

A Springtime for Hindi Poetry in Translation*

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**A Name for Every Leaf: Selected Poems, 1959-2015*, Ashok Vajpeyi, Tr. Rahul Soni Harper Perennial, 2016; Pages 228, Price : Rs.450/-

Translation, we all understand, is the most intimate act of reading, and intimacy is a dangerous zone. It is heartening indeed to watch how sincerely the youngest among the Hindi bilinguals have taken up the challenge of translating the most distinct of Modernist Hindi poets into English, the *'sootradhar bhasha'* of our times. Earlier Apoorva Narain had translated the best of Kunwar Narayan for a collection published by Rupa five years ago. Then Sahitya Akademi brought out the translations of Kedarnath Singh's selected poems- *Benares and Other Poems*- translated by many translators including Vinay Dharwadker, Harish Trivedi and K Satchidanandan edited by K Satchidanandan and In 2013 Rahul Soni came up with his translation of 'Magadh' (Srikant Varma) and this year Harper Collins publishes his translation of the selected poems of Ashok Vajpeyi (1959-2015) A good translator, like a sensitive lover, must awaken all layers of poetry: rhetoric, logic and silence, without disrupting the delicate tissues that hold them together as one complete unit. Rahul seems to be sensitively aware of this basic fact about the art and craft of translation.

Everyone in the Hindi public sphere acknowledges Ashok Vajpeyi as a poet and poetry activist who has left no stones unturned in realizing Rilke's dream of letting the sibling art-forms (dance-music-poetry-painting-theatre and sculpture) work together towards what Ashok refers to as the 'Republic of Poetry'. Wittily playing upon Plato's idea of ousting poets from his kind of 'Republic', Ashok visualizes a pluralistic, polyphonic world of multiple beginnings and ends, all folded into one continuum: "One day No-Beginning and No End/ got bored and decided /to play a game, pretending to be a train:/ they got behind one another and /started going round in circles....to forget the ennui of having no place". (No Beginning, No End)

Stirring up the sediments of dark thoughts and half-ideas most of the poems in the collection are charged with a passion at once personal and cosmic, self-cogitating and profoundly affirmative. Swimming against a vast range of emotions and sensations, the poet seems to be struggling with the classic angst of how to infuse a world of fascinating but chaotic sense data with a transcendent meaning, especially at a time when it is deprived of a common myth and there is little room left for the good-natured banter of yesteryears: "They didn't have a decked-up god/to parade during worship: /they had left him outside/ like old, worn out shoes/ naked, carrying a bar of soap/ heading towards death / all they had was a darkling 'NO' ".(What They Had)

Sailing through the troubled times of public and private breakdowns, we are a dislodged and floating population today. No wonder then that the most significant of poetry today enters its time through its place and quietly absorbs motifs and memories from local roots. Ashok too enters his time through his place. The best of his poems rekindle personal, inter-personal and racial memories so as to establish some kind of cultural, historical and mythical bond between the man and his milieu, but one strange thing about his sense of place is that he is more at home on distant lands: you can smell the local flora and fauna more in his poems written in the remote corners of France, Germany and Poland: Look at his way of presenting river Rhine with Villeneuve on one side and Avignon on the other : "The Grass Calling out to the Galaxy in Chamber 'M' of the chartreuse of the fourteenth century France"; 'green leaves which you can't name'; 'century-old rose vines still eager to flower', 'the unanswered knock at the door in an empty Christian monastery', 'sunlight speaking through the fog' in a remote villa in the West. Then there are the multiple snapshots of the residual terror at Hitler's Auschwitz:

"When hate spreads out across the earth like a carefully planned garden

When we're not in jail but still are prisoners
Of our own pettinesses-

In reply to my grandson's lisp, 'What are you doing'
I want to create a new alphabet of hope
On the sullied black slate of history
In which all the world's children
Can write their words without hesitation or fear"
(If Possible)

