

Blending Voices

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Voices Across the Ocean: Poems from Australia and India: presents a motley of poets and their voices from Australia and India. This collection brings together the works of ten award winning poets- five Australian and five Indian poets, the connecting thread to all the poems is the theme of 'emancipation'. The different voices, though geographically disparate, somewhere collates with one another and the entire book becomes polyphony of utterances.

The editors explain the theme of emancipation as "to set free, especially from social and political restrictions" (Harle and Sarangi 2). The book becomes a continuation to the two previously published anthologies: *Poetic Connections: Poems from India and Australia*; and *Building Bridges: Poems from Australia and India*. Evoking the words of Charles Simic, "Like our ancient ancestors who inhabited an animistic universe, the poet claims the interconnectedness and sentience of all things. This is what haunts: a world where magic is possible, where chance reigns, where metaphors have their supreme logic, where imagination is free and truthful." (Harle and Sarangi 2), the diverse array of poems meet and cut across each other, creating common reference points which linger in the readers' mind long after it has been read. Such reference points are often 'serious, urgent, universal and profound' and demands immediate attention.

Ali Cobby Eckermann urges to go back to that lost silence in her poem 'Life is Often Silent': there is no escaping the silence/ of a coinless empty pocket today

nor the laughter of the teenagers
when soccer is played in the park
there is no escaping the silence
of a grandparents daying gaze
nor the laughter of the babies
when they walk their first step. (Harle and Sarangi 8)

Laughter and silence are juxtaposed continuously as two voices which intersect one another every time.

The compulsion to write, the art of shaping words into poetry, is a recurring theme in Bronwyn Owen Allen's poems. In 'The Clean Room', she writes:

As a child
my reflections were eclipsed were eclipsed
by the holy clean room. (Harle and Sarangi 13)

I remember the weekend scuffle to secrete squandered time/ on books and pencils/ beneath my bed.' 'The clean room' becomes a metaphorical space of the mind, that impulse to create something new. "The clean room is my own sentence

It is I, who has scrubbed and preened
my wastrel mind
till perfectly cleaned, and
poised to be seen. (Harle and Sarangi 13)

The negotiation between the 'desire' and the 'real' works continuously in her other poems. In another poem, 'Away', she begins: 'In the night unlimited

I cry
Torture to write,
Torture not to write. (Harle and Sarangi 15)

The double bind of freedom and captivity always works hand in hand. The theme gets bolstered later when the poet talks about her intense longing for Jane Eyre, but expresses a 'my fascination (which) cries out

For the madwoman
Locked in the tower. (Harle and Sarangi 15)

Hamish Danks Brown's growing up years in a soldier settlement farmhouse in Forestville New South Wales created a huge impact in his writings. The very first poem 'Mentored By My Compass' presents this idea of unmooring, decrying idea of geographical fixity,

Mentored by my compass
Only when it started spinning out,
From a mindset in centrifugality...
block lettering that graphically pinpoints
what might have to be
the clearing house of remedy. (Harle and Sarangi 23)

The poems present a form of interior monologue, largely dwelling on the theme of temporality, loss. Yet it reaches towards a positive conclusion. For example, in 'Does This Round Us Up?' the poet at the end of everything says:

... and a few hours in eager conversation
While exchanging notes will be an enormous influence on me
And a demister for last night
And a sunny morning of what we are.
Does this round us up with a blessing, like life? (Harle and Sarangi 31)

W. B. Yeats in his "An Acre of Grass" talked about 'an old man's eagle mind', celebrating old age. Nathalie Buckland too reiterates the same in her poem 'In My Town':

In my town
 old women carry drums,
 they stalk the footpath... (Harle and Sarangi 35)

The poem encapsulates the spirit of old age and overturns all hitherto notions attached with it. Age does not debilitate the mental strength of an individual. Rather the resolve comes from within. So, in the fictional town of the poet she says:

In my town
 Old women rule. (Harle and Sarangi 35)

There is a sense of resilience in her voice that continues to speak out against the injustices happening around. In another poem "Wasteland", she laments for the youth,

Those who should be children still
 Loll indolently
 Passing the days
 Passing the joints
 Waiting for evening...
 Their marionette bodies
 Into hectic life-. (Harle and Sarangi 37)

Peter Nicholson, another contributor in this anthology could be termed deeply religious and a mystic. In his first poem, "Remembrance Day", he starts off with an element of nostalgia, saluting those men who have laid down their lives:

The dead are many in your country's fame,
 But you are worthy to recite their names
 Or bend your head, remembering to blame
 Yourself- perhaps there is a hope. (Harle and Sarangi 41)

Hope becomes a succor to life that nourishes it with happiness. Therefore in another poem, "Morning Assingation", he says,

With love's light wings did I o'erperch these walls,
 For stony limits cannot hold love out. (Harle and Sarangi 43)

The second half of the anthology begins with the poems of Archana Sahni. She is a prolific writer who is also the recipient of the first "Agha Shahid Ali Prize for Poetry". Sahni shows her concerns towards the Tibetans in exile, how they face the diasporic crisis, their desire to go back to Tibet. The Tibetans have always sought for a free independent land for themselves. "A Passage to Tibet" encapsulates all these emotions.

