

Poets inspired by Mountains during 18th -20th Centuries

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Abstract

Mother Nature has always attracted the seekers of religion. The beauty of mountains touching the sky has long been inspiring poets from East to West. In Raghuvansham Kalidas wrote "Rivers are like Mothers for the country and Mountains like the father. Famous Russian president and noble laureate Mikhail Gorbichev exclaimed "Nature is my religion... The trees are my churches and the mountains my cathedrals" Poems written during 18th-20th Century highlighting how mountains have been mesmerizing poets forms the basis of this paper. Many of the poems begin with 'mountains' as their titles while others have used it inside the body of the poem. Great Romantic poet Percy B Shelley wrote a love poem on how nature is never lonely, asking his beloved to help him end his own loneliness in "Love's Philosophy" wherein he writes "Mountains kiss high heaven and the waves clasp one another". Wordsworth's poem "Line Written in March" captures spring season in England after the rains. Victorian poet Robert Browning wrote the monologues poem "Fra Lippo Lippi" on an orphan who joined the Carmelite monastery in Florence. Matthew Arnold educated at Rugby School wrote a long elegiac poem "Rugby Chapel" wherein he pauses to reflect on the course of the life of mortal man on this earth. Another long poem of his named "Thyrsis" written in 1866 is a tribute to his friend and fellow poet Arthur Hugh Clough. It shows Arnolds uphill walk in search of the signal suggesting the image of life as a climb towards truth set almost inaccessibly among mountain-tops on the difficulty of reaching truth. English Poetess Christina Rossetti wrote the poem 'I Will Lift Mine Eyes Unto the Hills'. American poet Edwin Arlington Robinson wrote "The house on the hill". British poet Ted Hughes wrote light hearted poem "Meet My Folks" wherein he introduces us to the favourite hobby of his grandfather- keeping owls. It is a good-humoured account of the eccentricity of the old man. In 1903 Sri Aurobindo on a visit to the Shankaracharya Hill in Kashmir experienced the vacant infinite in a very tangible way- an experience which could ordinarily be had only after prolonged Sadhana. Around 1907, he wrote a long poem on "Baji Probhou" the hero in Maratha history who held a mountain pass for two hours with a small company of men against twelve thousand enemy soldiers. Subramanya Bharati represented India as a whole in his poem "India the Mother" and many of his poems are seen to celebrate this concept. G.S Sharat Chandra's poems "Tirumalai" minutely explores the base in his personal experience like tradition of hair donation to Lord Venkateshwara. The image of India is fused with his happy childhood. Sahitya Akademi Award winner K. Siva Reddy was instrumental in writing "Mohana Oh Mohana". The plight of the weak and downtrodden is the dominant theme of these poems and their message is revolution. Adil Jussawalla wrote on "Evening on a Mountain". Agha Shahid Ali wrote "The Half-Inch Himalayas" and "Postcard from Kashmir". Kamala Das's poem "Radha Krishna" shows her elemental passion with words like bazaar, cows and

*rivers which gives the natural experience. Krishna, “the lotus feet” and “mountain holder”, is truly a paragon of beauty and valour. Bilingual poet Arun Kolhatkar wrote **Jejuri** which is a string of 31 poems winning commonwealth Poetry prize in English. All the poetries thus show mountains and hills in various perspectives.*

Research Article

Mother Nature has always attracted the seekers of different faith, artists, poets and writers etc. In the present paper sixteen poets who have written on mountains and hills from eighteenth to twentieth century have been covered. The paper has been divided into two sections

- 1) Western Poets
- 2) Eastern Poets

Great Romantic poets like Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) wrote a love poem saying that the things of nature are never lonely and asks his beloved to help him end his own loneliness in

Love’s Philosophy

The fountains mingle with the river
And the rivers with the ocean,
The winds of heaven mix for ever
With a sweet emotion;
Nothing in the world is single,
All things by law divine
In one another’s being mingle-
Why not I with thine?
See the mountains kiss high heaven
And the waves clasp one another;
No sister-flower would be forgiven
If it disdain’d its brother:.....

Wordsworth’s¹(1770-1850) **Line Written in March** depict a spring scene in England after “the rain is over and gone.”

The cock is crowing,
The stream is flowing,
The small birds twitter,
The lake doth glitter,
The green field sleeps in the sun:
The oldest and youngest
Are at work with the strongest;
The cattle are grazing,
Their heads never raising;

¹ Padmini Sengupta’s writeup ‘Feminine Influence on Wordsworth’ is Published in *The Hindu Newspaper* of Oct 7,1956. p1.,which says Wordsworth’s quite background and the beauty of the country in which he lived created the poet in him

There are forty feeding like one!

