

ISSN : 2395-4132

THE EXPRESSION

An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

Bimonthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal



Impact Factor 6.4

Vol. 9 Issue 2 April 2023

Editor-in-Chief : Dr. Bijender Singh

Email : editor@expressionjournal.com

www.expressionjournal.com



POETRY ANTHOLOGIES AND THE SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES OF THE MODERN INDIAN CANON

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Abstract

Poetry anthologies exist in a liminal space serving the “dual purpose” of announcing new poetry on the one hand and the creation of a canon on the other. The creation of the modern Indian poetry identity—throughout the 20th century—has more or less taken place within the pages of anthologies. It is characterized by a long twisted editorial trajectory involving the inclusion and exclusion of texts, negotiation with imitation of style, and the acculturation and synthesis of newer forms. As the modern Indian poetry canon began to be consolidated in the 1990s with anthologies such as *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (1992) and *The Oxford Anthology of Modern Indian Poetry* (1994) it also left a big representative vacuum concerning the archiving of regional poetry. As the parameters of the *new poetry* (post-1990) keep evolving, there is an emerging interest now in anthologizing poetry of the marginalized and the regional challenging the long-standing canon largely composed of poets from within the Bengal and Bombay literary circles. This paper examines the nature in which the enterprise of editing and anthologizing poetry has become tied to a larger national narrative. Secondly, it highlights the evolving position of marginal poetry/poets in mainstream anthologies across the last three decades (post-1990). Lastly, this paper emphasizes the importance to constantly examine literary canons against current political culture(s), and attempts to reveal how anthologies become mired in the dialogic webs and cultural conflicts of their times.

Keywords

Modern Indian Poetry, Canon Theory, Anthologies, Marginality, Regional Literature, Modernity, Book History.

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I

The anthology genre, despite the lack of its proper acknowledgement, has been at the centre of both the wider market of public readers and academic literary cultures for a very long time. Anthologies empower subjects, and ideologies, and often serve as the backbone of literary canons (Di Leo 2). However, the argument against anthologies has been that they are superficial, offering only a collection of texts dislocated from their intended collections and contexts. Historically, there exists a long-standing criticism against poetry anthologies, including testimonies from Western modernist giants such as T.S. Eliot, Robert Graves, and Laura Riding. Riding and Graves argue in their radical publication, *A Pamphlet against Anthologies* (1928) that “the serious nature of poets and poetry is trivialized, and even actively destroyed by anthologists arbitrarily cutting up poetry” (Jacobs 170). Despite these ongoing accusations, only anthologies have consistently played a significant role in the making of literary canons. However, to begin an examination of anthologies it is necessary to understand the politics and intent that drive these powerful and often controversial volumes.

Modern Indian poetry in English emerged as one of the many “new literatures” after the Second World War and the age of colonial empires came to an end (King 1). Unlike the literature of Africa or the Caribbean, most of the twentieth-century discourse on postcolonial literature has neglected modern Indian poetry in English – as opposed to modern Indian fiction – perhaps because it displays a lack of “relationship to the cultural movements which led to national independence” according to Bruce King (1). But this alleged lack of alertness to the cultural campaigns of the time may be easily located within the pages of poetry anthologies that have been published since the 1950s. The project of re-establishing a new Indian literary identity after independence began immediately in the 1950s with poetry anthologies such as *Modern Indian Poetry: An Anthology* (1958) edited by A.V. Rajeswara Rau and *Modern Indo-Anglian Poetry* (1959) edited by P. Lal and K.R. Rao, both published by Kavita Books in New Delhi. These volumes were already conscious of the power and potential of the anthology to herald fresh ideas into the literary landscape.

Vol. 9 Issue 2 (April 2023)

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Between 1950 and 1980 the publication of poetry anthologies in the newly independent India went through rapid cycles of experimentation—on the one hand, there was the tendency to comprehensively accumulate and publish contemporary poetry being written, on the other hand, there was the secondary tendency to distill poetry and establish a new poetic canon. During the 1980s and 1990s, anthologies' focus shifted to the establishment of canon partly influenced by the entry of big publishing houses in the industry and also influenced by the growing Anthology Wars which was happening in the West led by publishing giants such as W.W. Norton, Faber, and Oxford University Press (Chaitas).

Modern Indian poets, namely Nissim Ezekiel, Jayanta Mahapatra, A.K. Ramanujan, Arun Kolatkar, Keki. N. Daruwalla, Dom Moraes, Dilip Chitre, Eunice de Souza, Adil Jussawalla, Agha Shahid Ali, Vikram Seth, and Manohar Shetty all make an appearance in *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (1992) chosen and edited by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra. He states in his astute *Introduction* that “The origins of modern Indian poetry in English go no further back than the poets in this anthology” (1). Two years earlier Mehrotra had included ten of the mentioned poets in his previous anthology *Twenty Indian Poems* (1990) also published by Oxford University Press and targeted towards undergraduate literature students. Between 1990 and 2012 *Twenty Indian Poems* was reissued ten times, with each reissue running for multiple thousand copies. One may argue that Mehrotra's Oxford poetry anthologies helped create and stabilize what we now understand as the canonical modern Indian poets.

