

Unit II Poetry –Detailed Study

Of the literary genres, poetry is predominantly the manifestation of human life in its myriad faces. Any course in literature studies will envisage a lacuna if it does not explore the realm of poetry. The second unit of this course on Postcolonial Literature is no exception to the fact stated above. The six poems prescribed hereunder are of detailed study. They have been meticulously chosen to have a variety of themes, authorship, ethnicity, culture, and of course, to have good literary standards.

Poets hailing from various regions of the world viz. E. J. Pratt [Canadian], Judith Wright [Australian], Abioseh Nicol [West African], Zulfikar Ghose [Pakistani], Mervyn Morris [Jamaican] and Edwin Thumboo [Singaporean] have been chosen and one of their popular poems have been culled out and presented in this unit as the prescribed poems.

Pratt's *The Dying Eagle* portrays a spectacle of the aquiline dominion; the monarch-like power the leader Eagle enjoyed and how he felt desperate losing his position and line of control over his region with unusual, unknown and strange entry of a new steel bird into his hitherto unconquered province.

Judith Wright's *Fire at the Murdering Hut* presents the futile wish of a dead woman for reawakening, rebirth and reunion with her lover who had murdered her for her infidelity. The century long waiting and the unjust wishes of the woman have well been exposed. The poem abounds in symbols of rosewood tree, fire, stone etc.

Abioseh Nicol's *The Meaning of Africa* is indeed a fine exploration of the countryside of Africa. The poet states that he is successful in his attempt of finding a new meaning for Africa as he feels 'contented, happy and fulfilled'. The poem presents a beautiful landscape of the rural fold portraying the innocent and busy routine of the rural folk

Zulfikar Ghose's *This Landscape: these People* exposes the issues of diasporic consciousness. The narrator's difficulties of getting himself adjusted and adapted in a strange place and the problems thereof have taken a strong hold in the poem. But, at the same time it does teach him the ways of maintaining equilibrium as time passes by. At last, he accepts the reality and nurtures a sense of belonging thereby turning the new place his own.

Mervyn Morris' *Literary Evening, Jamaica* brings up the literary evenings, a meeting of young poets; with their sessions of poetry reading and brainstorming. The poem is the poet's appeal and advice to be optimistic and see the brighter side of life. The poet opines that the younger poets of country have too easily taken to the negative aspects of literary writings and their

compositions also do tell upon such negations. He reminds them that they are two young for any disillusionment.

Edwin Thumboo's *Words* is a simple poem that reiterates words, though simple and plain could turn devastating for the users as well as the receiver take them in their own way. They exaggerate, edit and interpret the meaning according to their whims and fancies. Growing too polite and using words and phrases to exhibit that politeness, many a time, miserably lead one to get understood in the wrong way.

***The Dying Eagle* by E. J. Pratt**

A light had gone out from his vanquished eyes;
His head was cupped within the hunch of his shoulders;
His feathers were dull and bedraggled; the tips
Of his wings sprawled down to the edge of his tail.
He was old, yet it was not his age
Which made him roost on the crags
Like a rain-drenched raven
On the branch of an oak in November.
Nor was it the night, for there was an hour
To go before sunset.
An iron had entered
His soul which bereft him of pride and realm,
Had struck him today; for up to noon
That crag had been his throne.

Space was his empire, bounded only
By forest and sky and the flowing horizons.
He had outfought, outlived all his rivals,
And the eagles that now were poised over glaciers
Or charting the coastal outlines of clouds
Were his by descent: they had been tumbled
Out of their rocky nests by his mate,
In the first trial of their fledgeling spins.
Only this morning the eyes of the monarch
Were held in arrest by a silver flash
Shining between two peaks of the ranges-
A sight which galvanized his back,
Bristled the feathers on his neck,
And shot little runnels of dust where his talons
Dug recesses in the granite.
Partridge? Heron? Falcon? Eagle? Game or foe?
He would reconnoitre.

