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## Book Review

<b>Title</b>	:	<b>Rochelle Potkar's <i>Coins in Rivers</i></b>
<b>Author</b>	:	<b>Rochelle Potkar's</b>
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Rivers have spoken of the serenity of a disconcerted heart, unfazed survivals, and composed endurance, as the realm of the sentience resonating and echoing the whoosh of an undying gusto. Rivers become poems when, what you plant in them either flows off gradually into it or the rocks, pebbles, sediments of soil, rains of tears, icy-cold deportment, winds of apathy, wetlands of desire, silts of memories create contours of little brooks and creeks of the poetic wonder.

The forces of gravity from the downhill to the punch of a quib, barb, or dictum from the poet's heart, the erosional power of a river, and the evocative power of a poem can wear down mountains, tire out the heartless, the seismic humming of the earth, and the tender rhythms of a poem gently swaying the world in its song. An endlessly flowing stream in a poem carries the weight of its wisdom as if a signatory counsel of sages hammer and shape them into some precious metal.

Perhaps that is how the poet Rochelle Potkar might have imagined them in her fifth collection *Coins in Rivers*; as coins, whose density of horse sense causes them to perennially settle in the watercourse of the poem rather than just float on the surface. From this optics and optimism, all great poems have carried tonnes of coins in their belly, of sensitive sapience, wrapped in gold, copper or nickel. When these coins reach the riverbed, they come to rest and etch permanently in the sediment of the subconscious, as memorabilia of one's psychic and corporeal being.

One is rather inveigled into the title as some sort of ride up an embankment where the poet stands at the edge of a levee to throw some coins with a prayer or devotion for a wish, while the seduction of words on the recto and verso speak otherwise, they lure the reader into the valency and configuration of the water of words, into the atomized molecules of personal, social and the public. The final capstone crowns a prophetic and almost sibylline gasp of holding a pithy titan in hand is a postmodern pastiche fashion of miscellany. Just as one collects postcards and souvenirs, magnets, travel cards, and currency notes, the poet stashes the relics of remembrance, and experiences, garners these reminders from the privy of her experience, from the antique collection to casino win, tips as the likes of a street-artist, bank notes, tokens in the private wallet etc, the enormous 'life-savings' accrues her the benefits of poetic numismatics.

The *First Mint* opens with thoughts of food existentialism, where 'Bread' serves as the telltale of divinity, from a gourmet meal of Andalusia to the Eucharistic ceremonies and French delicacies, the everyday 'grinding grain' of the old soldiers, bankers, and tailors for "*roti, kapda, makaan*" acutely juxtaposes with the greedy gut for the art of Gastronomica. It almost feels as if the poet questions the extensiveness of the elaborated rituals where food is given to every creature, "bread for the worm, bread for the fish, bread for the rabbit, bread for the civet" but the grains rupture and rot in the stone-built, cemented chambers of storage, in the bonfire burns the comfort of their home and hearth.

From the *private wallet* comes personal ruminations crafted and sown in the poem "Sew" as semantic calls, which rather turn callous to the reader, asking them to self-frisk their lethargic faith and fancy of the uppish, elitist apathy. The habiliments of the civilized society have comfortably pushed aside countless episodes such as Khairlanji, Hathras, terrorist attacks in Casablanca Morocco, and projectile-like slaps of morality when violence becomes not an anomaly but a norm. "Three Women on the Liberty Bridge", "Willow Witching", "Amber", and "Ice Factory" reveal the sum aggregate of the negotiations one has to do with *womanhood* with sometimes bold and at other times understated mediation. The material explorations and exploitation of "The Girl from Lal Bazaar" entails a profusion of colors on the artistry spectrum of womanhood which entails courtesans, prostitutes, and even their 'progeny' and offspring. As the poet dabbles on the idea of who is divine and who is not, to seek liberation, these young ones, unlike the white women, have to start at the lowest of the rung, as "she starts at the rim like the white women (after independence). . ." (11). Being the daughter of a Courtesan or a 'village radical',

women still tuck their tribulations and sigh “at the edge of their sari” (9).

The section *Antique Currency* dwells on the poems of desire, the sentience of belonging, de-belonging, moving from the self to the sensual to endurance and existential. “Anthill” scribes an existential unease to downtrend the unrestrained prodigality in the rutted rigmarole of life. But these “ants are not easy listeners . . . claims the poet (29).” The existential comes with political undertones, measuring the red bosses and /or the capitalists to the pair of scales.

. . . where wise red-rich ants  
organize their revolution, egg-laying queens  
workers, soldiers, new nests,  
nuptial fights . . .”

In adumbrating the use of coercion and draconian control over the subjects, the poem speaks of an Orwellian dystopia, sometimes moving in the Huxleyan hegemonic acceptance, without question and resistance, but choking them in a stranglehold of its subjects:

The real purpose of an anthill home, is so we can  
tame these organized creatures  
tame unruly elements of nature ---  
all that an anthill was made of  
strategy, order,  
piles of earth, sand, pine needles,  
clay, urine and manure” (30).

