

Some People

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B.A(Prog.) Ist Year Understanding Poetry V :: "Some People"

Fellow Name:

***Dr. Nirmalya Samant, Associate Professor
Department/ College: Deshbandhu College, University of Delhi***

Reviewer Name:

***Dr. Rajiva Verma, Advisor, ILLS SDC
Department/ College: South Campus, University of Delhi***

The Poet

RITA ANN HIGGINS

<http://www.ritaannhiggins.com/profile.html>



Email: rahiggins@eircom.net

Rita Ann Higgins is a contemporary Irish poet and playwright who was born in Galway in 1955. She has published seven collections of poetry.

They are:

Goddess on the Mervue Bus (1986)

Witch in the Bushes (1988)

Goddess and the Witch (1990)

Philomena's Revenge (1992)

Higher Purchase (1996)

Sunny Side Plucked New and Selected (1996)

An Awful Racket (2001)

She has also published plays. They are:

God of the Hatch Man (1991)

Face Licker Come Home (1991)

Colie Lally Doesn't Live in a Bucket (1995)

Down all the Roundabouts (1999)

Rita Higgins left formal schooling and began to work in a factory at the age of thirteen. When she was twenty-two years old she had to be hospitalized because of tuberculosis. As she was recovering from her illness she developed an interest in literature. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945), an extremely powerful political satire on totalitarian states, and Emily Bronte's extraordinary novel *Wuthering Heights* (1847) made a deep impression on Rita Higgins. She began to write poetry and published in 1986 her first book of poems *Goddess on the Mervue Bus*. Since the nineties Higgins has been writing plays and conducting theatre workshops.

Higgins writes about everyday reality of the society in which she lives and works. Her writing is characterized by a compassionate and yet often angry look at contemporary Irish society. Her poems have elements of satire, irony and humour that keep the poems connected to the everyday life of the people she vividly describes.

The Poem

SOME PEOPLE

By Rita Ann Higgins

here to listen to a recitation of the poem

Some people know what it is like,
to be called a cunt in front of their children
to be short for the rent
to be short for the light
to be short for school books
to wait in Community Welfare waiting room full of smoke
to wait two years to have a tooth looked at
to wait another two years to have a tooth out (the same tooth)
to be half strangled by your varicose veins, but you are the 198th on the list
to talk into a banana on a jobsearch scheme
to talk into a banana on a jobsearch dream
to be out of work
to be out of money
to be out of fashion
to be out of friend
to be in for the Vincent de Paul man
to be in space for the milk man
(sorry, mammy isn't in today she's gone to Mars for the weekend)
to be in Puerto Rico for the blanket man
to be dead for the coal man
(sorry mammy passed away in her sleep, overdoes of coal in the tea pot)
to be in the hospital unconscious for the rent man
(St Jude's ward 4th floor)
to be second hand

to be second class
to be no class
to be looked down on
to be pissed on
to be shat on
and other people don't.

Another Poem

By Rita Ann Higgins

Anything Is Better Than Emptying Bins:

I work at the Post Office.
I hate my job,
but my father said
there was no way
I could empty bins
and stay under his roof.
So naturally,
I took a ten week
extra mural course
on effective stamp licking;
entitled
"More lip and less tongue".
I was mostly unpleasant,
but always under forty
for young girls

who bought stamps with hearts
for Valentine's Day.

One day a woman asked me
could she borrow a paper clip,
she said something about
sending a few poems away
and how a paper clip
would make everything so much neater.

But I've met the make-my-poems-neater type before;
give in to her once,
and she'll be back in a week asking
"Have you got any stamps left over?"

Well I told her where to get off.

"Mrs. Neater-poems," I said,

"this is a post office
not a friggin' card shop,
and if you want paper clips
you'll get a whole box full
across the street for twenty pence."

Later when I told my father,
he replied,

"Son, it's not how I'd have handled it,
but anything is better than emptying bins."

Another Poem

SOME PEOPLE

Some people know what it is like, This poem appears in Rita Higgins's book of poems entitled *An Awful Racket*, which was published in 2001.

Society, it seems to the poet, is divided into two types of 'people'. *Some* people who have money and can afford all the privileges of life and *some* people who are poor and have to struggle to live. The poet suggests that the people who have money do not know and cannot imagine the life of a poor person.