The most intense poems in the collection are the ones addressed to his Didiya (mother, pregnant with another child), Dada (arrogant father) and the classic painter, (late) S H Raza': "The prehistoric stone you keep in your studio/ lies silently in history/..... It's as if the Narmada's uninterrupted time/ flows to touch your fingers each day/ and finds tranquility / the vital trench time of Paris/ breaks the bounds of / pain, compassion and revolution/... one colour crawls to the easel before fading away/ one colour knocks at the door to the invisible/.... One colour advances, trembling like a leaf/.... In this battle of colours/ in this wilderness of colours /agitated by colours, at peace among colours / you stand / a colour-burnt man/.... Time is the silence that lives in the veranda in front of your home / time is a thin hair that has broken off your brush / time is the expectation of mystery in your eyes, time is the vibration of flesh: without any fuss." (Raza's Time) In the rest of the poem this colour-burnt man stands tall reflecting on ironies at this particular point in history when terror and love, angst and celebration, nihilism and mysticism coalesce. Compared to the poems dedicated to friends and family, his love poems, despite their earthy sensuousness, taste like the weak green tea that we casually sip in VIP lounges, waiting for Godot, and it seems that love for Ashok, as for most of us, is a quest that failed: "Come/as darkness to darkness comes / as water meets water/ as light dissolves in light/ come / wear me /as the tree wears its bark / as the trail wears/ green grass/ take me / as darkness takes roots/ as water takes the moon / as eternity takes time". (Come)

This kind of predictability one hardly comes across in poems addressed to family members, friends and people he actually adores: those poems take unexpected turns and exhibit a unique poise that dawns upon one only after a deep realization of the fact that both in life and in poetry, balance of action and reaction must be exquisitely and organically, not quantitatively and mechanically, adjusted. An exquisite example of this poise are his poems addressed to father: "I have only emulated you:/ the truly sad thing is not / that so many years passed in misunderstanding / but that / in the end / I've turned out to be a pale imitation of you/ which neither you nor I / ever suspected / or desired." (To My Father)

Most of Ashok's poems, especially the ones gazing at the face of Time, Death, Culture and History, are qualified by emphasis on the contingency and a synchronic view of culture dismissing the unidirectional law of progress and the hegemonic modes of representation.

Besides poems, this collection includes an insightful chit-chat with the fellow-poet, Dhruv Shukla and some luminous reflections on contemporary world poetry. A glaring example of what Eliot calls 'Workshop Criticism', these reflections carry some sensible formulations on the aesthetics of poetry. On the whole Ashok seems to be in agreement with our ancient Acharyas who don't count ethics and aesthetics as binaries. Rooted in the common foundation of equipoise, *sthithpragnata* or *samyak drishti* which establishes denial of extremes and excesses, both 'aesthetics' and 'ethics' in Ashok adhere to the principle of harmony and any violation of harmony becomes both aesthetically and ethically frustrating: all that is 'improper' also becomes 'ugly' (unbridled anger, lust and greed, for instance, are the ugliest states of being).

Ashok's immense faith in youngsters is borne out by the fact that not only for translation but also for 'introduction' to the text he has chosen poets at least 25 years his junior.

Arundhati Subramaniam has written the Preface, and Ranjit Hoskote, the Afterword. Brightest among the contemporary Indian English poets, both Arundhati and Ranjit seem to be raising their tender palms from both sides to protect the flame of Bhasha poetry against tough winds. One could only wish that the tone and timbre of multiple other shades of poetry in Hindi draw the attention of the youngest of our Hindi bilinguals. Quite unlike their self-taught elders they have had the privilege of growing up in cities and attending the best of English medium schools, so catching the rhythm of the *deshaj* – nativist-kind of poetry (the one deeply rooted in racial memory and rural, semi-urban cultural ethos) could be a bit more demanding, but then we can't be blind to the fact that reaching out to other vistas of reality is the only way out of the politics of thering.

Ashok Vajpeyi is a neo-classical poet with thick resonances of the past imperfect and present continuous. His inter-textual dialogues with fellow poets have a tinge of existential angst. Conscious of 'entering the heavens in mud-soaked shoes', most of his poems question his own self with the sensitivity of yet another Prufrock: 'Do I dare disturb the universe?' His is basically a Dhruvad style of poetry, poetry slowly rippling around the *beejakshars* (key concepts) of Fire, Water, Earth, Skies, Eternal Winds, Relationships, Death and Word "taking sand and twigs in its mouth" which "began to create after every end when there was no startled moonrise of the body / no dark night of the soul/no sunlit memory of love" (After he End- 2)