Like an army defeated
The snow hath retreated,
And now doth fare ill

On the top of the bare hill;
The plough-boy is whooping-anon-anon:
There's joy in the mountains;
There's life in the fountains;
Small clouds are sailing,
Blue sky prevailing;
The rain is over and gone!²

His famous poetry **The Solitary Reaper** Starts with "Behold her, single in the field, Yon solitary Highland Lass! "and ends with
And, as I mounted up the hill,
The music in my heart I bore,
Long after it was heard no more.

Also his long poem on Childhood **Ode**³ contains in second last stanza
And O, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills and Groves,
Forebode not any severing of our loves!
Nature was for him the embodiment of the Divine Spirit; and he insists that Nature is the greatest of all teachers.

Victorian poet Robert Browning (1812-1889) wrote in his collection **Men and Women**(1855) the monologues poem **Fra Lippo Lippi**⁴,

.....The beauty and the wonder and the power,
The shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades,
Changes, surprises,-and God made it all!
-For What? Do you feel thankful, ay or no,
For this fair town's face, yonder river's line,
The mountain round it and the sky above,
Much more the figures of man, woman, child,
These are the frame to? What's it all about?⁵

² Birjagdish Prasad, *A Background to the study of English Literature*, Calcutta 1972. P24-26

³ In Classical literature an Ode was a poem which was essentially meant to be sung, it became very popular with poets of the Revival and their Victorian successors.

⁴ Lippi(1412-1469) an orphan who was force to join the Carmelite monastery in Florence because of his poetry.

⁵ V Sachithanandan, *Six English Poets*, Madras 1978, P87

In the dedicatory poem **One Word More** he offers the volume to his wife as a true measure of his genius; in the last part he writes

.....Seen by Moses when he climbed the mountain?

Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu

Climbed and saw the very God, the Highest,

Stand upon the paved work of a sapphire.

Men and Women shows the full power of Browning's imaginative faculty all the poems in this volume are pictures of men finding in the multiplicity of their experiences the peculiar way of their own destiny, men attaining their individuality through love or art or religion.

His poem **Parting at Morning** shows time has come for the lovers to part

Round the Cape of a sudden came the Sea,

And the sun looked over the mountain's rim

And straight was a path of gold for him,

And the need of a world of men for me.

Meaning as the sun peeps over the edge of the mountain a path of gold, in the form of one of his rays is reflected on the waters.

Matthew Arnold(1822-1888) poet, critic and man of letters, was educated at Rugby School and wrote a long elegiac poem **Rugby Chapel**(a recollection of his schooldays at Rugby)⁶ He pauses to reflect on the course of the life of mortal man on this earth.

...A long, steep journey, through sunk

Gorges, o'er mountains in snow!

Cheerful, with friends, we set forth-

Then, on the height, comes the storm!⁷

Another long poem of his **Thyrsis**⁸ written around 1866 is a tribute to his friend and fellow poet Arthur Hugh Clough who died in Florence.

.....And long the way appears, which seem's so short

To the unpractis'd eye of sanguine youth;

And high the mountain-tops, in cloudy air,

The mountain-tops where is the throne of Truth,

Tops in life's morning-sun so bright and bare!

It shows Arnolds uphill walk in search of the signal-elm suggesting the image of life as a climb towards truth set almost inaccessibly among mountain-tops on the difficulty of reaching truth.⁹Arnold paints the landscape in Thyrsis.

⁶ Dr. Thomas Arnold(the great headmaster of Rugby) poets father was buried below the floor of the School Chapel at Rugby on 17th June 1842, the poet visits his father's grave fifteen years after his death.

⁷ *Ibid* p191

⁸ *Thyrsis* with *The Scholar Gipsy* are ranked among his best achievements. Thames and Oxford are his inspirations in these poems.

⁹ *Ibid* p 212.

In his Long poem **The Forsaken Merman** he writes

.....Through the narrow paved streets, where all was still,
To the little grey church on the windy hill.
From the church came a murmur of folk at their prayers.....¹⁰

Merman were legendry creatures half human , half fish, the above poem is a story in Danish legend

Wherein the Merman is addressing himself to his children, whose mother(Margaret)¹¹ deserts them,

Christina Rossetti ¹² who lived for sixty-four years and wrote poems for almost fifty of these occupies premier place among English Women Poets.

