

able since Benedict Anderson, and alters the terms of discourse by emphasizing that though India had neither been a unitarily administered polity or a nation-state, it nonetheless, has existed as a civilizational entity for a long time, and is underwritten by a common historical archive. The idea is further elaborated in the essay "The Indian Culture and Nation" by presenting the Indian past not as a bygone era, but a present that is constituted out of the past, thus stepping out of the paradigm of exclusive valorization for the historical present over the past as its negation and transcendence. Tradition itself is not a fixed referent, and it is continually reshaped and restructured, being not in the least inimical to cultural absorption. It is "self-analysis" that is the pre-condition of a vibrant tradition. And

we have to acknowledge that tradition intervenes in the contemporary consciousness to give it an organic unity, which is an antidote to the fragmentation and alienation of modern life.

Referring to the polemics about the ontological status of a work of art and its instrumentality, Verma expresses his strong conviction about the autonomy of a work of art, which contributes to and sustains its own truth, so much so that it gives art the status of an alternative reality. Since a work of art creates its own fictive world, and has an appeal to an ineffable sort of truth, it has to be appreciated and assessed in its own right. He resists the fashionable tide of literature being appropriated by several other disciplines, as for instance, history and anthropology, in which literature loses its essence. Language itself has to

be considered as a means and not an end, which should not create a division between the creative and the critical activities. Indeed, when we look back, we find that in the Indian experience history and myth, memory and self-criticism are all embedded. The fusion of thought and feeling had been the hallmark of the medieval Indian poets, a quality which Eliot had found in the work of metaphysical poets. Its absence engenders the dissociation of sensibility conspicuous in the modern man. The crux of Verma's arguments is that there has to be a complementarity of visions, and that the paradigm of modernity must be defined by taking recourse to both Gandhi and Simone Weil.

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## Return Flight of a Wounded Bird

Dislocation has its poetic potential. One who is in exile, imposed or self-inflicted, is a poet. There is no escape other than poetry. Poetry is his predicament, his subterfuge to come to terms with his residual past and emergent future. Those who hail fiction as the genre of the displaced, associate dislocation with exposure, horizontal experiencing. Dislocation as an emotive trope moves up and down, rather than to and fro. More than just a spatial rupture, it is a temporal disjunction. More than just an easy addition into one's cultural portfolio, it is a complex dismemberment of the intact self that one has had before. If fiction is capable of showcasing the plurality of experience, poetry is capable of articulating its polarity.

The poetic enterprise of Subhash Kak, an expatriate Indian scientist settled in US, attains special significance in the light of manifold dislocations that he as a Kashmiri Hindu undergoes both in India and abroad. Not only is he an alien outsider in the West, even when he comes back to India, is he not able to go back to his native place. Perhaps poetry is his only space of belonging, a medium through which he re-creates images of

his possessive native space to make up, howsoever partially, for the inability to experience it physically any longer. The collection of poems under review, *The Secrets of Ishbar: Poems on Kashmir and Other Landscapes* raises expectations of its being a multi-layered poetic discourse on various strains, affiliations, affinities that possibly emerge between the poet's native space and his adopted abode.

The collection of thirty-two poems is divided in two parts—"Snow in Srinagar" and "Ten Thousand Years of Solitude". Apparently enough, the first part promises to offer the reader a rich tapestry of Kashmir's landscape as re-visited by the displaced poet through memory and nostalgia. The opening poem "Exile" is in a way a prelude to the poet's creative credo: "Memory gets hazy/ even recounting doesn't help/. . ." So the poet chooses to walk "through narrow lanes" of his town to experience life. As he glides past a water passage, he is reminded of "sleek houseboats/ moored to banks with soft green grass/with willow trees/ guarding the edge of water . . ." The last two lines do sum up the sense of loss: "The best

• *The Secrets of Ishbar: Poems on Kashmir and*  
• *Other Landscapes*  
• by Subhash Kak  
• Vitasta, New Delhi, pp.62.

paradise/ is the paradise we are exiled from"; but the repetition of "paradise" only fetishizes the medieval image of Kashmir as an idyllic pastoral landscape bereft of any human problems.

The opening three lines of "Reaching Srinagar" herald the poet's (imaginary) entry into his homeland: "As the dusty bus crosses the Banihal tunnel/ the air becomes scented and zippy/ and the passengers break out into a loud cheer". But the ecstasy of exploding into vast expanse of blue sky remains understated. "The City of Fame" presents a topographical account of important cultural centres of Srinagar in poetical terms. "Snow in Srinagar" records the anguish of the poet in not being able to snowfight with his pals on a snowy Srinagar morning: "Who knew then decades later a terror will come to Srinagar/ and I will be unable to see my home where I was born". The poem could have had a better climax, had the poet not stated "the terror" in explicit terms.

