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K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar: A Poet with Paradigm Shift

Dr. Suruchi Upadhyay

Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
DAV PG College, Siwan,
(A Constituent College of Jai Prakash University, Chapra).

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Abstract:

K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar (1908-1999) was primarily known as a critic, than as a poet. He was the first one who acknowledge and give Indian English Writings a distinct place in Literature, by writing a voluminous book, *Indian Writings in English* in (1973). The current paper aims to put forth the idea that he was significant critic yet most neglected poet in the Post-Modern Era of Indian English Poetry. Further, to trace out the qualities from his poetical texts namely: *Microcosmographia Poetica* (1978), *Sitayana* (1987) and *Krishna-Geetam* (1994) and lastly highlights his contribution to Indian English Poetry.

Keywords: Indian English Writings, critic, poet, Post-Modern Era, Indian English Poetry.

K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar is one of the doyens of Indian English scholars. He provided Indian English Literature with an independent identity and recognized it as a major subject of study at University Level. Apart from being a literary historian and a critic, he is also a biographer, reviewer, translator, editor, transcreator, letter-writer and above all a poet of par excellence. It is a pity to know that he is hardly known as an outstanding poet. However, it is the need of the hour that his poetical works should be evaluated in a proper perspective. To establish Iyengar as a poet of equal competence who wrote epic poetry against the existing poetic trends of satire, pastiche, montage in the era of Modernism and Post- Modernism.

In his late sixties Iyengar produced some fine poetry. He wrote in English and the range of his poetry vary from the descriptive, narrative, reflective, dramatic, heroic to the tragic, ironic

and satiric. His poetical works were overshadowed by his critical works. Even his poetry fails to evoke the type of response it deserves. The influence of his poetry remains confined only to a small group of the Aurobindonian Circle. In the Modernism and post-modernism, Iyengar carries forward the trend of spiritual poetry. He even goes far beyond and uses Indian myths and interprets these myths in evolutionary terms by taking the best elements of the Eastern and Western Epics. However, he makes Indian myths relevant to contemporary times by infusing feminist ideologies, philosophy, religiosity and spirituality.

The indifference towards Iyengar's poetry raises many questions. Is the cold response to Iyengar's poetry is due to the fact that he discovers his poetic talent relatively late? Or are his poetical works overshadowed by his critical works? Or does he write in a spiritually barren age? Or the mythical themes which he uses become redundant to the modern and postmodern poetry? Or is his poetry beyond the understanding of familiar readers? Or he wrote epic poetry in an age which is dominated by the triviality of subject matter? Or he carry forward the trend of spiritual poetry initiated by Sri Aurobindo? Or is his poetry devoid of intrinsic values? There are several questions of these types. These questions can be answered in the light of historical development of Indian English poetry. It will allow to know the historical relevance of Iyengar's spiritual poetry. It is done through the fourfold phases as envisaged by Markarand Paranjape in his book *Indian Poetry in English*.

K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar's poetry does not find the type of recognition it deserves. His poetry suffers from studied silence of the critics, historian and anthologists. Its the need of an hour to evaluate his poetry in a proper perspective. Iyengar objectively studies Indian English poetry, its various themes, forms and finds his poetry as an essential medium of expressing Indian consciousness through the four phases colonialism, Nationalism, Modernism and Post Modernism.

The first phase, 'Colonialism', spans from 1825-1900. The major poets of this era are Henry Derozio, Michael Madhusudhan Dutt and Toru Dutt. The poetry of this phase is imitative and derivative. It lacks any sort of identity. It only expresses the narrow segment of a society. The second phase, 'Nationalism', extends from 1900-1950. This phase tries to attain its original form by being less initiative and derivative in nature. It reflects spirit of romanticism,

spiritualism and marked influences of British poetry. It is the golden period in Indian English Poetry. It has produced great luminaries like, Sri Aurobindo, RabindraNath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu .

The third phase, 'Modernism', starts from 1950 . This phase is remarkable for its vigorous search for thematic and formal identity. It is influenced by modern movements like Existentialism, Confessionalism, Surrealism, Feminism and Dadaism. The poets of modernism phase were influenced by foreign poets like William Carols William, Robert Bly, Ezra Pound, Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg. The poets of this era write poetry on Indian scenes and develop their own poetic modes and linguistic techniques. Modernism gives such eminent poets like Ezekiel, Ramanujan, Parthasarthy, Kamala Das, Dom Moraes, Arun Kolatkar, Keki N. Daruwalla and Gieve Patel.

The fourth phase, 'Post Modernism,' begins from 1980's.. It gives a distinctive identity to Indian English Poetry. The poets engage themselves to develop new forms and themes to write poetry. They write poems on local scenes and trivial subjects. The poetic techniques of this phase was parody, pastiche, juxtaposition, collage, montage etc. It is the superficial nature of poetry that is a marked characteristic of this age. They highlight common places, things and persons. The familiar poets, were Mahapatra and Mehrotra, Agha Sahid Ali, Manohar Shetty, Saleem Peerdina and Vikram Seth..

These were the poetic trends when Iyengar began his poetic career. He wrote spiritual and religious poetry which is against the trend . A serious effort is required to locate and establish him as one of the significant poet in Indian English Poetry. To ascertain further from the study, we find that Iyengar is a poet with revolutionary zeal. He swims against the poetic currents of his age. He is against the satiric, the ironic and the trivial poetry written during the era of Modernism and Post Modernism. He believes that the conflicting and diseased mind whether, sub-conscious or unconscious, cannot produce a good poetry to cater to the aesthetic needs of ailing humanity. Iyengar was the one who dares to take up challenging task to recover the lost glory of poetry spiritual poetry.

He restores poetry and makes it dignified in its expression by making it a vehicle of spiritual experiences. By his poetic works *Microcosmographia Poetica* (1978) *Sitayana* (1987), *Saga of Seven Mothers* (1991) and *Krishna–Geetam* (1994), Iyengar gives mankind and future poets the idea of what good poetry is, but even goes far beyond, that by making spiritual poetry a powerful mode of expression.

Iyengar started writing in an age which is dominated by triviality of subject matter. He restores the thematic grandeur by celebrating human dignity. His poetry paints the beauty of consciousness, spirituality, philosophy and religiosity (in terms of faith).

In his *Microcosmographia Poetica* Iyengar presents the blueprint of Spiritual Poetry. In this poetic manifesto, he outlines the aim of poetry. Poetry for him is an instrument of transcendence. It aims to create a meeting point of Heaven and Earth or more precisely between divinity and humanity. Iyengar through his poetical works acts as beacon to spread a message of hope, peace, and happiness to the confused voyagers of the world. In his epic trilogy *Sitayana* (1987), *Saga of Seven Mothers* (1991), and *Krishna–Geetam* (1994), Iyengar takes new themes of womanhood, evolution of feminine and masculine consciousness and infuses spiritual, modern, philosophic and upanishadic wisdom, which is against the existing trends of Modernism and Postmodernism.

Iyengar even goes far beyond that, and establishes the essence of Indian legends and myths by making them a relevant source for his poetical works. He recovers their pristine glory which has suffered a great setback in the hands of Modern and Postmodern poets. The new poets either overlooked or misinterpreted Indian myths. It is only, Iyengar who highlights Indian myths and interprets them in their proper context by making them relevant to the modern time. He makes Indian myths the vehicle of expressing scientific ideas especially in evolutionary terms. It is Iyengar only who uses different versions of myths in his poetical work to teach everlasting truth to humankind. He stands far above than his fellow poets like Parthasarthy, Daruwalla, Arvind Kumar Mehrotra, Saleem Peerdina etc, who concentrate on trivial issues and degrade the divine like character of humanity. In order to set them right, Iyengar interprets man and his consciousness in terms of divinity.