The person speaking in the poem is a person from the poor class. The tone is of anger and frustration.

to be called a cunt in front of their children *Cunt* is a crude way of referring to the female genital organ. We realize that the speaker is a woman. She is bitter and angry that she is abused and called a 'cunt' in front of her children.

Do we also refer to women like this in India? Have you thought about the fact that many of the abusive terms that we hear our everyday life actually dishonour and humiliate women?

But, it is not as if only poor women are abused and dishonoured. Poor people in general are referred to and treated with disrespect.

Have you heard someone

describing the poor and deprived people who live in slums as 'kireh makoreh' or vermins and insects? Have you heard Amitabh Bacchan call himself 'gande naali ka keerah' (insect of a dirty drain) in the film *Lawaris*?

to be short for the rent

The woman describes her difficulties. She has no money for rent, no money to pay for electricity bills, no money to buy schoolbooks for her children. She has to

to be short for the light

to be short for school books

to wait in Community Welfare waiting room full of smoke

depend on government welfare schemes for the poor for help. There are lots of people who seek such help and thus the welfare department is crowded. It is full of smoke, perhaps because men are smoking as they wait. This suggests that the process of getting state support is long and tedious and also that the government does not care and that the urgent needs of the poor are not considered.

to wait two years to have a tooth looked at

The lines express the feelings of frustration and helplessness in the way the

to wait another two years to have a tooth out (the same tooth)

poor are treated in government hospitals. The long wait for examination as well as for treatment makes the reader aware that the poor people are not given any importance.

to be half strangled by your varicose veins,

A varicose vein is a vein that has become swollen because of defective valves. This is a condition that affects old people or people who suffer from malnutrition and sickness.

but you are the 198th on the list

This line brings to our mind images of old and sick people, with swollen veins waiting in a queue at the hospital with a card and a number on it. The word strangled suggests the choking nature of the experience. In a hospital you are only a patient and you have no independent identity. You are just a number.

Have you ever visited a government hospital?

How are patients treated there?

Are V.I.P.s and rich people treated differently in hospitals in our country? Other than hospitals, which other institution can you think of where human beings are identified only by numbers?

to talk into a banana on a jobsearch scheme

Looking for jobs is fruitless. The idea of getting a good job remains only a dream.

to talk into a banana on a jobsearch dream

The government often comes out with many employment schemes for the poor (like the *Gramin Rozgar Yojana* of the Government of India) but few benefit from such schemes. The banana is used to train job seekers on how to use a telephone. The obvious idea is that just as a banana cannot hear, the government is deaf to the cry of the poor and the needy.

to be out of work

Note that the poet continuously uses 'to be' in

to be out of money
to be out of fashion
to be out of friend

the beginning of each of the sentences. This gives us the sense of someone talking fast and spontaneously. That is what one does when one is angry.

The speaker is 'out of', meaning without any money, work and fashion, and that makes her socially unacceptable.

to be in for the Vincent de Paul man

But she is 'in' when it comes to receiving some charity from the church or a religious organization. (Click here to read more about Vincent de Paul)

to be in space for the milk man
(sorry, mummy isn't in today she's gone to Mars for the weekend)

Poor people have to continuously play a game of hide and seek with people they owe money to. So when the milkman comes to ask for his due an excuse has to be made to avoid him. Everybody knows that the excuse is a lie. The poet introduces grim humour by making this lie sound ridiculous by making the child tell the milk man that mother cannot pay today because she has gone to Mars!

to be in Puerto Rico for the blanket man

Another funny excuse that the child is taught to give to the man from whom a blanket has been bought and the money is due is that mummy has gone to Puerto Rico (an island state in the Caribbean islands in the Atlantic Ocean)

to be dead for the coal man
(sorry, mammy passed away)

For the man to whom she owes money for the supply of coal the excuse taught is

in her sleep, overdose of coal that mummy has died and
in the tea pot) for the man who comes to

to be in the hospital is in the hospital. To make
unconscious for the rent man the lie sound realistic the

(St. Jude's ward 4th floor) name of the hospital as well
as the ward number is also
mentioned. The excuses
given are absurd. This only
tells how helpless the poor
people are.

to be second hand

to be second class

to be no class

to be looked down on

to be pissed on

to be shat on

and other people don't.

The last few lines express
the frustration and the
humiliation of being poor.
The poor are seen as
dispensable or disposable
and treated with disrespect.

The last line of the poem is
dramatic. It is the second
half of the first line of the
poem. Put together the
complete sentence would
read as: Some people know
what it is like, ... and other
people don't.