In "Journey into Himalayas" and "Ishbar Evenings", Kak draws vignettes of Kashmir with a rare metaphysical intensity. For instance, there are

mountains with "meditating face[s]", as "The lake begins to prepare for repose". In "Views of Haramukh", the multi-hued landscape of Kashmir comes alive. The images of "Clump of walnut trees", "babbling brook", "vertical sheep track/ around wild rose", "the birch trees", etc. are followed by the climactic image of Haramukh "dressed in ice".

As a poet of landscapes, Kak succeeds partially. He fails to fuse the incongruities or complexities of the landscape in sharp and succinct images. "Rainy afternoon in Chashmashahi" does bring out the romantic and the non-romantic aspects of the landscape, but the poem seems to fall apart into two distinct images. If the first stanza of the poem refers to the picnic potential of "the astonishingly sweet/ waters of the Chashmashahi spring", the second stanza describes "the leaky house above Chashmashahi" where "The water did not stop for a week" while the poet-persona "shuddered" in "blankets/ in the only dry corner of the room".

A seasoned poet like Keki Daruwalla, for instance, has an uncanny skill of fusing such opposite situations in one poetic stroke. This is how he manages to yoke together the contractions of life at Ganga-ghat in Varanasi: "what plane of destiny have I arrived at/ where corpse fires and cooking fires/ burn side by side". Kak should have juxtaposed "the leaky house" with the springing waters of Chashmashahi in one terse, tense whole. Another pithy image from Keki Daruwalla's poetry can be quoted here to underline, by way of contrast, the rather untidy frame of poetic tension in Kak's verse: "Beggars hoist their deformities/ as boatmen hoist their sails". Never does Kak succeed in such a masterly play of opposites in his poetic portrayal of Kashmir landscape.

Even when Kak tries to strike some kind of analogous relationship between Kashmir, his filiative space, and Hawaii, the affiliative one, he sounds too simplistic and rather elaborate. Look at some of the parallels he draws between two landscapes: 1. "The little stream behind the apartment/ seems like the shrunken Apple River"; 2. "Walking up and down the hillside above our home/ was like a little pilgrimage/ to the

goddess of the isles/ a sister to the sparrow goddess / of our old city"; 3. "The park atop St. Louise Heights/ with its pine trees/ . . . / like the clump of trees/ beyond the clearing of Gopadri hill".

It really requires A.K.Ramanujan's finesse and artistic acumen to contain such comparisons in chiseled idioms such as this: "Chicago bulb, the cousin of Vedic sun/ dry chlorine water/ my only Ganges". The relationship between two landscapes cannot be homological alone, it is hierarchical as well. In Ramanujan's analogies, the two axes of comparative relationship are fully realized, whereas Kak fails to explore the hierarchical component of his analogy-building exercise. Does Hawaii, despite its outer proximity to his native space, behold the poet as much?

While reading Kak's Kashmir landscapes, one is reminded of another expatriate Kashmiri poet Agha Shahid Ali who, by way of contrast, evinces a far greater degree of poetic sensitivity than what one encounters in Kak. While in Kak's poetry, night is the time for the lake to retain its pristine calm, in Ali's poetry the night at lake is a period of emptiness: "The glass of Dal Lake ruffled half by Satin Glass/ that chandeliered boat barely focussing on emptiness – last half of any night." Even when it comes to articulating the richness of Kashmir's ambience, Ali is far more innovative. This is how he describes a Kashmir paisley: "The air chainstitched itself till the sky/ hung its bluest tapestry".

Kak lacks the double consciousness which a Kashmiri diasporic like Rushdie has. The old Kashmiri boatman Tai in *Midnight's Children*, described rather sarcastically as "a watery Caliban, rather too fond of cheap Kashmiri brandy" has many secrets of the lake to unfold. One of them is "lotus-roots and mountains (under lake-water) as angry jaws". Kak moves only on the surface of the lake; Rushdie looks underneath it. While Kak is happy in giving outer description of temples on the hill tops, Rushdie, with his characteristic naughtiness subverts the sacred deities from within: "Narada Markandya was falling into the solipsistic dreams of the true narcissist, con-

cerned only with erotic pleasures. . ."

