

Gothein and the major one, Helene Meyer-Franck. Growing up at a time when women were not expected to aspire to a university education or a role in public life, both apparently lived and worked largely in the shadow of their husbands. Nevertheless, they seem to belong to a generation of middle-class women that sought for avenues of emancipation, however limited, in intellectual activity. It seems that Marie-Luise Gothein independently discovered Tagore, translated his *Gitanjali*, and sent the manuscript to Wolff's publishing house for consideration. While it may be unclear whether the motives behind the eventual publication of the manuscript were in any way influenced by the providential announcement of the Nobel Prize, there seems to be no doubt about Gothein's genuine enthusiasm for Tagore's poetry. The same may be said even more forcefully about Meyer-Franck.

The third and final chapter of the study looks at both Helene Meyer-Franck and her husband Heinrich Meyer-Benfey since, as Kämpchen points out, they worked as a team. Both of them learnt Bengali and had plans for some time to move to Shantiniketan. These plans were scotched when the British Government refused to grant them visas. Though largely neglected by Tagore scholars in Germany and

India, Meyer-Franck was not only Tagore's major translator but also the first one to translate directly from the Bengali original. Meyer-Benfey, a philologist and literary historian of considerable repute, might have been put in the shade by Keyserling's flamboyant publicity, but, as Kämpchen explains, his contribution as a Tagore scholar is more than that of anyone else.

Though Kämpchen does not attach any significance to it, Helene Meyer-Franck's first encounter with Tagore's writing was in 1920 with the essay "The Spirit of Japan" and the poem "Sunset of the Century," both of which she immediately translated. The poem with its powerful, apocalyptic but universalist critique of civilisation that is unmistakably not just Western has nothing in it to particularly endear those who would wish to see Tagore as a representative of an Eastern idealism as against a Western materialism. Yet it marks the moment of Meyer-Franck's initial and spontaneous attraction to Tagore's poetry.

What one misses in Kämpchen's study is any discussion of the responses to the form or style of Tagore's writing rather than on views that he held or were attributed to him. One stray remark made by the director of production in Wolff's publishing house gestures unintentionally in this

direction: "The poems were so good and peculiar..." (emphasis added). Evidently, Meyer-Franck was so drawn to what was 'peculiar' to Tagore's writing that she decided to learn Bengali even despite her husband's discouragement. Kämpchen has shown critical appreciation of the fact that this first translator of Tagore from the original Bengali attempted to recreate not only the content but also the form that is inseparable from its "full emotional appeal." However, one would have liked to find some discussion of the literary qualities of Tagore's writing that attracted the German reader at a time when German writers were engaged in intense literary experimentation.

Heinrich Meyer-Benfey was evidently as intense an admirer of Tagore as his wife and wrote the first full-length book about him. He also published the eight volume *Collected Works* along with his wife. Kämpchen contrasts his sober language and balanced appraisal to Keyserling's superlative praise. Kämpchen ascribes this combination of emotional intensity and intellectual sobriety to the depth of Meyer-Benfey's scholarship, and in particular to the fact that Meyer-Benfey was the only person with any Indological training to write on Tagore.

One might add that though Kämpchen legitimately criticises perceptions that stereotype the Occident and the Orient, he himself at times lapses into formulations that are typical of such perceptions. He tends moreover to emphasise in his presentation of Tagore concepts such as harmony and interdependence between East and West and to somewhat underplay the passion and anger in Tagore's social critique as well as his internationalism and universalist concerns that so sharply contrast with the cultural relativism of Keyserling.

The study is evidently based on a great deal of documentary research including letters, newspaper reports, systematic and stray references in the writings of a vast number of people in Germany who met, read or merely heard about Tagore. The author has honestly admitted where he was unable to check the validity of any statement. Written in a lucid language that does not get cluttered despite the large amount of unknown information that it carries, Kämpchen's study gives fresh insights as well as new impulses for further investigation of Germany's encounter with Tagore.

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Simmering between the modernist and postmodernist postures, the poems selected by E.V. Ramakrishnan for *The Tree of Tongues* capture a predominant mood of resistance and anger as much as anguish. The tree stands steadfast on its deep roots, emerging, as it were, from the same mood of protest as evidenced in the medieval poetry of each of the four tongues recorded in this volume. The title of the book is in itself a rich metaphor that draws its meanings from the mythic and the grand narrative of the Malayalam poem by K. Satchidanandan quoted in its English translation in the very beginning:

And the goddess frowned
The goddess lifted the sword
And she chopped off the root

The tongue tree had a gash
The gash spurted blood
The blood sprouted leaves
A thousand tongue leaves
Each leaf put forth truth
All those buried truths were out

Each poem in this collection projects an effort to unravel some buried truth, be it in the insularity of a private consciousness or within the much larger social domain where the personal too becomes the political. Subaltern voices find their much deserving space in this volume, giving vent to suppressed and erstwhile

Book review

The Blossom of Wounded Voices

THE TREE OF TONGUES.