Her poem **I Will Lift Mine Eyes Unto the Hills**

I am pale with sick desire,
For my heart is far away
From this world's fitful fire
And this world's waning day;
In a dream it overleaps
A world of tedious ills
To where the sunshine sleeps
On the everlasting hills.-
Say the Saints: "There Angels ease us
Glorified and white."
They say: "We rest in Jesus,
Where is not day or night.".....¹³

Edwin Arlington Robinson(1869-1935)

The house on the hill

They are all gone away,
The house is shut and still,
There is nothing more to say.

Through broken walls and gray
The winds blow bleak and shrill:
They are all gone away.

Nor there one to-day
To speak them good or ill:

¹⁰ *Fifteen Poets* OUP Calcutta, 1964 p460

¹¹ Margaret is a favourite name with Arnold here having a very effective sound value.

¹² She wrote St. Thomas doubted, but simultaneously he loved. Whence it follows that his case was all along hopeful.

¹³ Naomi Lewis, *Christine Rosetti*, London 1959,P19

There is nothing more to say.

Why is it then we stray
Around that sunken skill?
They are all gone away.

And our poor fancy-play
For them is wasted skill:
There is nothing more to say.

There is ruin and decay
In the House on the Hill:
They are all gone away,
There is nothing more to say¹⁴.

Ted Hughes(1930-) a British poet wrote light hearted poem “**Meet My Folks**” The poet introduces us to the favourite hobby of his grandfather- keeping owls¹⁵. It is a good-humoured account of the eccentricity of the old man.

The truth of the matter, the truth of the matter—
As one who supplies us with hats is a Hatter,
As one who is known for his growls is a Growler—
My grandpa traps owls, yes, my grandpa’s an Owler.
Though owls, alas, are quite out of fashion,
Grandpa keeps busy about his profession
And hoards every owl that falls to his traps:
”Someday,” he says, “they’ll be needed, perhaps.”Owls are such sages,” he says, “I surmise
Listening to owls could make the world wise.”¹⁶
Nightlong his house is shaken with hoots,
And he wakes to owls in his socks and his boots.
Owls, owls, nothing but owls,
The most fantastical of fowls;
White owls from the Arctic, black owls from the Tropic.
Some are far sighted, others myopic.
There are owls on his picture frames, owls on his chairs,

¹⁴David Lehman, *The Oxford Book of American Poetry*, OUP,2006 P194

¹⁵ A translated Malayalam poetry of Poornima Kumar **You** by C.P. Abubaker says The night owls of the Vindhya mountains- you think they are adoring you, chirping and crying in the night. You stupid fool! They tell the world news of your death

¹⁶ According to ancient folklore in the West, the owl is considered a wise, silent and solitary bird of prey associated with lunar deities- symbol of wisdom, wiser even than the eagle-the totem bird of the Sun Kings. Also the owl is the animal representation of the Greek goddess of wisdom Athena and hence its reputation in the West.

Owls in dozens ranked on his stairs.
Eyes, eyes, rows of their eyes.
Some are big as collie dogs, some are thumb-size.
Deep into Africa, high into Tibet
He travels with his rubber mouse and wiry owl-net;¹⁷

In 1903 Sri Aurobindo was on a visit to the Shankaracharya Hill in Kashmir where he experienced the vacant infinite in a very tangible way- an experience which could ordinarily be had only after prolonged *Sadhana*¹⁸.

Around 1907 He wrote a poem on **Baji Probhou**, who to cover Shivaji's retreat, held a mountain pass for two hours with a small company of men against twelve thousand enemy soldiers. The long poem in blank verse opens on a description of the land and the time that formed the background of the episode:

At noon of Deccan with its tyrant glare
Oppressed the earth; the hills stood deep in haze,
And sweltering athrill the fields glared up
Longing for water in the courses parced
Of streams long dead.

S Satyamurti in 1928 in a speech in the Madras Legislative council in 1928 said, The Late Subramanai Bharati was a man on whose tongue the Goddess Saraswati can honestly be believed to have danced the dance of Patriotism.....¹⁹

Bharati saw India as a whole, India the Mother; and poem after poem celebrated this concept, this living reality, of unified India splendorously alive:

The mighty Himavant is ours-
There's no equal anywhere on earth.
The generous Ganga is ours-
Which other river can match her grace?
The Sacred Upanishads are ours-
What scriptures else to name with them?
This sunny golden land is ours-
She's peerless, let's praise her!