In the second part of the collection, Kak addresses various themes of death, love, sorrow, etc. as in this part, more than the nostalgia, he is informed by his irrepressible philosophical proclivities. "The Conductor of the Dead" has a series of small snippets, some of which are highly soul-stirring. The snippet no.5 needs to be quoted in full:

The birds fled when I came  
I had no knife  
and I offered seed with my hands  
the birds still kept away  
and my arms got tired and I let go.  
The scattered grain sprouted plants  
with little white flowers –  
what a harvest of lilies.

In another poem, "A Wounded Bird", the poet plays upon various possibilities of what a wounded bird can possibly do after he is cured by the poet-persona as Gautama Buddha. The last image of the poem has poetic under-currents: "Shall I get well and live with/ you in a gilded cage woven/ by your deft fingers/ or shall I paint your form/ on these rocks before I fly off?" Interestingly enough, it is in his imaging of birds that the poet excels more than his extended visuals on mountains and rivers.

An interface of vocation with avocation as a dynamic principle of creativity operates beneath the poetic edifice of Kak. Poetry as his passion, and research in the area of philosophy of science as his profession bear a complementary as well as contradictory relationship with regard to his creative pursuits. On the one hand such an interface provides metaphors, co-relatives and even poetic arguments to sustain the creative endeavour, on the other it begins to rob poetry of its finer genre-specific subtleties. In "Patanjali's Song", Kak is at his poetic best. Patanjali's philosophy of controlling mind and passions through yoga has been conveyed in fairly artistic terms thus: "The reins afloat/ flowing with the movement of the horse/ like fish in the wake of a powerful ship". Control implies a continuing inner tussle which the twin images of "reins afloat" and fish tossing on the waves reinforce very cogently.

The poem "Flying", as one among the four songs of Patanjali, deserves exclusive attention. A yogi is a bird flying with perfect balance and equipoise. In his effort to capture this theme of control and harmony, Kak impregnates the stock metaphor of "happiness as a bird flying" with new possibilities. The poet is enamoured of the steady formation of a flock of birds flying "at an unchanging height" thus:

The leader looks like the last  
each held in position by the formation  
always between two movements  
fixed while moving.

Fixity to flying and back to fixity is  
the law  
but rest and motion are mysterious  
the bird flies  
yet it moves not

Only space flows  
for a bird cannot see itself . . . .

The merit of poetry is measured in terms of the poet's capability of sustaining the metaphor. Kak does more than that as he envisions an easy entry of a lonely bird into the flock without really disturbing its well-set formation: "The lonely bird takes its place in the flock/ its position so well defined/ so much

combined/ that the flock is like one flying monster".

In poems like "Chance and Necessity", "Quantum Implications", "Seeking Answers", "Naming Things", etc. philosophy overtakes poetry. There is an overt use of philosophical imagery lifted from ancient Indian texts: 1. "Take a chariot for your journey/ the driver will know the answer"; 2. "Connections bind us/ from time to non-time . . ."; 3. "The seed carries the tree's secrets"; 4. In our beginnings / is our meaning hidden"; etc. The images are retained without any remarkable topsy-turvy semantic shift in their canonical meaning.

In terms of poetic design, Kak lacks variety. It is in the last line – one might describe that as a sting in the tail – that an otherwise descriptive poem gathers its meaning. The last lines of some of the poems do have a climactic vigour: 1. "A light joined another light/ in Hawaii"; 2. "A lonely butterfly had accompanied us"; 3. "Words soar/ nesting secretly/ with their mates"; 4. "I have so much of desire/ that desire itself is my fulfillment", etc. In poems like "The Fire in the Waters", "The Conductor of the Dead", "A Wounded Bird", the poet uses another poetic strategy of speculating upon various configurations of the

binary components of his poetic metaphor. In this process, he hammers upon a series of images, some of which turn out to be really innovative and startling. One of the images of fire in water is worth attention.

Subhash Kak does evince poetic promise, but it will take time before this promise blooms into mature poetry. It has to be more evocative than descriptive, more suggestive than explanatory, more dialogic than statemental. The poems need rigorous editing and pruning. The propensity to lapse into philosophical abstractions needs to be checkmated. Nostalgia is undoubtedly an asset to poetic impulse, but it must be self-reflexive and critical enough to generate poetic tension in the poems. Poetry does not suffer, if the poet occasionally turns little playful and mischievous to the extent of being irreverent and non-canonical. The strong intellectual foregrounding of the poet in both Indian and Western streams of knowledge would definitely go a long way in providing him frames of vertiginous creative possibilities in his forthcoming creative forays.

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#### DECLARATION

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