Catapulting from the ledge,
He flew at first with rapid beat, Level, direct: then with his grasp
Of spiral strategy in fight,
He climbed the orbit
With swift and easy undulations,
And reach positions where he might
Survey the bird - for bird it was;
But such a bird as never flew
Between the heavens and the earth
Since pterodactyls, long before
The birth of condors, learned to kill
And drag their carrion up the Andes.

The eagle stared at the invader
Marked the strange bat-like shadow moving
In leagues over the roofs of the world,
Across the passes and moraines,
Darkening the vitriol blue of the mountain lakes.
Was it a flying dragon?
Head, Body and wings, a tail fan-spread
And taut like his own before the strike;
And there in front two whirling eyes
That took unshuttered
The full blaze of the meridian.
The eagle never yet had known

A rival he would not grapple,
But something in this fellow's length
Of back, his plated glistening shoulders,
Had given him pause.
And did that thunder Somewhere in his throat not argue
Lightning in his claws?
And then The speed - was it not double his own?
But what disturbed him most, angered
And disgraced him was the unconcern
With which this supercilious bird
Cut through the aquiline dominion,
Snubbing the ancient suzerain With extra-territorial insolence,
And disappeared.

So evening found him on the crags again,
This time with sloven shoulders

And nerveless claws.
Dusk had outridden the sunset by an hour
To haunt his unhorizoned eyes.
And soon his flock flushed with the chase
Would be returning, threading their glorious curves
Up through the crimson archipelagos
Only to find him there –
Deaf to the mighty symphony of wings,
And brooding over the lost empire of the peaks.

Fire at the Murdering Hut Judith Wright

I - THE GRAVE

You who were the snake hidden under my house,
the breath of the bushfire—
are you come to take me again like a storm in the night,
Oh storm of my desire ?
Are you come to take me like a knife in the breast
after this silent century?
You will find me this time lying alone.
It has been a long time you left me with the rose-tree
the wandering mist and the stone.

Lay down your fire beside my frost again,
against my stone your blade of love
I have been too long alone in the drought and rain:
it is all true as you said.
Come now and take me -
dig with the blade of your heart into the grave and wake me,
and this time you will find me lying alone.
I have been here too long with a white rose-tree,
the wandering mist and the stone.

II - THE FIRE

Are you one of the old dead, whisperer under my feet?
I stamp on your shallow earth
like a red-bird, my song is the last message of love,
which is the news of death.

Now I shall even eat your white roses and eat
the dry moss on your stone.
Neither love nor death come to the dead, nor does flesh
grow on the bared bone.

But look, I am beautiful, I dance on your grave
like a lover's ghost.
I dance with your tree of roses, I whirl my blade
till they fall into black dust.
And though I am not your lover and am not love
I shall set before I am gone
a kiss on the rose-root to travel down to your breast;
the last message of love, the fire's black stain
to wear like a badge over your white breastbone

III - THE STONE

Cruel was the steel in the hand that split my sleep
and branded me with pain.
Why did I not lie for ever out of time's way,
cold, quiet and deep?
Now I am delivered to the fire again
and set naked in the track of merciless day
for years to fret me, those instruments of love
that will eat my stone away.

You the poor nakedness that lies beneath—
the bone that love left bare—
I hear you call on him, the terrible one
the eater even of death.

THE MEANING OF AFRICA

by Abioseh Nicol

Africa, you were once just a name to me
But now you lie before me with sombre green challenge
To that loud faith for freedom (life more abundant)

Which we once professed shouting
Into the silent listening microphone
Or on an alien platform to a sea
Of white perplexed faces troubled
With secret Imperial guilt; shouting
Of you with a vision euphemistic
As you always appear
To your lonely sons on distant shores.

Then the cold sky and continent would disappear
In a grey mental mist.
And in its stead the hibiscus blooms in shameless scarlet
and the bougainvillea in mauve passion
entwines itself around strong branches
the palm trees stand like tall proud moral women
shaking their plaited locks against the
cool suggestive evening breeze;
the short twilight passes;
the white full moon turns its round gladness
towards the swept open space
between the trees; there will be
dancing tonight; and in my brimming heart
plenty of love and laughter.
Oh, I got tired of the cold northern sun
Of white anxious ghost-like faces
Of crouching over heatless fires
In my lonely bedroom.
The only thing I never tired of
was the persistent kindness
Of you too few unafraid
Of my grave dusky strangeness.