So, Iyengar attempts to continue and promote Aurobindo's effort of reappraisal and evaluation of the myths of India, which are indeed the treasures of spiritual wisdom. He uses old myths, refines them in modern terms. He preserve their antique strength, depth, simplicity of message which can be cherished by the contemporary generation.

Iyengar goes on to poetize man as a heroic figure who overcome odds coming in his spiritual path. Iyengar looks for new orientations and opening of fresh channels of philosophical wisdom, spiritual experiences and myths to make it relevant to the contemporary time. The era in which the poetry assumes the form of Irony, Satire, Collage, Pastiche and Montage, Iyengar extensively uses epic form for his verses. As a follower of Sri Aurobindo's idea, that epic poetry is the only medium to express exalted ideas ,Iyengar tries to keep the epic tradition alive and make his poetry a medium to highlight different states of consciousness passing from the Ordinary Mind to the Higher Mind. He combines the best elements of Eastern and Western Epic.

Keeping in mind the views of Sri Aurobindo, Iyengar in his epic trilogy, *Sitayana*, *Saga of Seven Mothers* and *Krishna-Geetam* presents a confluence of spiritual, aesthetic and religious elements. In these epics he focuses his attention on the ascent of human soul and the descent of divinity producing a Spiritual Poetry of the highest order.

We find Iyengar as a true heir to the poetic legacy of Sri Aurobindo. Though poets like Nolini Kant Gupta, Dilip Kumar Roy, K.D. Sethna, Nirod Baran endeavoured hard to continue the poetic tradition established by Aurobindo, but they cannot sustain and promote reader's interest in Spiritual Poetry. They tried to keep that tradition alive but hardly succeeded. It is only Iyengar, who lives up to the promise shown by Aurobindo in his the *Future Poetry*. He even goes on to expand his poetry by making it an instrument of attaining Higher Consciousness .He demonstrates that the heroic poetry can be produced in an age which is known for its triviality, ugliness, conflicts, frustration and mental disorders. His poetry can well be panacea for the suffering humanity.He effectively incorporates religiosity, mysticism and makes a literary art not one dimensional but it covers all the dimensions of one's personality.

If going against the tide of contemporary poetry is a mark of originality, Iyengar is certainly a great poet. He stands firm and continues the tradition of spiritual poetry of Sri Aurobindo. He begins his mission with *Microcosmographia Poetica* (1978). The book gives us a fresh and extended interpretation of the Spiritual Poetry by Sri Aurobindo. Iyengar refreshes his master's views but also goes on to add some points to it. Sri Aurobindo's *Future Poetry* exhibits the inner most truth of life and transcends intellectual and sensational responses among mankind. It not only limit itself as a poetry of an ordinary men and manners, but it is a poetry of spirited soul with a more developed psychic and intuitive mind. This type of future poetry will change human life and add spread spiritual values.

Iyengar conception of the Future Poetry is slightly different from his master. No doubt, his future poetry will cater to the spiritual, psychological, mental and philosophical needs of ailing humanity, but will also entail freedom of spirit, love for life, glory of word and inner beauty of consciousness. Iyengar's future poetry will give true delight to its readers by making literature an integral part of social consciousness.

Iyengar's *Sitayana* (1987), produces a new vision of an old myth and makes it fully attuned to the emotional, intellectual and spiritual needs of the modern humanity. He recast the story of Valmiki's *Ramayana* and presents it from the point of view of Sita. He even incorporates best elements from Tulsidas's *Ramcharit Manas* and Kamban's *Ramayana*. *Sitayana* is an epic based on the theme of womanhood where Sita is a primordial *shakti* and a representative of women and their woes.

Iyengar's Sita is neither Sita of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, nor of Kamban, or Tulsi. She undergoes a complete transformation and reflects the best elements of feminine psyche. All female characters are given the voice of their own and they protest against male-dominated society; whether it is Sita, *rishipatnis* (Lopamundra, Ahalya), Rakshshas women (Mandodari, Sulochana, Trijata, Anala) or Queen's of Ayodhya (Sumitra, Kausalya).

