

BOOK REVIEWS

1

Review of P. Raja's *Any Wife to Any Husband*

Raja, P. *Any Wife to Any Husband*. Rock Pebbles, 2022. pp.104.

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A prolific writer, novelist, essayist, short story writer, bilingual writer and editor, P. Raja hails from Pondicherry, India. *Any Wife to Any Husband* is a poetry collection dedicated to his wife, Periyanaayaki. This collection of 61 poems in English was published by Rock Pebbles, Odisha, in 2022. It is a collection of poems deeply rooted in his observations as a writer. All the poems bear a strong affinity to contemporary times. They are marked by an element of satire, wit and humour and urban sensibility.

The poet makes candid confessions where he wishes to pronounce serious judgment on an ordinary man. He is a master of linguistic niceties, and each word he employs conveys a distinct meaning. If delighting his readers is his sole weapon, it is equally his shrewd scholarship and critical judgment that play a significant role in shaping a poem. His dexterity reflects in his economy of words.

The collection under review has sixty-one poems. The first poem, "Fearlessly Flying", reflects his experience of travelling on a flight. Raja has a few self-negated doubts, which are genuinely present in every passenger. He writes, "I do not know at what speed? It is flying/ I only know/ It is fast, very fast? (9). In the succeeding stanzas, he writes that the cockpit records every bit of the journey and that his life is one conditioned by the cockpit voice recorder.

Towards the end, he sums up the philosophy of flight journey as, “All that I could see is / vacuum and vacuum/ at times wagons of clouds / pass below reminding me of / the ephemeral nature of life” (10). A typical vein of philosophy emerges in the end when one undertakes a flight journey full of fear, anxiety and alarm. Fearless flying is never possible. However, the passengers on board are frequently cautioned against any mishap. The ephemeral nature of life is emphasised in the poem.

The next poem, “Mathematics of Married Life”, is numerically composed around mathematical calculations. Married life is an exploration of zero outcomes towards the end. The focus of the poem is that married life is likened to mathematics which eventually ends up in zero value. Man thinks he is married, but actually, he is living a life of nothingness. Marriage is neither a pleasant event nor a fruitful passage in the journey because man halts at nothing.

“Final Action” is a poem of absolute revelations on man’s different actions in life. Different stages and roles –active and passive, restless, and life of lies are inevitably meant to be experienced. “Your show is over / vacate the stage/others are in the long queue/waiting to play their roles” (21). This poem is on the lines with William Shakespeare’s “Seven Ages of Man”. Both entrance and exit in life are full of hopes, stages, and lies. The final action, as the poet brilliantly sums up the philosophy, is “Now is your time / your place is a new stage / About action, all that You have to do is sleep” (22). All that man has done in different roles ended up in a pack of lies. His life is subject to endless trials in futile exercises. The final action signifies death.

In the poem “First Kiss”, Raja demonstrates the haunting images of the first kiss in different contexts. The romantic touch and the mood get heightened by images that engage him in the kiss. Onions peeled signify the hurting of his lover in distress.

“City” is a poem of many reflections about busy city life. It is a city full of lies and robberies in broad daylight. Business gets multiplied, and the number of business men is beyond the countless stars. “The seductive harlot / sells nations through her / nakedness and shame” (26). It is a city of open prostitution. Towards the end, Raja bemoans that there won’t be anyone who can control all illegal

activities. "Who will bemoan the city? / the Law is powerless / Justice is blind /How long shall the city weep? (27). The poet protests the lawlessness and injustice in city life. The wicked are surrounded by the righteous in cities. It has become a bloody city of utter failure in governance. The woes of the city are unending in illegal activities.

In yet another poem, "Oh, Once Again", Raja recollects how he spent his entire life looking for her dream girl. To him, she was a sweet dream and a solace. She was to him an affectionate mother. "Like a sweet dream / That turned true / You came as a solace / To my bereaved soul" (34). A bosom friend, he found in her a friend who saved him from the tunnel of sorrow. Soon, she disappeared like a dream from his busy-bee life. "Oh, how cruel it is / to spend the rest of my life / Looking for you once again? " (35). His wait and expectations ended in mere dreaming.

"A Writer's Library" is a poem of brilliant recollections rooted in auto biographical elements. As Raja is an established writer, he has his own library with a good collection of books. He recollects how his relatives branded him as a bibliophile. The writer's library is a storehouse of books that created more platforms for more books. He feels that "The very presence of books/ is a great company more interesting / than other interesting friends" (36).