¹⁷ Perin Daruwala(ed), *Many Voices An antology of prose and verse* for First Year Arts, S.N.D.T University, Bombay 1972, P207

¹⁸ Manoj Das, *Sri Aurobindo*, Sahitya Akademi New Delhi 1994,P19

¹⁹ Prema Nandakumar , *Bharati*, Sahitya Akademi New Delhi 1987, :P22.

Bharati hailed the advent of the Gandhi Age in ‘**Mahatma Gandhi Panchakam**’

How shall we praise thee?
As one whose choicest herbs
Healed the cobra’s bite?
As one who held the hill as cover?

You have a plan outlined
That’s ne, unfailing,
To end this raging fever
Of dire and dark subjection.

Dear as one’s life to hold
The engineer of one’s woes;
To know that all is God
And we are all His children;
Master!you’ve dared to harness
This prepotent moral force
To the murderous, strife-ridden
Political fray.

G.S Sharat Chandra’s poems have a minutely explored base in personal experience.

Tirumalai

Lord Vishnu’s place.
Also known as Lord Venkateswara
He turned stone on the seventh hill
While visiting earth on a curse
He ran into woman trouble.

Since then he’s grown famous
As arbiter of disputes
Bribed with rubies and emeralds
By those who can afford such bribes.
Politicians speak well of him too
So do government servants
Wanting promotion or increment
Women wanting child or husband.
Some visit incognito
Others with bare hands
Or faceful of tears.

I, when I was four

Gave the Lord my head of hair
I was told that would make me rich
My hair prosperous.

The father who said that is dead.
My mother who held me to the barber
Ails with age and despair
The hills have changed hands
I've grown bald
And owe two payments
On the alimony.²⁰

In many of Sharat Chandra's poems, the image of India is fused with a happy childhood. At Tirumalai, he gives his hair to Lord Venkateshwara, when he is just four.

K. Siva Reddy(1943-) won Sahitya Akademi Award for his sixth volume of poetry **Mohana Oh Mohana!**²¹ in Telugu. The plight of the weak and downtrodden is the dominant theme of these poems and their message is revolution²².s

Wave(Translation of "Ala") It's a big poem, here only lines on mountains are highlighted.

The moon is floating on the sky
Like a dead *bochche* fish
Worthless pale brightness
Jumping on the window's glass eyes.
At a distance the howl of a weeping stream's flow-
An ineffectual tear-course that grows no crop.
In a hazy sleep, carts overturned.
Our hands plucking our own eyes-
Our lips abusing us-
The nectar we thought we had churned and brought
Turning into poison and people becoming corpses-
From the Himalayas to Kanyakumari
Digging each one's grave in his own body-
Tigers-roaming about freely
With the royal staff-.....²³

Seeds of the first dawns shouldn't be sown
Tender leaves of lamps shouldn't sprout in your eyes.
Wind knives shouldn't be sharpened on the leaves of your eyelids-
You shouldn't stand like a mountain of courage.

²⁰ Keki N Daruwalla(ed), *Two Decades of Indian Poetry 1960-1980*, New Delhi 1980, P5,6

²¹ Regarded an outstanding contribution to Indian literature in Telugu.

²² M Sridhar, Alladi Uma (Ed and translated) *Mohana! Oh Mohana! and other poems* of K Siva Reddy, Sahitya Akademi New Delhi 2005, pvii

²³ *Ibid* p3

Long march-
Whole village march-whole *mala* hamlets march
Trees are marching on-mountains are moving along.....

You plant your Feet On the Ground(Translation of “*Bhoommeeda Padam Moputavu*”)

You plant your feet on the ground.
You fix your eye, fix your gaze on the ground.
You pour out the oceans that ebb and flow in the gaze.....

Only when you plant your feet on the ground can you perceive man’s greenness.
Only when you plant your feet on the ground
Can you perceive the hungry animal of a man.
Only when you plant your feet on the ground
Can you perceive the mountain range of man.....²⁴

Adil Jussawalla(1940) published his two volumes of poetry after 1970, he wrote the poem

Evening on a Mountain

The valley sunned itself all day, its span
Curving up two foothills;then the shadows
Crossed like wings across its back; further,

Ferries embroidered a slim lake, stitching
Silk into its cotton, prows snipping.....
How still it was then! the sky thin and hollow,

Deflecting the words stoned across the valley,
The ears straining at each rebound; far off,
A cloud, launched from a rock, streaked
North like a startled bird.

The feeling that under sets these poems does not interfere with the traveler’s sympathetic eye; on the contrary, it makes everything more vivid.

