

Book Reviews

Satya Brata Das, *The Promise of Time: Towards a Phenomenology of Promise*, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2011, Pp. xix + 419, ₹ 695.

As I write this review—in June 2012, in Kolkata, a very strange feature film about rehabilitation of displaced ghosts is making big news. The title of this movie *Bhooter Bhabishyat* also intends to convey the deeper problem about the Future of the Past. But not only is the future of our historical past, our bygone cultures and traditions at risk now, the future of our future seems to be at risk too. The short-sightedness and hopelessness of the new cyber-space-occupying face-book generation sometimes seems to create a false nihilism about civilization's future itself.

In the last part of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant lists the questions that human reason feels compelled to answer, and to address which Kant wrote his three famous Critiques:

- What can I know?
- What ought I to do?
- What may I hope?

The “I” of these most basic self-questionings of reason, of course, turns out to be a disguised “we”, when, Kant starts his *Logic* lectures with all these questions plus a fourth one, in which, according to this undisputed father of both analytic and continental, modern and post-modern philosophies, all the other critical questions converge: What is Man?

Even after finding out the limits of knowledge, and being “disciplined” by a humbling critique which tells us that reality viewed from nowhere, just as it is in itself, is something we can merely *think*—and indeed must think-about, but can never *know*, human reason legislates rules of moral action to itself and celebrates its autonomy as its own law-giver.

But, however desireless—*niṣkāma*—our moral actions

may be, however unconcerned with the fruits of one's actions the ideal ethical agent may be, we humans are not just conceptually experience-organizing knowledge-seekers, and categorically duty-bound practical reasoners, we also live because we hope.

Time, as a form of intuition, and the time-images of pure categories, as *schemata*, determine the nature of our cognitive engagement with a world partly “made” and partly “received” by our understanding. One does not have to be a popular San Francisco-based feel-good guru to realize that each of us, every moment, physically live only in the present, that this time now is the luckiest gift, the present which is a present, that we receive every instant of our brief dwelling in this world which, our current experience always tells us, spreads back into the past, and forward into the future. Our inescapable command over the concept of the past comes from the frame of memory and recognition with which we are conditioned to catch the present sensations and perceptions. I cannot even see a tree without recognizing that I have seen something of its kind before (how does one see any *kind* of thing for the very first time at all? Hence the Platonic and Indian Karma theoretic a priori argument: that every life and experience is beginninglessly preceded by past lives and past exposures to the world. More interestingly, even if one does not grope into memory to classify or characterize the object, one at least gets the feeling that the existence of the thing one is seeing predates one's seeing of it: that it did not pop into existence thanks to one's seeing of it. In these two ways, the concept of the past—that the world did not begin just now—is ingrained in our cognitive mechanism. Yet, while through the burdensome blessing of memory we look back at the past whenever we look at the objective world, in our practical life—as does—we are constantly living for, towards, even, in one deep sense, off of the future.

A voluntary action starts with a *promise* to myself “I shall do this” with or without a “because..” of reason. Now, I cannot intend to do something in the past or the

present. I cannot promise to have done something. Not in the past because we cannot go back there, except in mad science fiction or in morbid repentance. Not in the present, because if I am already doing this I cannot want to do it (I can only want to re-do it, but redoing is not doing). So voluntary action is planned, intended, and accomplished in the future. Yet actions are not completed—you can try to cook by merely fumbling with the rice and water and fire but you have not cooked until the softened edible fragrant white exuberance is ready. About this future fruit of the action, all we can do is *hope*. Our hopes are to be distinguished from our mere wishes—for wishes can be about the past also e.g. I wish I were born at the time of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa—but hope can only be about the future. Our hopes are also not forecasts or predictions. I cannot *hope* that there will be a global genocidal 2025 even if I am forced to predict that. Hope goes beyond inductive probability and claims of ‘deserving’. Kant calls hopes “moral certainties”. Rabindranath Tagore, tormented by this dark sorry world, just as much as young Siddhartha or a cynical Schopenhauer was, still sings with “hope against hope”, addressing God:

If you will not bring me back to life,
Why would you kill me?
What for is all this arrangement with such festive
claptrap?
Look at how brutally you have cracked open my breast.
And now, if no fountain gushes out of it, how would
that make sense?