Reassessing Tagore

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* Chhanda Chatterjee (ed.), *Rabindranath Tagore: A Mind Staring into Infinity*. 2016. Primus, New Delhi. pp. 1-157

As the contemporary socio-political scenario is getting increasingly intolerant and violent, Rabindranath Tagore and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi are acquiring a new relevance for both academic and non-academic readers. These two iconic figures had anticipated an acceleration of the dark forces of communalism and myopic, self-serving majoritarian nationalism in India, if the cultural and institutional framework of thought and values celebrated a consumerist materialism transplanted directly from Western imperialism. Tagore's creative genius sought to liberate the Indian elite and middle-class imagination from a blatant imitation of a crass Western material acquisitiveness. Such imitation could only result in a double disorientation of the literate communities within Bengal, for the ethos of the culture one was imitating would always elude the imitator, while the vernacular culture which provided the ground beneath one's feet was discarded as "uncivilized". A deeply concerned Tagore forged a different and far more creative manner of locating oneself within a synthesized new cultural idiom which retained a selection of the universalizing values from within the Bengali culture but which combined much that was liberating and beautiful from Western intellectual and cultural traditions. Chhanda Chatterjee's edited volume puts together a string of essays by different Tagore scholars. There seems to be two broad themes around which the essays are arranged.

The first set carefully maps the myriad pathways Tagore trod in order to creatively fuse values intrinsic to Indian life, with the intellectual, institutional and physical dynamism present in Western societies. Sobhanlal Dutta Gupta's "Tagore and Western Modernity: Towards an analytical Understanding" turns on this theme of a smooth synthesis between the two civilizations – the East and the West.

Bipasha Raha's explorations of the "Recovery of the Self: Rural Welfare and Rabindranath Tagore", shows how Tagore's vision could combine a new sense of action-driven community welfare programmes based on Western scientific organizational rationality, which could then lessen the intellectual isolation of the rural communities vis-a-vis larger, more cosmopolitan urban regions. Further, such a vision, backed by action-oriented practices, would build on an indigenous notion of community – broadening and deepening its notion of harmony with the environment and with each other, thereby ensuring that such gradually modernizing identities would retain their intrinsic humanistic values as they reoriented themselves to the global.

Uma Dasgupta's essay on *Santiniketan's Place in India's nationalist History: As Gleaned from the Letters of Andrews, Tagore and Gandhi 1912-1940*, maps the success of Rabindranath's vision of creating a community attuned to universal values, through an educational agenda that harmonized with all the natural elements within a sylvan space he called Santiniketan – a vision which runs in his rural welfare programme too. This space seemed to retain for both Gandhi and Andrews what was essentially Indian – a free space beyond the colonized Indian nation which contained repose, quiet contemplation of the fast-moving world beyond, and joyousness. Jose Paz, in a similar vein, traces the confluence of liberal western thought which found expression in creative pedagogy, and Tagore's vision of synergic communities which harmonized science and nature within the everydayness of *Santiniketan* in "Tagore's Educational Model and Its Relation with the New School Movement". Somdatta Mandal's essay, *The itinerant Traveler: Tagore and America*, dwells on a Tagore openly critical of America's disconnection with the non-Western world staggering under Western imperialistic exploitation, yet the reasonable success of Tagore's personal fund-raising activities from rich

Americans for building Santiniketan also convinced him of the generosity of the American spirit which could rise above criticism.

The second set of essays engage with Tagore's creative desire which sought to inculcate an expressiveness in ordinary everyday lives through a heightened daily awareness of grace, beauty and freedom of an embodied human existence. Mandarkrant Bose's essay on Tagore's fascination with Vaishnav Padabali and his creative merging of the new literary and musical tastes with the poetic, rhythmic and devotional depths of the vaishnav padavalis, which produce a wonderful rush of words and music unique to Tagore. The essay of course delves into other cultural influences from different parts of the world, but Tagore did serve up a blend of the East and the West with such consummate skill that his creations could not be split into different cultural components. Tagore's influence in shaping literate Bengali communities' musical aesthetics, devolving right down to the present day, in this sense is still vibrantly alive. Amrita Dutt's "Tagore and Dance" trace the tremendous energy which infused the poet as he attempted to make a stilted community, scared and anxious of beautiful bodily movements, open up to the idea of aesthetic beauty of the dancing body. As Sutapa Choudhury's essay, *The Prince's Progress: Tagore, Tasher Desh and Revisionist Myth-Making*, points out, there is a deep connection between Tagore's dismay at frozen, immobile, human beings who have forgotten their connection to a dancing, joyous, challenging life, and his highly popular and provocative dance drama, *Tasher Desh*, which reveal how the rule-bound and lifeless marionettes suddenly, confronted by two