What the poet writes in-
between these two lines is
her description of the
condition of the poor and the
deprived. The poem is as
much about the poor people
who suffer and struggle
everyday of their lives as it is
about rich and privileged
people who are not
concerned about the
disparities and inequalities
that exist in society.

Explanation of text Contd.....



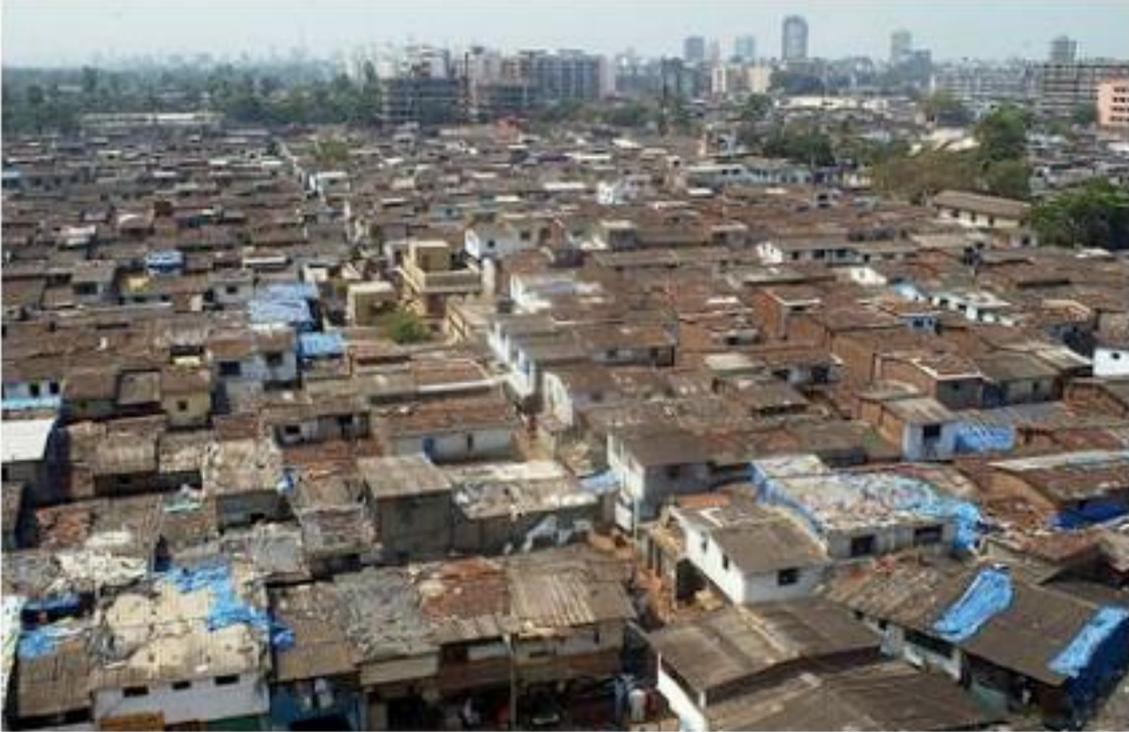
'Some People'

This poem is about poor people, specially socially and economically marginalized women. It is about the discrimination that poor people have to suffer in society. That the society is divided into some people who are privileged and some who are not is not necessarily a phenomenon of only the economically backward or the so-called developing countries. We in India tend to think of the western countries as economically developed and so presume there is no poverty there. This is not true. There are poor people in these so-called developed countries and they also have to face social and economic hardships.

(Click here for data on poverty and poverty related problems in Ireland.)

<http://www.cpa.ie/povertyinireland/whatispoverty.htm - CausesOfPoverty>)

This poem is also about anger and protest. Generally, we think that poetry deals with beauty, love, imagination and fantasy. This is not always true. Anger as an emotion may help create a poem of protest like 'Some People'. To understand this poem we must appreciate how the poet uses everyday language to convey the feeling of helplessness that the poor woman in this poem experiences. It is also commonly thought that poets live in a world of their own and dream of the ideal and the unreal. This poem challenges that idea. Poets live in reality and not in cloud-cuckoo-land! They do not accept the imperfections of society and protest against what they think is not right with the society.



THE POETRY OF PROTEST AND ANGER:

Anger and protest against injustice, social oppression, discrimination, inequality and domination have found their expression in poetry.