One does not have to be a theist in order to hope, just as one does not have to be a believer in order to be grateful for a day-break with the most incredibly musical bird-calls. The scientific uncertainty of the assurance that all the incongruences of life and nature will come together in a unified theory, the constantly eroding but never-vanishing faith that the huge amount of unmerited anguish in the world will one day reveal a concealed justification, and the hope for a future “redemption” or “resolution” all seem to be a *hope* that keeps us going. Is “hope” then, the *Isha*, the Lord which pervades, permeates, perfumes and covers all fragile moving things in this changing world (*ishaa vaasyam idam sarvam yat kinca jagatyaam jagat..*)?

The unusually ruminative book titled: *The Promise of Time: Towards a Phenomenology of Promise* does not even hint at any theodicy or any resolution-directed nature of our living in time and free will. But, right from the otherwise unimportant “Acknowledgement” section—which starts with an intricately sensitive analysis of

“thankfulness”, Satya Brata Das’s densely written, nearly 400 page book dwells on what and why we must hope for if our life is a wait for a future which never arrives.

Its twenty-one chapters are, somewhat arbitrarily, divided into five parts called:

“Prologue”, “Configuration”, “The Lightning Flash”, “Event”, “Messianicity” and finally, “On Philosophy”. Unfortunately, there is no clear thesis which is the author’s own, towards which the argument of the chapters builds up, though nearly every paragraph is bursting with tantalizing, half-articulated insights.

Even if one can extract a series of theses that Das has put forward, this is not a book in philosophy, because it does not contain a single argument for any thesis. It almost flaunts its refusal to pass from plausible premises to unobvious conclusions. Perhaps it is not meant as a book in philosophy in the sense in which both continental and analytic philosophers write philosophy. Even Sartre or Levinas gives justifications for their openly un-analytic reflections and pronouncements on the distinction between, say, being-in-itself and being-for-itself, or for the infinite ethical claims of the Face of the Other.

Satya Brata Das’s book, while being an unabashed, albeit original, commentary on Schelling, Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, Blanchot, Levinas and Derrida, does not even make the feeblest attempt at justifying even his interpretations of these giants. On page 181, for example, Das claims that to speak is to be attuned to a fundamental mournfulness. But why? Of course, we know that there are intriguing symbolic puzzles such as the jester/clown’s drop of tear, but surely there are unambiguously jolly, happy, fun-filled ways of speaking which are not mournful! When Hannah Arendt urges us to celebrate natality, or a Bhajan celebrating the birth of Lord Krishna or baby Muhammad (recall that unforgettable Qawaali “Dai Halima god me teri chaand utarne walla hai!!”), must we search out a lament, a dirge, a mourning in that celebration of life?

How would Das’s own hopeful discourse about the Messiah to come count as evidence to this universal mournfulness of speech?

There is no point embarrassing the author with quotable examples of the numerous ungrammatical sentences, and simple infelicity of run-on sentences that even long-winded writers like Kant or Heidegger would be ashamed of.

But I would like to end this critical notice by registering my mournful reaction that the complete lack of allusion to the metaphysics of time and the politics of the future in Indian (Sanskrit or Vernacular, classical or contemporary) philosophy makes this book sadly derivative and Eurocentric. It is quite readable and

thought-provoking. And the style of Satya Brata's thinking holds a lot of "promise". If only he could think through the lens of his own tradition and his own lived reality, of post-colonial India! A book on Time would be more timely if it told us of the Space that the author authentically lives in. But I am hopeful. I have learned from this book that to think is to thank. Seriously, that is a very fertile teaser of an insight. One has to be thankful for that.