So I came back
Sailing down the Guinea Coast.
Loving the sophistication
Of your brave new cities:
Dakar, Accra, Cotonou,

Lagos, Bathurst and Bissau;
Liberia, Freetown, Libreville,
Freedom is really in the mind.

Go up-country, so they said,
To see the real Africa.
For whomsoever you may be,
That is where you come from.
Go for bush, inside the bush,
You will find your hidden heart,
Your mute ancestral spirit.
So I went, dancing on my way.

Now you lie before me passive
With your unanswering green challenge.
Is this all you are?
This long uneven red road, this occasional succession
Of huddled heaps of four mud walls
And thatched, falling grass roofs
Sometimes ennobled by a thin layer
Of white plaster, and covered with thin
Slanting corrugated zinc.
These patient faces on weather-beaten bodies
Bowing under heavy market loads.
The pedalling cyclist wavers by
On the wrong side of the road,
As if uncertain of his new emancipation.
The squawking chickens, the pregnant she-goats
Lumber awkwardly with fear across the road,
Across the windscreen view of my four-cylinder kit car.
An overloaded lorry speeds madly towards me
Full of produce, passengers, with driver leaning
Out into the swirling dust to pilot his
Swinging obsessed vehicle along,
Beside him on the raised seat his first-class

Passenger, clutching and timid; but he drives on
At so, so many miles per hour, peering out with
Bloodshot eyes, unshaved face and dedicated look;
His motto painted on each side: Sunshine Transport,
We get you there quick, quick. The Lord is my Shepherd.

The red dust settles down on the green leaves.

I know you will not make me want, Lord,
Though I have reddened your green pastures
It is only because I have wanted so much
That I have always been found wanting.
From South and East, and from my West
(The sandy desert holds the North)
We look across a vast continent
And blindly call it ours.

You are not a country, Africa,
You are a concept,
Fashioned in our minds, each to each,
To hide our separate fears,
To dream our separate dreams.
Only those within you who know
Their circumscribed plot,
And till it well with steady plough
Can from that harvest then look up
To the vast blue inside
Of the enamelled bowl of sky
Which covers you and say
'This is my Africa' meaning
'I am content and happy.
I am fulfilled, within,
Without and roundabout
I have gained the little longings
Of my hands, my loins, my heart
And the soul that follows in my shadow.'

I know now that is what you are, Africa:
Happiness, contentment, and fulfilment,
And a small bird singing on a mango tree.

This landscape, these people - Zulfikar Ghose

1.

*My eighth spring in England I walk among
The silver birches of Putney Heath,
Stepping over twigs and stones; being stranger,
I see but do not touch; only the earth
Permits an attachment. I do not wish
To be seen, and move, eyes at my sides, like a fish.*

*And do they notice me, I wonder, these
Englishmen strolling with stiff country strides?
I lean against a tree, my eyes are knots
In its bark, my skin the wrinkles in its sides,
I leap hedges, duck under chestnut boughs,
And through the black clay, let my swift heels trail like ploughs.*

*A child at a museum, England for me
Is an exhibit within a glass case
The country, like an antique chair, has a rope
Across it. I may not sit, only pace
Its frontiers. I slip through ponds, jump ditches,
Through galleries of ferns see England in pictures.*

2.