During our freedom struggle, poets like **Rabindranath Tagore, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Iqbal and Subramaniya Bharathi** wrote poems against the injustice of the British rule and inspired the nationalist spirit.

During the 1980s in Punjab Avatar Singh Sandhu wrote poems of protest using the pseudonym '**Paash**'. Paash was a revolutionary and wanted the realization of an equal and just society. He wrote angry poems against the injustice and insensitivity of the powerful towards the powerless.

(<http://www.forumpakistan.com/punjabi-poetry-paash-shiv-t2877.html>)

The Telegu poet **Srirangam Srinivasa Rao**, popularly known as Sri Sri, is a well-known poet who protested against injustice and oppression. (<http://books.google.co.in/books?hl=en&id=I05YvECvJ2sC&dq=Srirangam+Srinivasa+Rao&printsec=frontcover&source=web&ots=1gddCiftw4&sig=hSMvdNNpwV2mfwcEmcM4Z0nvZis#PPP1,M1>)

Jayanta Mahapatra, a poet from Orissa often writes about the condition of the poor and down trodden.

The poetry of protest and anger often inspires and calls for a new social system in which the oppressed and the unprivileged free themselves from the bondage of economic hardship and deprivation.

What do we mean by satire?

Satire is mainly a [literary genre](#), but satire may also be found in painting, theatre and visual forms like posters and advertisements. In satire, individual or collective human failings or shortcomings are ridiculed in order to reform the society.

POVERTY IN IRELAND

In 1601, after the battle of Kinsale, for the first time the whole of Ireland came under English rule. Soon, large scale colonization took place and the native Irish were driven off almost 500,000 acres of the best cultivable land and colonizers were 'planted' on large estates. The native Irish peasantry was reduced to poverty and destitution resulting in large scale migrations.

It would be pertinent to recollect the works of one of the greatest satirist of the English language, the Irish writer, Jonathan Swift.



www.gutenberg.org/.../12933-h/images/ljv1-7.jpg

Many of us are familiar with his *Gulliver's Travels*. In the context of this poem by Higgins, it would be interesting to look at a terribly satirical pamphlet that Swift wrote in 1729 entitled 'A MODEST PROPOSAL: FOR PREVENTING THE CHILDREN OF POOR PEOPLE IN IRELAND FROM BEING A BURDEN TO THEIR PARENTS OR COUNTRY, AND FOR MAKING THEM BENEFICIAL TO THE PUBLIC' This is also commonly referred to as 'A MODEST PROPOSAL'. In this 'modest' proposal Swift sets out to solve the economic problem of poverty and lack of food in Ireland by arguing that the children born to poor people be sold off as food to the rich.

(Read this essay at <http://www.uoregon.edu/~rbear/modest.html> or Click here to read this essay.)

In the first portion of the essay Swift describes the terrible plight of the poor people in Ireland. The reader begins to believe that the writer will suggest something that will really solve the problem. So when Swift proposes as a solution to the problem: "A young healthy child well nursed, is, at a year old, a most delicious nourishing and wholesome food, whether [stewed](#), [roasted](#), [baked](#), or [boiled](#); and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a [fricassee](#), or a [ragout](#).", the reader is shocked. This is the use of irony in satire. This kind of writing is grimly ironic because of what Swift is suggesting and what he actually intends to say. With the use of irony, a satirist forces the reader to look at social reality in a critical way.

In another equally powerful essay entitled "A Short View of the Present State of Ireland" Swift declared that the English colonial and imperial policies had squeezed out of the very blood, and vitals, and clothes, and dwellings of the tenants, who live worse than English beggars. The families of farmers who pay great rents [are] living in filth and nastiness upon buttermilk and potatoes, without a shoe or a stocking to their feet, or a house so convenient as an English hog sty to receive them. These may, indeed, be comfortable sights to an English spectator who comes for a short time to learn the language, and returns back to his own country, whither he finds all our wealth transmitted.

It would perhaps also be pertinent to refer to the political satire *Animal Farm* (1945) by George Orwell. Probably the best-known example of political satire, *Animal Farm* uses allegory to criticize the degeneration of a political ideology when individual and group vested interests overtake the professed ideal.

Questions

1. What effect did this poem have on you?
2. Do you think poor women suffer more than men?
3. What new words and phrases have you learned from the poem? Can you make sentences with them?
4. Do you think there are any differences between the poor people who live in the city and the poor people who live in the villages?
5. What is a slum? What difficulties do the people who live in the slums face?