The title of this poetry collection, "Any Wife to Any Husband," is one of the poems where the wife presents the experiences: "I married you / Not out of any love for you / Yet I did so / For I know I should marry /some idiot one day / All to provide myself / a false sense of security" (38). Further, she does own everything in married life. "The home I made of your house / the kids I made for your bliss / the reliable friends I brought in / the hostile relations I turned amicable / Oh! Only I could do that delicate handiwork / (40). Her observations about the house, kids, friends and relations are meant for a fair and judicious evaluation.

"My Two Pens" evokes the poet's possession of two pens –one of them was gifted by his father, and the other one he bought with his first salary. Raja uses such simple objects to fuel interest among the readers. These two pens never went outside his house. He uses a cheaper one and hands it over to those in need at the bank and other offices. There were occasions when he forgot all about the pen. Those

pens he uses are safe in his study on the writing desk. When he loses them, he never complains. He loves them just as a pen holds his fingers. It is nostalgic in one sense and demanding in the other.

“Butterfly” is a poem about his keen observations on a tiny creature. It was a lovely sight to see the beautiful butterfly. It flutters around him as he fondly recollects the colourful wings to collect nectar. Raja describes, “To be or Not to be” / is not her dilemma / what to be and what not to be” (49). Raja presents the growth of a butterfly as something “Eggs first, then caterpillar / Pupa then and soon a butterfly / all forms in less than a month” (50). The very sight of a butterfly invokes a curiosity in the poet, and he is compelled to compose a beautiful yet simple verse signifying the birth and development of a tiny creature in the universe. Poetry for Raja is inspirational, emotional and spontaneous. He has immense knowledge to produce matchless and innovative things with poetry.

“My Testament” is a poem of self-declarations in a fine narrative grip. Testament means something that serves as a sign or evidence of a specified fact, event or quality. He begins the testament as “When I am dead / Let it be said / P. Raja has lived” (53). Raja as a dutiful brother, affectionate father, and loveable parent, makes him dearer to them. He became a hard-working student to his inspiring teachers. “A jolly good guy / to his goody-goody pals / he has lived” (53). He wishes to be remembered as one who has enjoyed his three kids. He is a lover of good food and it is what to him “he lived to eat / and never ate to live” (53). Likewise, he has an endless list of wishes by which he would like to be remembered. Tasty whisky, teaching, books and stray enemies – all hold him in their fond memory. “If P. Raja has not lived / who else has? (54).

In “Painter Rain”, he writes that “watching rain is a lovely pastime / when you have nothing else to do (61). To him, rain by itself is no beautiful sight. It becomes just a spray painter. A man needs a thousand eyes to see into the artist’s creation. Artistic beauty holds men in beautiful sights. “And, I, imprisoned in my study / Move from windows east to west / to frame in words the scenes the rain painted” (62). A painter lives in artistic beauty. The rain that he paints becomes a creation in his hands. Creative art has life and this life is invoked in the rain by the painter.

In the poem "Porcupine Woman", Raja presents the most glaring realities. He goes philosophically in the lines, "Living together without love / is akin to making love to a corpse / Yet life has to go on" (68). As we move forward, Raja writes that "we are absent in our presence and present in our absence" (68). In conclusion, the lines are pregnant with realism. "Marriage is a net / woman uses to arrest / an ignorant man for life / yet it is the same a woman, who cries / "O" I am caught in a net of fate for life" (70).

"Paper Life" is a poem of the poet's own recollections in the company of books. Life for P. Raja is of writings and books. He desperately needs paper to attempt his writings. This spirit of books is reflected in the lines as "I live with books / I sleep with books / I know one day / I will die amidst books" (84). What does he do with the books? Raja writes that "Books keep reminding me / of my mother –love incarnate" and " Books remind me of my Dad –duty conscious /who turned my empty head / into one crowned with many laurels" (84). Today, he is so proud of creating titles in a good number. He searches for readers armed with bouquets. He strongly wishes that paper life will keep him alive even after his death. In fact, a writer lives in the works he produces during his or her lifetime.

These books would stamp out the literary journey of the writers. Raja will be remembered in the annals of the history of Indian Writing in English as a poet. "House of Books" is yet another poem of love for books. Raja finds the sight books everywhere – books to his right side, books to his left side, books on his pillow, books on his footstool, books on his bed, dining table, kitchen and books in the toilet. Further, his house is a home for books. "My house, a home for books / A loyal companion it is / through my whole life" (87).