The emerging book market and inclusion of literary studies in educational curricula have contributed immensely to the surge in the popularity of poetry anthologies in recent decades. However anthologies remain an acutely political space, and as debates and discourses regarding the democratic representation of linguistic and cultural diversity have emerged with increasing intensity in recent years so have the contents of anthologies been put under scrutiny. If we were to measure and critique all the major Indian poetry anthologies that have been published throughout the 1970s to 1990s based upon the yardstick of contemporary political and representational discourse then most of them would come out unsatisfactory.

The influence anthologies can have over a particular literary culture is very visceral. It is one of the few genres that can mediate between the academia and the public readers and therefore is responsible for taking new ideas into the public sphere (Di Leo 5). What is evident in the Oxford poetry anthologies of Mehrotra is the enforcement of a selection boundary, attaching an underlying nationalist project—a boundary that inevitably becomes political. On the one hand, anthologies constantly strive for the creation of a unified literary identity or a canon; on the other hand, there is also the growing demand to accommodate both mainstream and peripheral literature(s) as well.

II

The *modus operandi* of an anthology is the archiving of texts. An anthology, by placing a poet or a poem within the company of other poets and poems, creates its context and solidifies ideas. This is facilitated through a process of *inclusion* and *exclusion* carried out during the process of editing with varying rigour. It is this process that eventually transforms texts into archives. The act of archiving or anthologizing thus yields two registries in the process—*literary memory* and *cultural amnesia*. Most of the peripheral/regional poets and poetry have been lost to cultural amnesia, owing to their absence from the pages of major poetry anthologies. This has fed the long-standing accusation that the modern Indian poetry canon is cosmopolitan.

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As the Indian subcontinent is composed of many languages and cultures, this plural existence constantly evokes a hegemonic tension, one that eventually manifests on the literary front. For most of the human past, the construction of history (or histories) has been achieved through literary narratives (Puchner), and Indian poetry anthologies since the 1950s have played a decisive role in the creation of the national literary identity. An argument may be made here—literary canons are not born, they are normalized. The present modern Indian canon, as they appear in the 1990s Oxford anthologies, comprises mainly the poetic works of poets who operated around the Delhi, Calcutta, and Bombay literary circles. The vast and rich literary output of regional writers of the subcontinent mainly Jammu and Kashmir (with the exception of Agha Sahid Ali) and India's North-East have remained absent from the pages of major anthologies. For a long time, this omission has subsequently created a marginalized territory removed from the literary narrative and national canon.

How do we map cultural spaces and cultural dominance in the pages of anthologies? The ethical demands of anthologizing the poetry of India itself is a monumental task. Any editor of a poetry anthology using the categorical “Indian” in the title is already risking criticism because of the compromises that have been made during the selection process. This is always the case since an anthology cannot afford an unlimited number of pages with an unlimited number of entries. The editor's role, therefore, is pivotal in the creation of a literary canon. Major publishing houses have always treated anthologies as a nationalist project. This homogeneous categorization of “Indian poetry” in these anthologies repeatedly deprives the resonance and specificities that are characteristic of regional and culturally rooted poetry.

As the anthology wars intensified in the West in the 1980s and 1990s, the tremors of this literary cold war were also felt within the Indian publishing industry. The intensity of this global paradigm shift in anthologizing and canonizing of texts, resulted in the publication of two iconic anthologies of Indian poetry: *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (1992) edited by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, and *The Oxford Anthology of Modern Indian Poetry* (1994) edited by Vinay Dharwadker & A. K. Ramanujan.

There are two conjectures as to why these two volumes have emerged as the standard of modern Indian poetry. First, they are published by a bonafide university press with wide networks in both the academic and trade book markets, and secondly, both volumes are edited by celebrated star editors of the time. In our retrospective assessment, they must be considered influential as they have remained in print and in vogue, when close to one hundred and thirty anthologies of Indian poetry in English have been published after them in the last three decades—since 1994. The latter anthologies have gone out of print, not having made significant cultural footprints. Mehrotra's volume has been reprinted more than ten times and recently has been republished again as a cheaper student's edition paperback to be circulated within the university curriculum. However, with the exception of Agha Sahid Ali, who is described as someone who “has made exile his permanent condition” (Mehrotra 139), the anthology, which claims to represent modern Indian poetry gives little exposure to peripheral/regional poetry.