Edited by E.V. Ramakrishnan, IAS, 1999

silenced feelings. "My poetry is a sharp stabbing knife," says Jayant Parmar, the Gujarati poet. Namdeo Dhasal locates an "empire of darkness" in his poem "A Notebook of Poems" in Marathi. While reviewing this volume, Vasantha Surya asks in desperation: "What has happened to poetry? Is Keats being paraphrased? Unbeauty is truth and truth unbeauty!" In poem after poem, this collection throws up images which are surreal and at times even grotesque. There are poems replete with graphic descriptions that can arouse disgust. Where is beauty then to be located in these poems? I believe that the success of most of these poems lies in perceiving beauty in the moments of truth and awareness yielded by them in flashes. On the face of it, they might appear so ugly. Kakkad's poem "Behold These Sheep on the Road," translated by E.V. Ramakrishnan into

a tight and neat poetic idiom, is an appropriate example demonstrating the beauty of a dark vision:

Behold these sheep worming their way
along this unending road, bearing
the butcher's seal on their haunches
like the legacy of a coat of arms

Jostling and kicking each other
mating in the open
teeming and spawning
drifting in dust and din....

With hunger foaming at the mouth
with lust squirming in their loins
crowding and pushing....

As the sheep cease to feel and we cease to feel them, the poet asks the question at the end of the poem, "Do we feel ourselves anymore?"

There is no question of any lofty aloofness in this poetry as found in the poems of the "High Modernists" -

the poets of the earlier generation of modernists. However, a deep sense of loneliness and a pervasive social indifference seem to be at the root of much of the suffering articulated in these poems. The four languages represented in this volume scan a fairly large domain of India, even though there would be so many more different voices emerging in the many other languages.

What this volume tells us effectively is that the poet in India in the post-1960's has come out of his/her privatised self to build connections with the 'other' on the street. Much of the subversive reality suddenly finds voice, thus "making it new." *Making it New: Modernism in the Poetry of Malayalam, Hindi and Marathi* is in fact the title of E.V. Ramakrishnan's earlier book to which *The Tree of Tongues* comes as a companion volume. This does not of course mean that the poems were written later; rather, the poems collected for this volume were written far earlier. The editor modestly and rightly says, "Poetry is not written to illustrate critical arguments." In fact, the strength of E.V. Ramakrishnan's critical responses lies in the very fact that his arguments evolve from within the poetry written in the languages of his study.

The Tree of Tongues is also valuable as an autonomous book meant for

anyone interested in Indian poetry. This immediately brings one's attention to the question of translation. It is a well-known fact that poetry demands a more creative and skilful translator than does prose. This volume succeeds in presenting the translated poems as poems rather than pale and uninspired versions, which merely transmit information and not the essential experience of the poem. The Malayalam section of this book specially offers some examples of excellent translations with E.V. Ramakrishnan, K. Satchidanandan and A.J. Thomas as translators. Here's a sample from Kadammanita Ramakrishnan's long poem "The Pumpkin":

If nothing can be done
let this axis collapse
and let this earth be crushed
like a rotten egg.
Or, let it be frozen
like a still picture.
Let us leave it to its fate.

And let us talk about the pumpkin:

The pumpkin is globular
like the earth.

No, no. Let us not compare the
pumpkin
with the earth.

The pumpkin is like the pumpkin.

And later on in the poem:
The paradox that
even the greatest truths
turn into the most grotesque lies
as they turn into words
and then into actions,
is nauseating.

(Translated by A.J. Thomas)

In the Hindi section, Kedarnath Singh's poems too have found an inspired English rendering in the hands of Pradeep Deshpande and E.V. Ramakrishnan. The translations are both creative and faithful. Some of the translations owe their success to the fact that the poets themselves have been involved in the translation of their poems. Udayan Thakker's poem "The Cobbler" is just one example of the same:

Look at the cobbler
Sitting in the busy street
Like a bus-stop, long cancelled;
Lines of smile torn from his face,
Like a strap of an old sandal.
He is laid in the corner
Like some monument to a martyr.

The self-conscious use of language and a sort of self-reflexivity in the poems of all four languages represented here define a postmodern sensitivity that brings Indian poetry out into the streets. "Languages do not live in houses," says Satchidanandan.

He ends his poem called "Languages" with his language rising from the street: "His feet dirty with the slime/from the gutter," eventually to climb up "the steps of the parliament house." Namdeo Dhasal's Marathi poems "A Notebook of Poems" and "Autobiography," Sitanshu Yashaschandra's Gujarati poem "Language" and Raghuvir Sahay's Hindi poem called "Hindi," appearing at various points in this collection, create an overall ambience suggestive of a shared poetic sensibility. The interrogating poet of one region shares his/her questions with the poets of the other regions of India. Which language? Why this or that language? Why write poetry? What is the self? These are questions that are important in the making of the history of any nation.