"Night" is a poem of stunning revelations. It puts on a veil of darkness. "A live candle / lifted the veil and / searched for the / night in hiding/night was missing" (97). Philosophically, night finds shelter in those hearts of despair that eventually blame darkness. Night brings down many hues in different vicissitudes. Night symbolises death, the darkness of the soul and loss of faith. It means grief or death. It can refer to the darkness of life, mind, and soul. But night awakens us against the precautions of life, and the dangers that lie ahead of us.

In conclusion, P. Raja is primarily a poet of everyday situations. He has combined his experiences into the poetic output of sustenance and reliability. If life is to be lived in earnest, Raja's poems in this collection bear that stamp of authenticity and realisation. He converts his observations and experiences into simple verses full of literary realism and free from didacticism. This is where P. Raja's poetry will be a testament to Indian resilience after setbacks and bitter shades of life. The collection is worth reading for many reasons. It stimulates the reader's minds and awakens them to better ways of living a life.

2

Review of Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*

Shree, Geetanjali. *Tomb of Sand*. Translated by Daisy Rockwell, Penguin Books, 2022. 696 pp. Rs. 691.

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Transgressions abound in *Tomb of Sand*. In the novel, language, border, body, and memory all become “doors,” accommodating the increasing traversals of all its characters (Shree 29). Unlike Manto’s *Toba Tek Singh*, where place and identity overlap one another, making each “equally uncertain,” Geetanjali Shree’s novel employs “a rambunctious tone and structure” to dig into Chadraprabha Debi’s memory to deliver Chanda of Pakistan (Padamsee 2; cover copy). Translated from its Hindi version, *Ret Samadhi* (2018), *Tomb of Sand* won the 2022 International Booker Prize, a definite feat for a literary work originally written in an Indian language. To give credit where credit has been long due, Frank Wynne, chair of judges for the 2022 International Booker Prize, calls it “sui generis” while stating:

“in its linguistic contortions it evokes Don Quixote, in its discursive digressions it is reminiscent of Tristram Shandy, in its sense of the magical there are echoes of Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel Garcia Marquez.” (The Booker Library)

Before reviewing the novel, it is essential to dwell upon a lesson put forth in the first chapter: “Anything worth doing transcends borders” (Shree 13). In *Tomb of Sand*, borders could mean anything from the LoC to chapters in the book. The first part begins with the risky business of dealing with Ma’s (Chandraprabha Debi) widowhood-induced depression with humor. Humor enables Shree to deconstruct her own childhood experiences of growing up in a civil-servant household and ask pertinent questions regarding authority, patriarchy, and traditions. But the novel is not really

concerned with these questions as much as it is with the art of transgression. Ma's back, entombed in the quilt, was like a wall to her family's requests to "get up!" (Shree 17). The language used to describe the hustle and bustle of her family members and their persistent endeavours at forcing her back into some sort of sustenance carries an anxious undertone that is fully realised after she disappears: "As the search deepens, the senses grow intemperate" (Shree 183). The first part is only the beginning of a sputtering language to evoke the family's "intemperate" anxieties at having realised that "Amma *really* was missing... "The rest of their lives would be spent asking themselves what else they had lost" (Shree 198).

Alka Saraogi suggests in her review of *Ret Samadhi* that "the second part is a great saga of the love of a daughter for her mother" (35). Ma, after being traced, temporarily moves from her son's house to her daughter's house, where she finds a lease on "new life," enabled by the swift transfer of roles between the mother and daughter (Shree 241). However, while Ma finds a new rhythm of life, the daughter finds herself "getting cooked" as she "just wasn't used to it" (Shree 298). In the meanwhile, Shree introduces Rosie Bua/Raza Master, a transgender character who inspires the novel's many transgressions, like "a body unrecognising of the legitimacy of any borders" (423). As Harish Trivedi rightly suggests, "Rosie/Raza threatens to run away with the novel" until Shree returns the narrative to two women instead of moving forward with two and a half.

The third part unfolds like a mystery. Ma rises from her tomb of sand, as if from amnesia, and embarks on a journey to find her husband, Ali Anwar, whom she had married when she was sixteen, back in Pakistan. Without legal documents, without a visa, but with her "heart of stone," Ma and her daughter go on an amusing adventure all around Pakistan, only to end up behind bars in Khyber. It might be confusing for readers to understand the motive of an eighty-year-old woman hoping to find closure for a relationship severed by the Partition, but Shree in an interview with VighneshHampapurafor *Scroll* tries to explain that maybe Ma has become selfish. Her old age allowed her to unburden herself of the

various responsibilities, roles, and rules she had to take care of. But to try and find a clear motive for her actions would be futile.