impulsive and restless strangers – a prince and his friend from a distant land– who sing and dance their way into their hearts and allow them how to reconnect with life replete with movement, surprises, amazement and joyousness. Against this recurring Tagorean leitmotif of the joyousness of life and its constant ability to surprise, amaze, and produce wonder within the human mind, Raman Siva Kumar examines the darkness, the loneliness and the melancholy which rise up from Tagore's drawings in his "*Rabindranath as Painter*". Tagore himself had confessed to Andrews – as Uma Dasgupta has sensitively explored – that he could not enter into a close relationship with anyone – there was a part of him that always remained aloof and detached. His perception of sadness and darkness splayed onto paper. However, one has to keep in mind that Tagore did create images of darkness that held within it, unseen and invisible, an incandescent light: *The King of the Dark Chamber* immediately comes to mind.

All the essays address Rabindranath's vision of a regenerated community, or communities, who would share a different notion of occupying space, even to the manner they would lay claim to it. The essays are perceptive, and the range of the scholars – from Tagore's appreciation of Vaishnav Padavali to his pedagogical engagements with the creation of a community who moved differently, thought differently, and were positioned within a different understanding of the nation – in effect – a new community of citizens – makes this book a good addition to the corpus of academic works on Tagore.

On Gender and Resistance

KAUSTAV CHAKRABORTY

* Sujit Kumar Chattopadhyay. *Gender Inequality, Popular Culture and Resistance in Bankura District*. Delhi: Primus Books, 2016. pp xiv + 257. Rs 1495.

The book, in its seven chapters along with an introduction, glossary, bibliography and index, is a study, on the basis of the case studies carried on in the Bankura district of West Bengal, of the interconnections and correlations between the issues of gender inequality, popular culture and resistance. Accepting how the popular culture plays an equivocal role in maintaining as well as a counterattacking the gender inequality that is visible in rural Bengal, the author has tried to explore the possible implications of the popular folklore of Bankura district in formulating resistance against the prevalent gender bias in the everyday cum predominant cultural praxes. It is interesting to note that although the author has exclusively included the folkloristic forms like folk songs (like Tushu, Bhadu and Jhumur of Bankura district), riddles, rhymes and proverbs as the cultural components he does not use 'folk culture' but uses 'popular culture' in his title, instead.

In the introduction entitled "Defining the Problem: Current knowledge, Sources and Methods", a detailed description of the existing literature, research gaps and methodology has been provided. Chapter one, "Gender Inequality: Concepts and Approaches", begins by clarifying the terms like 'discrimination', 'difference', 'exploitation' and 'oppression'. Thereafter the 'Various Concepts of Gender Inequality' has been examined under different lens like, 'Religious Approach' (that includes Christianity, Hinduism and Islam), 'Biological Approach', 'Psychological Approach', 'Sociological Approach' and 'Feminist Approach' with an elaboration of the Liberal, Radical and Marxian feminism. The overall implication of these approaches for examining gender inequality is understandable, but how the author has possibly used all/some of these theoretical frameworks in his work or whether there is a coherent set of theoretical assumptions

that the author has been drawing from all these theories is not specified. In the second chapter, "Defining Popular Culture— Various Concepts: Role of Popular Culture and Social Resistance", the author has defined folklore and critically summarized a whole range of diverse theoretical perspectives related to folkloristic, like 'Mythological Approach', 'Philological Approach', 'Borrowing Theory', 'Anthropological Approach', 'Nationalist Approach' etc. without hinting at the way in which the author might have planned to use them selectively in the work. It is difficult to understand how one can connect these discussions based on varieties of mediations and methods together. Again, by straightjacketing the conventional folk as the popular culture the author seems not to have looked into the transition that has been taking place in these traditional folk items by the impact of modernization. Chapter three deals with "Demographic, Social and Cultural Account of the District of Bankura and Various Forms of Popular Culture". This is a well-researched chapter where, with a comparative analysis of data collected from the census of 1991, 2001 and 2011, an attempt has been made to expose the gender gap in terms of literacy, marriage, life-expectancy and work-participation of females in Bankura. Additional effort has been made to scrutinize the marriage systems and dowry, widow remarriage, status of women of the different scheduled castes and scheduled tribes of the region. "Popular Culture and Gender Inequality in Bankura Folk Songs" is the title of the chapter four in which a very interesting sociological study of the three major forms of folk songs popular in Bankura has been undertaken to reveal how the women questions related to domestic violence like wife-beating and sexual violence, child marriage, dowry and polygamy get addressed through Bhadu, Tushu and Jhumur songs. The author has made ample illustrations to justify his stance. For example, the following Bhadu reflects bluntly the items that the groom demands in dowry:

