as a poet who is at home in the modern world of technology.

NEW ZEALAND POETRY

The two islands, which make up New Zealand, were first colonized by the Europeans in about 1840. New Zealand has a vigorous literary tradition and its writers have contributed valuable insights, which are uniquely New Zealand in character. As in Australia and Canada most of the poets in the nineteenth century were journalists, professors, teachers, administrators, many of who were born and educated in Britain. From another group of men with no literary training we have the simple poems of home, and the ballad-narratives of pioneering adventures and hardships. The year 1890 marks a new beginning in the poetry of New Zealand. With the rise of a nationalistic spirit, some poets wrote of their country giving sentimental descriptions of an ideal "Maoriland." like William Pember Reeves and Jessie Mackay. In the poems of William Pember Reeves we find a feeling of confidence and national spirit. The Long White Cloud, one of his best books about New Zealand, was published in England in 1896.

Three women poets after Reeves - Ursula Bethell, Eileen Duggan and Robin Hyde -brought a deep religious feeling to the poetry of New Zealand. Eileen Duggan, writing in the 1920s, fuses native themes with traditional forms of expression and is one of New Zealand's finest lyrical writers. As in Britain, the Great Depression of the 1930's, gave rise to a group of poets who experimented with new forms, and infused into poetry their own disillusionment, loss of religious faith, frustration, irony and bitterness. In the works of poets like Allen Curnow and Charles Brasch the mountains and the sea become symbols of shelter, of generation and sometimes even of destruction. Drawing inspiration from the local landscape and history, they shaped a rich myth of islands and time, which symbolize the New Zealander's sense of sundering seas and his awareness of the fact that he alone could solve, his spiritual and social problems. One notable feature of New Zealand writing is the emphasis upon the material aspects of life - a determined worship of the practical man and the successful moneymaker, as one critic puts it. This explains why many gifted writers born in New Zealand in the past, have gone overseas - notable among them being the famous writer of short stories, Katherine Mansfield.

Here are two lines from Allen Curnow, New Zealand's most important poet:

Simply by sailing in a new direction

You could enlarge the world.

AFRICAN POETRY

The southern tip of the African continent was the first to be colonized, and the Dutch were the first to settle there, in 1652. In 1820 we have the first important landing of British colonists. The white African settlers, collectively known as the Boers, include people of Dutch, French and German descent. The conflict between the Boers and the ruling British government was settled in the year 1901 by a treaty, which legislated for equality of status as between Briton and Boer. In 1910 the Union of South Africa came into effect and the Central African Federation (consisting of Northern and Southern Rhodesia and Nyasaland) came into being in 1953. After 1960 the British Commonwealth in Africa underwent changes as one state after another achieved independent government.

Thomas Pringle wrote about the land, the natives and the animals. The best of the poets in the closing decades of the nineteenth century is the first native-born South African, Francis Carey Slater. Roy Campbell, also South African by birth and William Plomer are two distinguished poets of the twentieth century who wrote strongly about the poverty of the cultural climate of South Africa. West African poets like Dr. Armattoe and Michael Dei-Anang have tried to use English in a vividly African style. The emergence of sovereign states like Ghana, Guinea, Nigeria and Togoland and the growth of national consciousness have led to a new interest in traditional modes of thinking and awareness of the world. This has come to be embodied in the traditional poetry of drums, funeral dirges, folk songs, proverbs and tales and legends. Some of these traditional forms of expression have been transcribed from the vernaculars into English. One notable example is The Funeral Dirges of the Akan People transcribed by J. H. Kwabena Nketia.

Nigerian poets like Wole Soyinka (Nobel prize winner) and Christopher Okigbo have contributed a great deal to African literature. Here are a few lines from Soyinka whose poetry demonstrates the supreme nature of his achievement:

This road have I trodden in a time beyond

Memory of fallen leaves, beyond

Thread of fossil on the slate, yet I must

This way again, Let all wait the circulation

Of time's acrobat, who pray

For dissolution: the chronicle abides in clay texts

And fossil textures.

These African poets try to reinforce their sense of liberty through their poetry. The image of "Africa" dominates their thinking process and they seek an identity that is enduring through a return to traditional religion. Okigbo's poignant lines from his poem "Limits" is given below:

*Thus we must sing, tongue tied
Without name or audience
Making harmony among the branches.*

As in the other countries of the Commonwealth, English was imposed on Anglophone Africa as a means of easy communication and administrative convenience. An African writer is in voicing his thoughts and feelings to the world at large. While discussing the future of English, the famous Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe observes: The African writer should aim to use English that brings out his message without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English, which is at once unusual and able to carry his peculiar experience.

Africans proved the task set by Achebe. They succeeded in modern English Literature, especially with the poetry of West Africans like Amos Tutuola, Wole Soyinka and Gabriel Okara. Hence, the role of poetry, in African literature, has been highly effective in providing the people with the needful inspiration and the necessary insight. Poetry for African's is a source of learning and becoming aware of their destiny about their past, present and the possible future. For the African poets, in the words of the Indian critic, Srinivas Iyengar, "Poetry became a powerful medium through which they conveyed to the world audience, not only their despairs and hopes, the enthusiasm and empathy, the thrill of joy and the stab of pain... but also a nation's history as it moved from freedom to slavery, from slavery to revolution, from revolution to independence and from independence to tasks of reconstruction which further involve situations of failure and disillusion."

Nigerian poet, and Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka's masterful irony skilfully conceals anger at the racist attitude in his famous poem, "Telephone Conversation." After negotiating for a house on rent on telephone, he tells the landlady of his being a black African. He was rudely shocked when he was 'caught...fouly' by the lady's query regarding his darkness thus:

"HOW DARK...?' I had not misheard... Are you light OR VERY DARK..."