Dharamsala
 Is indeed little Tibet." (Harle and Sarangi 51)

Dhramasala welcomes the Tibetans in exile and makes them feel at home. It is place where finally the sons of the soil have come back to seek refuge, to find solace. The poet in another stanza says:

Who are we Indians
To pose as the gracious ones,
When you, lost children of Buddha,
Have finally only come home?
From Bodhgaya to Norbulingka (Harle and Sarangi 52)

The poignancy of the Tibet problem resurfaces time and again in the poem. The history of Tibet has seen a lot of bloodshed, conflict and tension. The dominant question that emerges amidst all these is, 'when shall Tiber be free?' The poet believes in the slogan and as she exhorts:

For all of us know
That the writing on the T-shirts,
'Tibet Will Be Free'
Is true. (Harle and Sarangi 56)

"A Passage to Tibet" therefore marks the journey towards 'home', a free Tibet, which will be a reality one day. The same motif is continued in another poem titled "Tibetmata". The name becomes an extension to the idea of Bharatmata. Tibet was never a part of India or China. It was always an independent region, and the time has come for 'Tibetswaraj'. The poet says:

If you put your ear
To the heart of Dharamsala's winding hills
You can hear something
Struggling out of the body of Hind:
Tibetswaraj. (Harle and Sarangi 57)

Sahni provides a translation of the older eighteenth century national anthem of Tibet, by Jamyang Norbu,

Jana gana mana Avalokiteshwar jai hai,
Tibet Bhagya Vidhata...
(Circled by ramparts of snow- mountains
This sacred realm,
This wellspring of all benefits and happiness...) (Harle and Sarangi 57)

While Sahni grapples with the question of identity crisis, diaspora consciousness, return to the roots for the Tibetans in exile, Sanjukta Dasgupta takes up the 'woman question' in her poems. Dasgupta is known widely for her pioneering work in the field of Gender Studies. In her poems she questions the idea, 'what it is to be a woman?'. In the poem "Shame", she traces the growth of a woman, from adolescence to old age.

On my seventeenth birthday
 My mother gave me a silk saree
 The soft swish of the silken pleats
 The shimmering, seducing cloth
 Carelessly clung to my lissome limbs
 Shielded my ripening bosom from hungry stares. (Harle and Sarangi 66)

'Shame' the word acts as a disjuncture, between the past youthful days, where there would be no fear to cover up her unadorned limbs, to the present old age, where saree drapes the 'shameful vulgar limbs'. Amidst these tensions, emanates the desire to be free, the search for individual autonomy. The image of Kali is invoked,

A garland of skulls round her neck
 The dark woman warrior
 In tempestuous rage
 Flings off the shame- shielding textile (Harle and Sarangi 67)

At the end, the transformation is almost complete, and one can find a resonance here with Buckland's 'old women'. Dasgupta too celebrates old age, waits for that hour of 'metamorphosis':

I am now stark dark Kali
 With flying tresses. (Harle and Sarangi 67)

"Goodbye, Mallika" is another poem where Dasgupta sings a paean for long time friend Mallika Sengupta, the prolific Bengali writer, who lost her life fighting against cancer. The beautiful lines becomes a tribute to her friendship that grew over the years:

Without insight
 Everything is out of sight.
 You just stepped within for evermore
 As you stepped out of this worldwide web. (Harle and Sarangi 69)

and "Malini's Role-Playing" (a clichéd narrative poem) encapsulates the long story of a woman Malini, as she struggles to raise her three sons. Malini was married off early, and was looked as a burden on her father's shoulders. Her meek demand to 'study further' was met with a strong rebuff from her father, "Nonsense - I have found a suitable boy/Marriage next month- remember she is eighteen this year." Malini's plight continues in her in-laws place after she bore three sons to her husband amidst the beatings from him. From a wife, to a mother till he last days, Malini's sad tale continued. But when she died, she was hailed as a 'virtuous wife' and 'mother'.

Loud invocations of God rent the air
 As the sons chanted Hari Bol as they walked
 With their incredibly light- lead

Malini's dead body lay like a tired bird under a coverlet:
What glory to be cremated by her own sons
Not one, not two but three proud sons (Harle and Sarangi 73)

The closing lines of the poem becomes a volte- face as the poet says,

(Malini) had secretly vowed
That she would never give birth to a daughter
Sometimes , merciful God does grant prayers! (Harle and Sarangi 75)

Malini's resilience becomes a staunch retaliation to the patriarchal forces that grows stronger every moment.

The other poets included in this brilliant anthology are D.C. Chambial, Vinita Agarwal, Vivekananda Jha whose works become an addendum to the theme of the book 'freedom'. The book becomes a conglomeration of identities, voices, thoughts that are not dissimilar from each other. But it's more of a postmodern pastiche, a web of images, and a barrel of sentiments. The polyphony of utterances sometimes merges, sometimes scatter. As Jaydeep Sarangi, one of the co-editors of the book sums up in his poem, "Stories of the Night": "He is not seen/ But he is that character in the story" (Harle and Sarangi, 98). The voices are not heard. Rather, they are the focalized point in all of the poems.

Reference

Harle, Rob, and Jaydeep Sarangi. *Voices Across the Ocean: Poems from Australia and India*. Allahabad: Cyberwit.net, 2014. Print.