E.V. Ramakrishnan's "Introduction" to the book offers an illuminating and comprehensive critical context for the reader to get meaningful entry points to the range of experiences underlying the poems in this volume. Whether it is the anger of Dalit poets or the "troubled conscience" of women poets, the editor does well in providing space to the marginalised and selecting poems that are not just politically correct but are aesthetically satisfying too.

Anuradha Poddar's Marathi poem

"Only Then the Cursed Draupadi in Me" turns inwards and declares:

If you could be pulled out from my heart

like Draupadi, hair undone
into the open assembly
and if each superfluous cloth that
covers your naked skin
could be clawed away by these
thorn-like hands

Only then will the cursed deprived
Draupadi
in me be pacified.

Draupadi has been seething for centuries. She has to be located from within and pacified. Humanity seeks and strives for the dignity of its being, not through "transcendental visions" but through the nitty-gritty of living existence. That seems to be the project of sensitive minds captured so carefully, so delicately and sometimes so fiercely in the voices of the poets in *The Tree of Tongues*.

The soft and pleasant colours of Gulammohammed Sheikh's painting on the cover of this Anthology are inviting to the eye. In fact, they serve as a beautiful disguise for the dark and harsh truths lying between the covers of this well-produced book.

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On the cover page of this handy monograph is a captivating photo. The intense and large blue eyes staring from a handsome face could belong to a film star, a Punjabi folk singer, or an impassioned Keatsian poet. And indeed Pash, the subject of the book, could be identified with aspects of each of these figurations. There is a poignancy about his young volatile life and about his abrupt and violent death – a surrender at the altar of idealism. He is the stuff that legends are made of. T.S. Gill's perceptive account of Pash's life and writings consolidate the fragments that local folklore has constructed around a mercurial individual. In a way, the critic holds the soaring angel down to terra firma making him accountable for his choices; in another way, Gill's affectionate and indulgent viewpoint allows the angel to arc higher than ever before as he enters the pantheon of apotheosised literary personages.

But first the essential biography. Born in 1950 in a modest home in the Doaba region, Pash came under the influence of Naxalites in the late 60s and his rousing poems in the collection *Loh Katha* announced him as a votary of armed struggle in the Punjab. In 1970 he was arrested under suspicion of murder and committed to jail for a year. Though released from prison, he lived as a marked man, frequently being

Book review

Ideology of a Poet

PASH

Tejwant Singh Gill

Sahitya Akademi Series,
"Makers of Indian Literature."

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apprehended on charges of violence. A passionate supporter of intellectual freedom and human dignity, Pash became a pawn in the complex web of political insurrections in the "Bluestar" years of Punjab. When information came that the Sikh terrorists had named Pash on their hit list, the young poet tried to escape the dragnet by emigrating to the U.S.A. But his revolutionary voice would not be silenced and he wrote about the anti-national activities of America-based Sikh terrorists. In turn, he was branded as a prime target and gunned down in his native village while on a visit to India. This was 1988, four years after Operation Bluestar. The sceptre of hate had not been laid to rest. Pash was thirty-eight years old. His destiny had been in curious emulation of his childhood hero – Bhagat Singh.

Tejwant Singh Gill's book on Pash explains the man and his work within the ideological contestations of the quest for national identity in Punjab. The turbulent decades from the 60s to the late 80s parallel the life of Pash. From the story of one man, significant to his devoted followers, the reader catches glimpses of the personal and the political, the regional and the national, poetics and propaganda. "Pash" was a pen name magically coined by a young Avtar Singh Sandhu. Lilted and resonant, he remains identified with its amorphous possibilities.

In a finely written chapter, "Ideology and structure of feeling," Gill traces the influence of the Naxalite movement on the impressionable minds of youthful rebels in Bengal and in Northern India. The rhetoric of

change, especially as articulated by Charu Mazumder, found its support in the call for revolution by Marxist sympathisers in the Punjab. Pash the creative artist, and Pash the self-styled revolutionary, meet in a queer conjunction in the Diary that visually represents the map of India. "Capitalists and landlords who are few in number have bled my loved country to nothing. So it will remain till these butchers are not deprived of this outrageous right" (p 18), says Pash even as he pictorially leaves blots in the text of the country to signify the bloodshed! One can chuckle indulgently at such adolescent fervour to remember that Pash was young, very young, and such excesses are best overlooked. However, maturity was to come soon as he turned as an acolyte to Trotsky's revolutionary passion and declared that Punjab should rectify the deplorable condition of its proletariat. That "ideology and feeling" is a complex negotiation is analysed by Gill with an acute eye: "Pash did not reckon with certain flaws in the deep structure of Trotsky's thinking.... Sound in the abstract, his theory of permanent revolution could not garner actual support from the people" (p 22). Pash is written with a lucidity and thoroughness which makes the Punjabi author easily accessible. Gill expertly guides us through eight