The novel has a few major characters, who are supported by a retinue of minor characters. However, most of the major characters are not named and are only referred to according to their relationship with Ma. We have Bade, the elder son, who is a civil servant in Delhi. We meet him when he too is transitioning into a new role as a retired civil servant, so his major concerns are to make better investments, although with Ma's pension, and to end Ma's vacation. Shree questions the many characteristics of men in Indian families: their fear of transgressions, their self-imposed responsibility of taking responsibility for everyone outside the family, and their inheritance of shouting (46). Even if she makes fun, she puts him under a microscope, turning the glass till different eccentricities emerge that dissipate into dreams dreamt on trees (Shree 451).

Beti, a modern woman in her own understanding, becomes a foil for Ma, wrapping her in "love that both fattens and starves" (Shree 35). When she and Ma reverse their mother-daughter roles, she is enveloped in a certain gloom of imposed motherhood where "no other desire, besides the desire to give one's child [Ma] everything," exists (Shree 241). The family and its responsibilities constantly agitate her, and she is driven to question her own identity and beliefs. When she realises her mother's appetite for transgressions is much stronger than her own, the gloom breaks, and she realises she is a secondary character in Ma's epic tale.

The many doors, the golden cane with its butterflies, the pathetic attempts of Overseas Son, Bahu's Reeboks, Sid's narrator friend, the crows, Delhi's environmental crises, the precarious lives of individuals occupying the margins of both state and gender, young boys of Pakistan wielding guns; enmesh with one another within the narrative. They aren't mere digressions; as Nikhil Govind suggests in his review of the novel in *The Wire*, these digressions allow Shree to deal with the seriousness of Partition with "both distance and intimacy, empathy, and a (rightfully) cultivated alienation."

The novel's polyphonic modes of narration and its unique use of language has received critical acclaim. French translator Annie Montaut reflects,

“The language was poetic, like a river – sometimes noiseless, sometimes gasping, and at times galloping. Some sentences were very long (a page or two in length) and some were no longer than a word. The voices also kept changing.” (*Scroll*)

Chapter 45 of Part Two allows readers to experience the traditional ways of Indian storytelling. In an interview with Vignesh Hampapura, Shree refers to the crows narrating the story, on lines with the *Panchatantra Tales* and its animal narrators as an influence on her novel. The story weaves a lot of tales together, leaving many incomplete, which might explain why certain reviewers like Reena Kapoor have felt as if the tale has been rushed, devoid of any actual dealing with the trauma of Partition, and tied up with loose ends. However, it is important to consider Shree’s stuttering narration as a way of dealing with the myriad confusions of our contemporary world, where:

“chaotic never-before odd couplings [abound]. Speak of this then this is the story, blend these cells with those then another story. This story belongs to these cells, and if you join some of these cells with those ones, you’ll get a different story. Join a belly with a back and get one story, a belly to a wall and get another, and peel the back away from the rest, and you get another and another and another.” (123)

Beyond the novel and its beauty lie a few issues that may not be specific to the novel but to Shree’s style of writing. As she believes in dealing with public issues through the “circuitous route of art, theater, and literature [which] can create an ambience receptive to other voices and ideas” her readers might be willing to ask how the sudden death of a hijra reflects on society’s perception of their lives (Shree, Outlook Web Desk). She does draw attention to the precariousness of their lives: “We are the grotesque, Baji.” Keep us away. If you see us, punch us. Did she die or did she survive, don’t even turn around to look. You can’t see what you didn’t see. We’ve always been missing, we’re forever missing” (Shree 482). And yet, a few pages later, after Rosie is dead, we are met with strange musings about her dead body at the morgue: “Artistry. A curiosity. A monstrosity. And those? Breasts or boils? And was that a penis at half-mast?” (Shree 511). It is difficult to gauge Shree’s intention in these lines; however, Rosie’s concerns about the fate of the transgender community in India stand caricatured.

The narrator of the story believes this tale will be told for generations to come, which might be an apt prediction of how the novel is going

to be received in future times. However, by the end, even if Ma is put to rest on a heroic note, Shree's readers are left in a lurch with the stories that are left sitting on the fence. To embrace the novel and its grandeur, readers will have to imagine these stories as moles and play a hearty game of "whack-a-mole-story" to move on.

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