

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 pettiness-

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)