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Nostalgia and Renewal: A Lyrical Trope

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Review of *When My Mother Sang: A Collection of Poems* by Subhransu Maitra, Penprints, Kolkata.2023. Pp 83

TDB College, Raniganj, West Bengal *When My Mother Sang* is the debut poetry collection of Subhransu Maitra, a renowned translator and writer. The collection is a medley of 62 poems that touch on multiple issues, which though apparently nondescript, take on archetypal proportions. Maitra's poems traverse thoughts, incidents and entities that transport the reader to the past, shock them into the contemporary and even provoke them to squint into the future. The title poem 'When My Mother Sang', also printed on the cover of the book, strikes a chord of loss and nostalgia that also reverberates in the cover picture, in the peeled wall paint, the knocker on the wooden door, the Victorian seater and portrait of the lotus and bud framed on the wall. When his mother sang Tagore's invocation of renewal from her 'cramped attic' as a 'bird-like invalid', the juxtaposition of revival in his dying mother's song nudges the core of the reader's heart.

The collection of 62 poems comprises of many dedications to icons of poetry and music such as Jayanta Mahapatra, Shankha Ghosh, Omar Khayyam, Chad Walsh, Suchitra Mitra and Hemanta Mukherjee; and even symbolic sites of the identity of new Bengal such as College Street and Coffee House and even the turbulent Kolkata of 1970-71. In almost all his poems the poet is deeply introspective. The words, lines and progression of thought breathes a quintessential simplicity that evokes a lyrical resonance. The 'distant sunlit flower'(15) sends him on a mode of reversal as he contemplates another spring when the Viceroy and the leaders of the subcontinent

were brainstorming the division of India through partition in 1947. That he satirically describes as:

Courts, prisons and assorted structures of
The blood-dimmed satire of partition freedom
Truncation ('Should the Flowers Eventuate', 15)

Maitra is by no means chained to tragedy and nostalgia of the past. In the poem 'Unlocking' he touches on the most recent denizens of psychological destruction.

The Bell tolls
Switch off the cell phones
Tear down the towers.
Abolish the net
Heed the call
Stop your earth-shattering Wall Street
Dalal Street chatter. (28)

The poet travels through spaces, ages, and generations with easy élan. He boldly discusses the gang rape and murder of a dalit woman and its shameful political cover-up. ('Gravitas' 30-31) With incisive cynicism he refers to Nissim Ezekiel's 'Professor Seth' along with Gandhiji and the 'peaceful Sanatana Indians' concluding the poem with the cynical line:

"We worship our women as Devi" (31)

Along with such contemporary concerns, Maitra conglomerates the present, the past and the mythical in a cycle of re-evolution. When he describes present Kolkata as 'faecal excremental city' with a 'mudflat womb', mentions Ram Mohan Roy and Macaulay and ties them up with

"...Satyrs Centaurs Apsaras Vidyadhars Gandharvas
Trapped in Mahamaya's tropic trance..." (36)

he reveals his suppressed, simmering anger at the universal tragedies of human history. In many of his poems, mundane Kolkata takes on mythical proportions. In his poem 'Pandemic Thoughts' he asks an existential question regarding the progress of science, globalization and glo-calization and yet one feels as if he has regressed into 'being a desolate island'. (41) Maitra's fascination with Kolkata is interesting and evident in many of his poems. Without flamboyantly romanticizing this city he details all its dusty, murky,

dark corners; unfailingly drawing a pen picture of a living, pulsating urbanature.

When all the poems are considered together, the poet appears to straddle the universe through his beloved city, his revered poets and singers, his mother and numerous incidents of the present and past. He attempts to charter a trajectory of human thought, belief, and action. Despite the apparently soft, almost lyrical cadence of most of the poems, he uses raw and harsh similies that jolts the reader out of his/her somnolence. He describes the sun as 'fatuous, feral' (*Raison d'être*, 81). The metaphor of the 'pariah kite' is used multiple times in separate poems- 'a pariah kite on a declining rainy day' (*Artifice*, 54) and while talking of the torn pieces in Gaza and Israel he says:

Who the hell are the murderers sadist cannibal
politicians and heads of states - guilty
of infernal crimes... (13)

Maitra describes the 'great guardian trees' having 'naked ragged bows' when he attempts to place the Coffee house and College Street between the British Raj and post-independence Modern India. He describes them as 'two amorphous centuries' and 'two celebrant lacerating centuries'. In "Kolkata 1970-71" he boldly writes:

Acute necrosis smote the city
Threatening to chew through the land. (25)

Certain metaphors and images seem to recur in a repetitive manner through the poems whose echoes appear to string them into a cohesive whole. Notable among them are the tropes of spring, of rebirth, of a transient permanence that subverts the onslaught of disaster, of history, of myth, of certain vernacular words and motifs that ensure that these poems will abide for a long time to come. He does not allow the reality of death and departure to cloud his horizon; rather he supplants them with images and hints of a neo-resurrection that reaffirms the cycle of life-death-rebirth.

His love for his own city Kolkata pulses through most of his poems though. The city for him is a living, breathing entity that may be criticized but never disregarded. The poet's sensitive gaze records minute details that often escapes our glazed vision. At the end Durga Puja, the poet watches with compassion, the young, "ragged boys" (*Raison d'être*, 81) who dismantle the Durga Puja structures and

prays to the holy Mother for their safety and better life. Spring for Maitra is akin to a life force that oxygenates the psyche and a ray of hope and indomitable strength. His repertoire is as wide as the history of human civilization. In 'On the Edge of the Stream' he describes Gautama driving through Kapilavastu, differentiating him from the Buddha who later achieved *nirvana*. He highlights the bloodbath of Dhaka on 21st February, 1952 ("Mysterious Mocking Fatality", 65) and the narrator's fugitive life across India (Chad Walsh, 57)

Every poem in this beautiful collection is a saga is a statement of the sensitive vision of the writer. His felicity of words, unexpected yet apt descriptions, the liminal use of ornamentation and a simple, soft, lilting style ensures good reading and provokes inquiry in the mind of the reader.