*My seventeen years in India I swam
Along the silver beaches of Bombay,
Pulled coconuts from the sky, and tramped
Red horizons with the swagger and sway
Of Romantic youth; with the impudence
Of a native tongue, I cried for independence.*

*A troupe came to town, marched through the villages,
Began with two tight-rope walkers, eyes gay
And bamboos and rope on their bare shoulders.
A snake charmer joined them, beard long and gray.
Baskets of cobras on his turbaned head,
Though the villages marched children, beating on drums, led
Them from village to village, and jugglers
Joined them and swallows of swords, eaters
Of fire brandishing flame thorough the thick air,
Jesters with tongues obscure as crows;, creatures
Of the earth, stray dogs, lean jackals, a cow;
Stamping, shouting, entertaining, making a row*

*From village to village they marched to town;
Conjurers to bake bread out of earth, poets
To recite epics at night. The troupe, grown
Into a nation, halted, squirmed; the sets
For its act, though improvised, were re-cast
From the frames of an antique, slow-moving, dead past.*

*India halted: as suddenly as a dog,
Barking, hangs out his tongue, stifles his cry,
An epic turned into a monologue
Of death. The rope lay stiff across the country;
All fires were eaten, swallowed all the swords;
The horizons paled, then thickened, blackened with crows.*

*Born to this continent, all was mine
To pluck and taste; pomegranates to purple
My tongue and chillies to burn my mouth. Stones
Were there to kick. This landscape, these people---
Bound by the rope and consumed by their fire.
Born here, among these people, I was stranger.*

3.

*This landscape, these people ! Silver birches
With polished trunks chalked around a chestnut
All is fall-of-night still. No thrush reaches
Into the earth for worms, nor pulls at the root
Of a crocus. Dogs have led their masters home.*

I stroll, head bowed, hearing only the sound of loam

*At my heel's touch. Now I am intimate
With England: we meet, secret as lovers.
I pluck leaves and speak into the air's mouth;
As a woman's hair, I deck with flowers
The willow's branches: I sit by the pond,
My eyes are stars in its stillness; as with a wand,*

*I stir the water with a finger until
It tosses waves, until countries appear
From its dark be; the road from Putney Hill
Runs across oceans into the harbour
Of Bombay. To this country I have come.
Stranger or an inhabitant, this is my home.*

Literary Evening; Jamaica by Mervyn Morris

In a dusty old crumbling building just fit for rats
And much too large for precious poetry-circles.
The culture fans sat scattered in the first ten rows
Listening for English poetry.

Geoff read Larkin beautifully, Enright too,
And Michael Saunders talked between the poems;
“I don't say they are wonderful,” he said,
“ And would not say that anybody says
They're great. I offer them
As two fair English poets writing nowadays.
They're anti-gesture, anti-flatulence,
They speak their quiet honesties without pretence.”

The longer section of the evening's programme
Was poems by locals, undergraduates,
Some coarse, some wild, and many violent
All bloody with the strains of rape and childbirth
Screaming hot curses of anti-slavery,
“Down with the limey bastards ! up the blacks !

Chr-rist ! Let us tear the painted paper
Off all the blasted cracks ! “

The more I heard the more seemed
A pretty rotten choice to read us Larkin.
Dull mannered, scared, regressive Phil,
Saying No to everything or Soon, Not Yet,
So many bulging poets must have blushed

And wondered where the hell they'd ever get
With noisy poems, brash, self-conscious, colourful,

And feared that maybe they were born too crude
Maybe they were; but it was bloody rude
Seeming to ask for things that don't belong out here
Where sun shines hot and love is plentiful
For to us standing here, a nked nation
Bracing ourselves for blows, what use
Is fearfulness and bland negation?
What now if honesty should choose
To say, in all this world's confusion
That we are still too young for disillusion ?

Words

by Edwin Thamboo

Words are dangerous, especially
The simple kind you leave behind for others,
For undesirable relatives and assorted purposes.
They are understood simply, edited,
Taken with a kind of air, a careful disregard:
Their plainness complicates.

When you say *Tell him please*
That the anger has come to pass
That friendship is not maimed...or
Please do come but after the
Fever has been put aside...
When you mean to be polite,

Careful, explicit, considerate, circumspect,
Adopting the proper tone,
You are likely to be quoted as saying
He won't...

Words are neither valid, merciful nor bad,
In themselves, nothing unless used, urged,
Imported into dialogue,
Becoming part-anger, part-laughter, bruised,
Adding to the mood and gesture.

Words are words. Except for us
They are not personalities.
We make them into poems.