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Lakshmi Kannan, *Nandanvan & Other Stories*, Translated from the original Tamil by the author, New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2011, Pp. 280 +x, ₹ 325.

One of the joys of reading short stories in a collection is that one can linger on each story without feeling compelled to go forward, anxiously clutching the threads of the narrative. Lakshmi Kanan's collection of short stories has the similar quality of making the reader ruminate and sense the resonance as each of the stories in some way or the other connects with the life experiences of the reader. Whether, it be the everyday struggle with the mundane and tyranny of a workplace in the "Zeroing In" and "The Maze" or transacting internally with world of emotions while swinging between life and death in "Please, Dear God" and "A Sky All Around", grappling with loneliness and filial indifference in old age in "Nandanvan" and "Savvyasachi Square" and finally, negotiating with patriarchy that forms the dominant theme in this collection, these stories immediately forge a relationship with the readers giving them an easy access into the inner world of the text.

The anthology is divided into three parts. The first part is a detailed analysis of Lakshmi Kanan's literary style and her stories by C.T. Indra, followed by two sets of interviews with the author by Christine Gomez and Sudha Rai respectively, giving a useful insight into the worldview and the literary style of the author. The second part comprises sixteen short stories followed by a novella in the third part. Originally written in Tamil and translated into English by the author herself, most of the stories despite being situated within the South Indian context, have a universal appeal with an eclectic literary style that transcends all regional and linguistic boundaries. In fact, one of the merits of this collection lies in the ways in which the author has negotiated not only with the bilinguality of the text, but has also deftly transposed the cultural traditions. This is a mark of an

excellent translation where the culture and the language that expresses it, blend effortlessly, transporting the reader to the world of the narrative. While replying to the question posed by Sudha Rai, Lakshmi Kanan aptly stated, "The mediations I negotiate are mostly in the use of language as I am anxious that the translation should read well... that it has to flow without disturbing the laws of English grammar, syntax... The real challenge is in translating the dialogue and grasping the speech rhythms of a people" (31).

One of the striking qualities of the stories is the complex treatment of the themes. This is best articulated in the narratives on gender with multiple voices creating a whirlwind of tensions and conflicts accentuating the intensity of these short stories. Thus we are confronted with a situation in which feminism is not a simplistic linear idea. Rather it is a complex discourse woven with the broader frames of religious orthodoxies, class structure, postcolonial identities, women's compliance with the patriarchy and most significantly their quiet subversion and negotiation instead of outright rejection. For instance, "Ejamanaaar" (meaning husband in Kannada) is one such story in which the protagonist, Gowri, an old lady operates within the traditional patriarchal family controlling the financial as well as household matters with the husband usually occupying the interior portion of the house, probably symbolic of his withdrawal from the practical life. Gowri's position of authority is further enhanced in her portrayal as the confidante of the neighbourhood and the silent yet palpable chemistry that she shares with one of the relatives, Sambasivan indicates a certain sexual autonomy that Gowri quietly enjoys. There is a pun in the term *ejamanaaar* as the tone of the narrative points out that the actual *ejamanaaar*, which also implies a manager, is Gowri. In many ways, the tradition dominated by power and hierarchy between the husband and wife here is reduced to an empty symbol, mocked at by none other than Gowri herself when she says, "... there is a world beyond this very imperfect character called an 'ejamanaar'Ö" (63). In contrast to this are the outright rejection of the oppressive traditions and a firm denunciation of the patriarchal structure in "Muniyakka" and "Because... ." However, this denunciation is accompanied by adherence to the same traditions generating a tension that creates several layers of negotiation. Such a nuanced approach is adopted in "Nagapushpam" in which the constant struggle between the mother and her questioning daughter is resolved by the author herself in her insightful commentary on women as lynchpin of the traditions, carrying the burden of meticulous adherence to them.

Interestingly, in these stories the class differences are