*With so many daughters—
Many houses are under obligation with so many daughters*

*As there is no bridegroom without a dowry of rupees one thousand!
Then a bicycle and watch—
A bicycle, a watch, bangles and a necklace—
Give the groom a set of utensils and also a transistor. (p 111).*

The pathetic condition of a wife in the house of her in-laws gets a poetic expression through this Tushu song:

*I cut a fish into big pieces
Fish-bones were not boiled
Elder brother-in-law makes ugly gestures
I shall not keep my life alive. (p 119).*

The painful lives of the emigrant women who are brought to Assam under false hopes only to be exploited as labourers get depicted in this Jhumur song:

*Let us go, my darling
To Assam as
We are in distress here.
O my darling
There is (are) green tea-gardens
In Assam.*

*O my beloved,
You have cheated me
You have cheated me.
In Assam I get only
Parched rice and liquor of tea.
Saheb says, come! Come!
The babu says, bring them captured
Sardar says, whip them on back*

*O my beloved!
You have cheated me
And brought me to Assam. (p 131).*

“Popular Culture and Gender Inequality in Bankura: Riddles, Rhymes and Proverbs” is the title of the chapter five that illustrates how the similar forms of oppression and gender inequality as expressed through the songs also get revealed through the riddles, rhymes and proverbs. According to the author, there are mainly three forms of discrimination against the women that one can perceive through the riddles, rhymes and proverbs: first, associating women in a sexual context to degrade women’s social status; second, objectification of the females that undermines their identity as human beings; and third, de-humanizing women by projecting them as inferior compared to men. A few examples can be cited from the book to show how the patriarchal agenda of suppression and mistreatment of the women get translated into the proverbs, riddles and rhymes:

1. *The fair wife goes fair
and life ends with being slapped.
(The answer [of the riddle] is ‘Cooking pot’) (p 142).*

2. *Bird, Bird, Bird,
Let my seven co-wives
Be pulled and hauled to the bank of river
I shall see (the funeral pyre) from the ferry. (‘Rhyme’, p 151).*

3. *Cowries for son,
Rope for daughter.
Daughter is a lump of mud,
is only to throw in water. (‘Proverb’, p 160).*

The next chapter, “Recent Challenges to Gender Inequality”, while examining the impact of civil societal associations, political movements and governmental interventions in resisting the gender inequality also shows how programmes for the sustainable development of the women have slowly been initiated through strategic emphasis on increasing women’s literacy rate, enhancing income through Sell-Help groups and generating awareness regarding the health of women and children. The most fascinating are the songs of resistance created during IPTA movement in Bankura:

*You did not allow me to go to school,
you gave me your son to my lap
You gave marks in the wall
how many days you have worked.
Why do you want to make me a blind like you
Shall I also give my son in my daughter’s lap?...
...Don’t make me like a blind.
Please open my eyes. (p 193).*

In the concluding chapter the author has summarized his findings along with elaborating upon the further scope of the study.

Personally I feel that this kind of conscious contribution by a male researcher to women studies is very much essential to inculcate sensitivity about women and their plights in our patriarchal society. However, while describing the misery of the women as expressed in the folk songs, the flat statement made by the author, “The mother-in-law and sister-in-law are often the prime movers in the oppression” (p 212) needs a bit of more insight, as how these in-laws are made to internalize the patriarchal ethos, in order to do justice with the issues of the subjugation of women; else the entire objective of the work becomes debilitated. Nonetheless, this book will be useful for those interested in and working on gender studies, area studies, folklore and cultural studies.