Agha Shahid Ali(1949) wrote *The Half-Inch Himalayas*(1987),and the below poems are from this collection.

Postcard from Kashmir

Kashmir Shrinks into my mailbox;
My home a neat four by six inches.

²⁴ *Ibid* p 12,13.

I always loved neatness. Now I hold
The half-inch Himalayas in my hand.

This is home. And this the closest
I'll ever be to home. **When I return,**
The colours won't be so brilliant,
The Jhelum's waters so clean,
So ultramarine. My love
So overexposed.

And my memory will be a little
Out of focus, init
A giant negative, black
And white, still undeveloped.

Though Ali made exile his permanent condition(he served in USA), it is not what he writes about. Exile offers him unconfined and unpeopled space into which, one at a time, he introduces human figures. The eccentric and occasionally violent men of the family stand aloof from its women, who have the sensitivity of the well-born and from whom Ali inherits his own²⁵. Just as exile provides each memory with its own space, absence gives high definition to what is absent, be it landscape, lover, or self as the above bold lines show.

Snowmen

My ancestor, a man
Of Himalayan snow, came to Kashmir from Samarkand,
Carrying a bag
Of whale bones:
Heirlooms from sea funerals.....

Kamala Das truly(1934) made a mark for her poems, her first collection was Summer in Calcutta(1965) Her poem **Radha Krishna**²⁶ shows her elemental passion with words like "river"

I am fascinated by the beauty of Mohan.
In the bazaar and by the way he teases me
I have not learnt the sweet desires of my beloved.

His body is beautiful and his eyes are like lotus flowers
His glance is very pleasant and his smile is very sweet.
Near the bank of river Jamuna, he is grazing the cows
And sings a sweet song to the flute.

²⁵ Arvind K Mehrotra, *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets*, Calcutta 1997, P139

²⁶ From her collection *The Descendants*(1967)

I surrender myself body and soul and wealth to thee

Mountain holder

Mira clasps his lotus feet.

In the above poem the employment of common images of “bazaar”, “cows” and river “Jamuna” gives the experience an air of reality. Krishna, “the lotus feet” and “mountain holder”²⁷, is truly a paragon of beauty and valour.²⁸

Madan Mohan Mathur’s **Woes of the Womb-begotten** are Rajasthani Poetry series translated by Kishore Kalpanakant, three poems in these series cover mountain and hills

Wandering among inaccessible Vales, I

.....Swimming across rivers in spate

Crossing over mountains difficult to approach

Trudging difficult path-ways

Beyond the long-barren stretch.....

The long poem **Sale**

.....Numerous items, commodities

How many names should I count!

Take from grain to mountain!

It’s quite late, I must leave!

Colour

.....Changed is the whole

Scenario

Colours blurred

And Vanish’d

Colourless Spectacle

In the hazy mind

The painful lack of colours

Rises in a sand storm

Over the inner hills

Colour/there isn’t any!²⁹

Bilingual poet Arun Kolhatkar(1932)wrote Jejuri(a string of 31 poems) which won him the Common wealth Poetry prize in English . The below poem is one among the above series

entitled **Hills**

Hills

Demons

²⁷ Mount Govardhan lifted by Krishna to save the people of Braja from deluge.

²⁸ Anisur Rahman, *Expressive Form in the Poetry of Kamala Das*, New Delhi 1981 p28

²⁹ Kishore Kalpanakant(translated), *Woes of the Womb-begotten*, Sahitya Akademi New Delhi 2003,p78

Sand blasted shoulders
Bladed with shale

Demons
Hills
Cactus thrust
Up through ribs of rock

hills
Demons
Kneequartz
Limestone loins

Demons
Hills
Cactus fang
In sky meat

Hill
Demons
Vertebrate
With rock cut steps

Demons
Hills
Sun stroked
Thighs of sand stone

Hills
Demons
Pelvis granite
Fallen archways
Demons.

I conclude with a Bengali poem *Chaturanga* by Lila Ray, translated as *Agastya's Journey* by Sankha Ghose

“Agastya,” Vindhya cried, “How much longer
Must I stand here with my head bowed?
What a lot of trouble you’ve put me to.”
“My dear Vindhya.” Agastya replied,
“I am busy with other things now,
But I’ve been thinking about you.
Wait a few more days, dear friend.

I'll restore everything with honor
when I've looted the honeycomb.”
Vindhya, on that assurance, now
With openhanded courtesy, is
Most polite even to snails.³⁰

About the Author

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³⁰ John Oliver Perry (ed) *Voices of Emergency*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay 1983.P8