III

The unspoken yet long-standing reservation against the inclusion of regional Kashmiri poetry and North-East poetry into mainstream anthologies stems from several factors: ideological and political. Although part of the Indian subcontinent, the two regions exist as marginally sealed and separated intrinsic cultures. It may be argued that the publication of

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anthologies such as *An Anthology of Modern Kashmiri Verse(1930-1960)* (1972) edited by Trilokinath Raina and made possible by the grant bestowed by the Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages; *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-East India* (2009) edited by Robin Ngangom and Kynpham Nongkynrih came as a response to fill an unattended space in the national literary narrative. Both Ngangom and Nongkynrih express strong opinions in the *Introduction* to their anthology concerning the “rootedness visible everywhere in the writings of this region” (xii). The “political” emerges in the poetry of these regions – not exclusively – as a form of “nervous expression” of a deeply rooted internal conflict, argues poet Robin Ngangom. The vividness of this theme stands in stark contrast to the contemporaneous literary trend(s) one finds in the mainstream anthologies of modern Indian poetry. The anxiety of being Indian was a sentiment first shared by Indian writers when novels that were written in English suddenly gained more visibility in the early twentieth century (Mukherjee 78), but the anxiety of being Indian that writers of Kashmir and the North-East experience is an anxiety—based not merely on language— but one that is rooted in its soil. Anthologies are political spaces as they have become increasingly tied to both contemporary social and political cultures. The mainstream anthology, and their exclusion of the peripheral/regional, is a form of political education as Marianne Moore—modernist poet and editor—observes “omissions are not accidents” (vi).

IV

Since the 1970s, there have been only a handful of comprehensive Indian poetry anthologies casting wide selections of both poems and poets. Mention may be made of P. Lal’s *Modern Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology & A Credo* (1971) which was one of the pioneering anthologies that attempted a wide survey of the poetry output of its time. A similar attempt was made by Vinay Dharwadker & A.K. Ramanujan when they edited *The Oxford Anthology of Modern Indian Poetry* (1994), which brought together poems composed in English and translated vernacular poems within one volume. Since 2000 poet-editor Jeet Thayil has made attempts at an updated canon of modern Indian poetry with *60 Indian Poets* published in 2008 and *The Penguin Book of Indian Poets* published in 2020. With the inclusion of overlooked poets such as Revathy Gopral, Mamang Dai, and Robin Ngangom, Thayil’s anthologies have overcome some hurdles over the cultural bracketing of the national literary identity.

The publication of *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-East India* (2009) by Penguin publishers and *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India* (2010) by Oxford University Press also suggests the shifting attitudes of major publishing houses in their willingness to venture into archiving the literature of the peripheral/regional. In more recent anthologies such as the *Harper Collins Book of English Poetry* (2012) edited by Sudeep Sen (published by Harper Collins India), *100 Great Indian Poems* (2018) edited by Abhay K. (published by Bloomsbury India), and *Modern English Poetry by Younger Indians* (2019) edited by Sudeep Sen (published by Sahitya Akademi), the shift in attitude towards a more open and encompassing attempt at revising the identity of modern Indian poetry is visible.

On the academic front, the most recent Delhi University anthology *Indian Writing in English* edited by Anjana Neira Dev and Amrita Bhalla and introduced in 2013 meticulously contains the work of four Indian poets: Henry Louis Derozio, Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, and Robin Ngangom. Although each poet is accompanied by only two poems respectively, in terms of metrics each represents a twenty-five percent weightage in an undergraduate anthology that is read by thousands of students each semester. The inclusion of Ngangom in a central

university anthology designed to cover two hundred years of Indian English literature thus become extremely significant for regional poetry.

The construction of any national canon demands a meticulous assessment of the literature of its people. Since anthologies act as archival spaces, the consolidation of national literature requires continual examination of the canons they create against the backdrop of political culture. Eventually, the survival or the slow disappearance of a poet and his work solely depends on his frequent inclusion in anthologies. Anthologies—and canons in particular—are exercises in consolidation (Berube 457), and there is a tendency—as observed in the past—for literary canons to become extremely hegemonic once solidified.

What is required at present is not the condemnation of the existing canon, but to constantly challenge existing canons to create a dialogue. It is only through the dialectical exchange in the pages of future anthologies that a healthy and transparent idea of modern Indian poetry can be created. At present, India's literature is rich, but the creation of a true democratic canon remains unfulfilled. A gradual shift in the landscape of poetry anthology publication in India is becoming visible, yet the change is still marginal and uncertain. It remains to be seen whether the inclusion of select peripheral/regional poets as seen in recent years should be celebrated; or if possible, perhaps to strive towards complete literary decanonization.

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www.expressionjournal.com ISSN: 2395-4132

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