There are innovations in techniques of narration and form of poetry. Iyengar uses stream of consciousness, reveries, monologue and dream technique to make the story of antiquity relevant to the contemporary time. He takes the unique blend of the Eastern (spiritual, religious,

and aesthetic elements) and the Western (heroic, invocation, grand language, media res) epics to elevate the story in cosmic terms.

The epic trilogy, *Sitayana*, *Saga of Seven Mothers* and *Krishna-Geetam*, employs Iyengar's own metrical form of 10-7, 10-7 unrhymed quatrains. Time and again in the text we find philosophic, upanishadic, scientific, social, spiritual and evolutionary perspectives of Sri Aurobindo.

In *Sitayana*, the focus is on the feminine perspective. Similarly, in *Saga of Seven Mothers* Iyengar accomplishes a great poetic feat by making the story of Seven Mothers of Indian Mythology the symbol of seven roles of womanhood. They face difficult situations and their gradual growth is carried forward from the *Satyug*, *Treta*, *Dwapara* and *Kali*. Iyengar poetizes the legendary tales of these female figures. He shows them as an incarnation of *Adya Shakti* in various forms of female consciousness.

The Seven Mothers from Devahuti to Kannaki, gradually ascent in their consciousness. There is gradual transformation in their mind. We see change from Ordinary mind to Overmind in Kannaki and lastly she achieves Supramental Consciousness. Through, these characters Iyengar tells that while leading an ordinary life and facing complex situations one can achieve spiritual enlightenment.

Krishna-Geetam (1994) is also an example of Iyengar's poetic genius. With his tremendous poetic powers, Iyengar re-works the myth of Vishnu's Ten Incarnations in terms of evolutionary process and the development of human consciousness through different forms of life. He created the unique personality of Lord Krishna which is at once human and divine. He interprets Krishna in terms of modern consciousness.

Krishna's Consciousness is human when we see child Krishna, whereas divine, when he liberates evil from Earth and his future role unfolds in when his consciousness acts as a symbol of *ananda*, beauty, truth and power as well as saviour to human life. Even after the withdrawal of Krishna, Iyengar relates Krishna Consciousness to Buddha, Mahavira, Meera, Goda Devi and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu.

By using Vishnu's Ten Incarnations from Fish, Tortoise, Boar, Man-Lion to Dwarf Boy, Parashurama, Raghu Rama, Balarama, followed by Krishna and the Kalki in near future. Iyengar effectively delineates the gradual evolution of masculine consciousness in terms of an evolutionary process. The first one is of animal consciousness (fish, tortoise and bear) the second is human consciousness (man- lion to dwarf boy Parashurama), the third category consists of divine consciousness (Raghu, Rama and Balarama), nonetheless the last is the confluence of Human and Divine that is Krishna consciousness and Kalki in the near future carries forward a new consciousness, a *nav chetna* which will sensitize the mind and the body.

However, inspite of contributing so much, still his poetry is never recognized and popular as it has not been put as yet in proper perspective. Critics were either hostile or indifferent, paying little attention to its poetic excellence. They are blind to the beacon light of the future poetry still relishing the post-modernist triviality and irrational aspect of humanity. They refuse to open their eyes to the tremendous beauty and splendour of epic poetry and its mythical wisdom.

However, we can say that his poetry will always be relevant as it gives a new note of hope, and re-interprets Indian myths in terms of modern ideas to make it relevant in the contemporary world. Indeed, his poetry presents a tremendous poetic wealth which challenges to future scholars. He is perhaps the only poet after Sri Aurobindo, who uses epic form with an unprecedented success and contributes a new type of modern religious epic. Iyengar's poetical works leave an everlasting message to ailing humanity to bloom and spread their petals, to emerge from the darkness of chaos and to mingle with Supramental Consciousness.

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