Potkar constantly investigates the role and stance of the poet who can bring about an expose`, nudged carefully to the fine-tune choreography of gagged assertions, an informed citizen *au fait* with his social frames. This poet would have been shot down a street with his words left to breed, just as an “investigative, committed” (31) journalist. When nothing seems to work, “the best reaction has . . . been salted packets of humor, peals of laughter, packaged bottles of irony. . .” (35). Swallowing the pride of the punctilious codes of conduct is like walking over a fine rope “The stoic pretension of decorum helps when planes are delayed” (34).

The poems on love and sensuality appear to have a strategic glow of fire in their bellies, competing with the best poems on lust and carnal appetite

that literature has ever perceived and recorded. It expresses the desire of longing/unbelonging with lines like: "My body is receiving her swell and blossom, she is awakening in a thousand breaths"/My body is awakening like a river under rain, torrid. The woman awakening in the woman in the jungle."(36) resonate deeply in the retina of one's gaze seeking the nuanced smack of sexual zest. The mind-body Cartesian dualism becomes the coin flip of love and desire, where stripped of one, the other cannot exist. Concupiscence tied at the end of tender intimacy, the skillful union of deep affection with carnal flames smokes out from the lines:

Your body is my home.

Your lips, my envelope. (35)

The erotic poems such as "Things I Want to do With You"; "Rape Fantasies" embody strong *risque* allure of the wild and suggestive images and powerful assertions. These poems unsettle the reader of their dormant aphrodisiac longings reminding one of the popular Donnish avowals, "license my roving hands, and let them go/before behind between above and below." The frank pronouncements of the personal, however, don't forbid the poet from acting as a whistle-blower of sorts, with headstrong paterfamilias or sexual offenders, all turning out to be the men in positions of dominance. In "Art Installation", the poet writes:

Six walls of a traditional house

Four for patriarchy. (63)

A signature hallmark of Potkar's poetry had been the cosmopolitan, urbane` diction, of its ecumenical arrangements, listing of multitudinous things, a legion of objects one is surrounded with, familiar to an audience of Indian English Poetry. But at places, it fizzles to hold the covalent bonds of words in a poem, slips out of the page, and of its coherent valency. The *Mumbaiya* dialect adds a zap and zing to the attire of the poetic sublimity. It is also an unmissable differentia to Potkar's verse, where a subdued playfulness and sportive, semantic teasing give a free pass to dabble with and take delight in the frolic gambol towards the limits of language. The effect is not a bitter caustic derision, but keeping the reader in the jocund company of amusement with intentional undercurrents of irony.

To a poet's eye, nothing escapes. The wobbling political topography, the craggy societal terrains, the bedraggled history: these lyrical historiographies ravage the entombed truths of what in its veracity happens at the bottom of the flow-chart: from Jallianwala Bagh to the imagined hermitage of a bigot, empty devotions, masks that hid the devious gambits, clev-

er ruses, the poems speak with a sharp decibel to block the katzenjammer of zealots, persuaders, disbelievers. The poet tosses off these artists' tips as they clink on the ground of the reader's conscience, not as some poignant recollections for some imagined reconciliation but a jar of long collected coins that chime, and clang as hard-hitting substance of a volatile mass. She writes in "Battered House"

Dried bones of contentions over slit wrists of cartography.

From whose womb did you come?

What be the color of your skin?

Dialect of tongue? How you pray, love and fuck?

What is on your plate? Who is on your bed?

What is the color of your blood? (102)

The poem on citizenship and migrancy entails a roundabout predicament of being an outsider, opens and closes with an 'in your face' aggression but goes mildly aloof and lukewarm in the middle:

Brown skin in a white country

100 years of citizenship

Embalmed, upholstered

And still 'a bloody immigrant'. (97)

Life for an immigrant comes with an agreement on the lease, a temporary possession of the status quo, periodic payments to prove your love, and nationality. Among the poignant ones, "Capsule" runs deep. Visualizing a Capsule blown off in, 'Italy, Lima, Madrid, London, Moscow, Istanbul or Brussels' (95) with conversations ending in the middle, stories hanging on the charred bodies and scrapped bones, flashes of fire appear vivid like photo-flashes to the reader. As if riding on a Mumbai Local, death strikes from behind and within,-- "Wreck, wretch, wreathing--entails of deadening silence. . ." (94); "When I stumble upon the train station, ghosts walk up to me. I can see their screams and sirens." (95)

In one of the illustrated graphics, "Parliament of variety", one is reminded of the original bard of the olden times, Chaucer and his "Parliament of Fowls", with a difference: here Potkar's dream vision is to imagine careerists, communists, liberals, democrats, pseudo-patriots, climate-alarmists, climate-deniers, pansexuals, anarchists, etc to have a seat at the table, while nature rules in Fowls, and hope to persist in the depiction of the

Potkar's photo-poem.

For a dainty and petite book, Potkar's work is expansive, ambitious, and full of combustible, inflammatory cadences, a rabble-rouser can easily take advantage to agitate using excerpts here or there, it is all for peace and a pain for a demagogue. The common denomination that runs throughout is a token of *Verismo* and verisimilitude, a thread that imperceptibly binds these poems with the readers, integrally, in unison.

**Bhawna Vij Arora**