

## Review

### *First Will and Testament*

by Debasish Lahiri (Kolkata: Writers Workshop 2012, ISBN-10: 935045033X ISBN-13: 9789350450338, 130 pages)



I have been reading Debasish Lahiri's poetry over the past few years as he has sent me his poems in a steady stream from Kolkata where he lives and writes, and from his various journeys in India and to the west and the east, and I have been struck by their many-layered intensity. It is a pleasure now to see his first collection in the public arena, reaching out to a wide readership.

Like his many physical journeys, Debasish's poetry embodies the metaphoric journeys a poet artist makes through his imagination, journeys that are metaphysical and philosophical, embodying a quest that moves into the inner recesses of the creative process and outwards in a pledge to comprehend and will life's experiences to be transformed and translated into verse. There is a certain anguish and agony evident in the process as the poems are carefully gathered and sectioned into seven parts, which reflect a journey that has been arduous but worthwhile.

Indian English poetry has gone through various phases ever since its inception in the early nineteenth century as a result of the colonial encounter. It was the product of the Indian Renaissance and inevitably one could see the influence of Romantic, Victorian, and Georgian poetry in a steady journey that reflected English

poetic models and inspiration, as happened in America, Canada and Australia. In India it was the voice of a subject nation but imbued by an Indian essence in much of its valued verse, beginning with the patriotic fervour of Henri Derozio and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, the revolutionary passion of Sri Aurobindo Bose, the wistful nostalgia of Toru Dutt, the lyrical mastery of Michael Madhusudan Dutt (even when he transposed the sonnet in blank verse to Indian soil) and the mysticism of the early twentieth century Rabindranath Tagore. Yet all these poets were bilingual, so the flavour of Indian speech and literary rhythms, the knowledge of Indian myths, legends and traditions transformed their poetry that was in English in language but had a distinctive Indian flavour. As the reality of World War I entered the Indian consciousness, as Gandhi's leadership in the decolonisation struggle gained momentum, as India moved to freedom, poets writing in English found themselves responding to the economic crisis, to famine, to communal tension and violence, to divisive politics with irony, satire and metaphoric versatility that situated them firmly in a modern and postmodern world in voices that are recognisably Indian with a universal appeal. Today they no longer feel as R. Parthasarathy does, 'My tongue

is in English chains' and they do not share the agony of Raja Rao when he said regarding his fiction, 'the telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own.' Today Indian writers of poetry in English do not find the 'telling' difficult. Even though English is read by a few million of India's billion plus population, with the poetry audience being a smaller fragment of this group, English no longer has the mantle of subjectivity. As the official language and recognised lingua franca, as the language of a thriving publishing multimedia industry, it is part of a global phenomenon of a global network of communication. Like poetry everywhere, intrepid small publishers continue to publish Indian English poetry collections and prestigious publishing houses like OUP India and HarperCollins India and poetry platforms like Arawali, bring out anthologies that bring together old and new voices. Sahitya Akademi of India recognises Indian English writing as one of India's multilingual expressive vehicles with poetry as a powerful tool in a confident market of creative productivity.

So where does Lahiri's poetry fit in in this burgeoning imaginative writing in a language that forms the modern Indian's bi/trilingual capacity for writing effective and moving verse in English? Lahiri has joined a confident group of an urbanised elite from India like Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, Anjana Basu, Jeet Thayil, Jayanta Mahapatra, A.K. Ramanujan, Arun Kolatkar, Sanjukta Dasgupta, Vikram Seth, Eunice de Souza and others, who form part of a continuum with diasporic Indian writers writing in English like Sujata Bhatt, Meena Alexander, Debjani Chatterjee, Shanta Acharya, Daljit Nagra,

Irfan Merchant, Nalini Paul, the author and others who write from their adopted countries while they carry their India with them, allowing English poetry to form an arch that has allowed the East and West to meet and, this time, on the poets' terms.

From the intriguing title, *First Will and Testament* (also the title of a music track from Iron Front), Lahiri plunges into his opening section on 'Deaths and Entrances' with direct questions addressed to the reader, testifying to the collection's confessional probing, as the 'perishable... cold wind' awakens the verse smith, 'to brave the coldness of the coming clime'.

The poems that follow have an objectivity as the poet's sharp scalpel carves under the surface of existence, exploring love, life, relationships, commitments, loyalties, priorities and choices. It is almost as if Lahiri is the observer and performer, the critic and artist, the outsider and insider, simultaneously present in his work, a dualistic role, where he is voyeur and victim on journeys that lead him to unmapped and unmarked territory, on detours and back to the marked roads of former artistic masters, as 'every word is a quest' looking for 'ten million lost addresses'.

The theme of the craft of writing permeates each section, but most poignantly in 'Along Came a Writer' and 'Love's Lost (a play on 'Last') Will and Testament'. The first lines of the first poem in the third section,

Pick up the pen when nothing means  
anything to you  
Write down that wordless, vacant  
terror of truth,  
Read it with the tired candour of  
disbelief,

Remember it like words  
capture the self-imposed task of the poet to  
consciously put trust in the creative  
process, even when confronted with ennui,  
and when the finished form is reread, the  
poet can discover meaning of the 'truth'  
and cherish it. There is a note of  
commitment to the idea of leaving  
something behind in 'Vigil' in the  
penultimate section. Yet there is always  
the compulsion to look beyond the artist  
and the audience, which circles to the title  
of the collection in the sixth section,

I give my song to you  
Like a book with its skin broken  
By danger,  
As I gave myself to the song the  
darkness  
Of your absence

Lahiri's inspiration from classical  
Europe is evident in the Hellenic echoes of  
Keatsian rhapsody, in Greek and Roman  
art and architecture and in composers like  
Handel and Hayden. Poetry becomes a  
continuum as the anguish of artists like  
Van Gogh and composers like Beethoven  
enter the same canvas of expression where  
their quest becomes shared quest for the  
poet. We can follow the writer in retreat,  
impelled into creativity for a personal  
search that leaves the applause behind a  
curtain of silence where the self stands  
alone in 'Beethoven's Journey' in 'Lost  
Opus'

Beethoven, on a dark night  
Ignored the starlight,  
And in the stillness  
Of fugitive darkness  
Rode dark waves of melody'.

In the final section, 'Exits and  
Survivals', there is the self-doubt of the

writer, who nevertheless, reaffirms that the  
poem has to be born and take shape in  
spite of the pain that creation involves.  
The hushed atmosphere in Juggernaut  
Temple exemplifies the dedication of the  
votary, spurred 'With new desires for the  
material', with offerings at the shrine,  
accompanied by 'hopeful prayers'.

Lahiri's poetry signifies the journeys  
he has made, through time and space, the  
splendour of Hellenic past, the  
urbanscapes of Europe with their cultural  
historic diversity, matched by the  
pluralism of India's contemporary reality  
that has never outgrown its own classical  
and cultural past- which all come together  
in his poetry not in a chutneyfied or  
biryaniised form but one in which the  
fluidity of metaphor rather than rigidity  
of poetic form find expression to convey  
Lahiri's searching self in a poet who is not  
afraid to make poetry his chosen route to  
communicate with poets beyond regional  
boundaries.

The complexity of the compositions  
can make meaning elusive, the 'fugitive  
words' that Lahiri chases, tethers and  
shapes into this first collection in poems  
which have emerged from the heart of a  
city where agony and creativity in high art  
find expression again and again. So  
'Kolkata: Waiting Daylong' remains the  
ultimate muse for the writer who may  
move across the world but must come  
back again to a pledge, that once formed,  
cannot be deferred or broken.

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December 2014