The theme of English superiority glares through David Rubadiri's poem "A Negro Labourer in Liverpool":

*Here his hope is the shovel
And his fulfillment resignation.*

Dennis Brutus, a South African poet, was subjected to torture by a cruel regime. His writing is full of images of love contrasted with images of death. Deification of Africa is another theme for many African poets, and it is perceived as their reaction to the self-glorification and the civilizing zeal of the imperial powers of Europe. Bernard Dadie's poem attains special significance viewed in that light. He says in a poem entitled "I Thank God":

*I thank you God for creating me black.
White is the colour for special occasions
Black the colour for every day
And I have carried the World since the dawn of time
And my laugh over the World, through the night creates
The Day.*

Some of the Africans converted into Christianity for class room education and well-paid jobs. As a result, the natives suffered a deep cultural shock as he was caught in a conflict between his own tribal culture and embracing Christianity for material benefits.

*Here we stand
Infants overblown
Poised between two civilizations
Finding the balance irksome.*

Gabriel Okara expresses the same sentiments in a lyric thus:

*When at break of day at a riverside I
hear jungle drums... Then I hear a
wailing piano Solo speaking of
complex ways.*

Thus, one realises that African poetry is not simply an offshoot of British literary tradition. Despite the many disadvantages such as a scarred past, colonial trauma, expression in a foreign medium, inability to travel abroad, unstable economic and political state of affairs in their respective nations, lack of educational opportunities, the African poet has effortless creative capacity. It is an enriching combination of rich oral literature, native experience and imported tradition of writing in English that made African poetry a tremendous success both at home and abroad.

CARIBBEAN POETRY

The West Indian achievement in poetry and fiction in a short span of 25 years is admirable and worthy of emulation by the rest of the Commonwealth. The absence of a native West Indian literature before the beginning of the 20th century may be attributed to the absence of a national consciousness. The West Indies was regarded as fragments of the British Empire and as colonies. Native poems deal with nature. In *Voices from Summerland* (1929), the first anthology of Jamaican poetry, we have descriptions of the pleasant, tropical, and colourful nature of the West Indies..

During the early part of the twentieth century, poet and novelist Claude McKay achieved international recognition. He focused on the sufferings of the Negro in the United States.

Derek Walcott of St. Lucia (Nobel prize winner) a poet of the British West Indies. He focused on poverty and racial and social problems

He has drawn poetic effects from the Creole dialect of St. Lucia while writing in English.

Writers like George Lamming and Derek Walcott are very effective artists. The religious or devotional tone is very strong in much of their writings. It comes through in Derek Walcott, George Campbell, Claude McKay, M. G. Smith, John Figueroa and many others. West Indian literature is one of the newest and most dynamic of the literatures of the British Commonwealth.

PAKISTANI POETRY

In Pakistan, the power and authority of the British as rulers grew rapidly after 1757, which led to a corresponding growth in the importance of the English language. The English brought to the East the new developments in the field of science and technology and philosophy, which were welcomed by some important groups. The formal adoption of English as the official language of India in 1835 is an important event in the cultural history of the territories, which constitute Pakistan and India. The culture of Hindus and Muslims have to be taken into account.

In Pakistan after the First World War Muslims started attempting to produce imaginative literature in English. Mumtaz Shah Nawaz, Shahid Suhrawardy and Itrat Hussain Zuberi are three important poets of the twentieth century. Shah Nawaz writes on the conflict between Eastern and Western cultures. The influence of T. S Eliot is evident in the imagery and language of Hussain Zuberi's poems, some of which have been published in *Poetry from Oxford*. Shahid Suhrawardy symbolizes the fusion of Western and Eastern cultures. These three poets do not have much affinity to the Bengali and Urdu literatures of the period as they approach to life and society. Standing apart from these writers, is M. A. Seljouk translates *My Goddess* into English. Poetry of a different kind has been produced by translators of Pakistani Urdu poetry. The works of Muhammad Iqbal, Pakistan's most famous Urdu poet, have been translated by Professor A. Nicholson. Mrs. Muhammad Husain translated Bengali verse.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, Commonwealth Poetry presents an immense landscape alive with creative energy and poetic sensibility, full of promise. These writings in the Commonwealth countries are seen to be different from one another and it is difficult to speak of a common culture that binds them. Commonwealth Poetry accommodates a variety of sensibilities reflecting different landscapes, races, nationalities, religions and cultures from the white British dominions (Canada, Australia and New Zealand), to the free coloured Nations (Asia, Africa, the Pacific Islands and the Caribbean region). In Africa and the West Indies, there is a conscious effort on the part of the writers to develop forms of expression that are particularly suited to their own problems, and not to resort blindly adopting the techniques of the European literatures. They have tried to "convey in a language that is not one's own, the spirit that is one's own" (Raja Rao in his foreword to *Kanthapura*). The writers of Australia, New Zealand and Canada, on the other hand, have tended to work within the accepted forms of literature and hence have not been notably experimental.

References

- [1] Achebe, Chinua. *Morning yet on Creation Day*. London: Heinemann, 1975.
- [2] Adcock, Fleur, ed. *The Oxford Book of Contemporary New Zealand Poetry*. Auckland: Oxford UP, 1982.
- [3] Brodsky, Joseph. "On Derek Walcott." *The New York Review of Books*. (10 Nov. 1983): 39-41.
- [4] Narasimhaiah, C.D. *An Anthology of Commonwealth Poetry*. Madras: Macmillan India, 1990.
- [5] Povey, John. "A Comment on the Attitudes to the Past in West African Poetry." *National Identity*. Ed. K.L. Goodwin. London: Heinemann, 1968.
- [6] Soyinka, Wole, Art, *Dialogue and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture*. London: Methuen 1993. Soyinka, Wole *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976).