

all nine of them. And this is a rare feat for an editor to accomplish in an anthology.

While some stories definitely shine brighter than others—my own favourite being Anil Menon’s “The Man Without Quintessence,” chiefly for its delicious undertones of humour and irony, I confess—the entire collection makes for some very good reading indeed. Meanwhile, Cassandra-like, science fiction goes about its business of telling the histories of our futures.

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Reviewed by Lalit Kumar

The history of post-independent India is the history of disenchantment with the Nehruvian dream and Gandhian ideals of Ramrajya. The failure of our nation builders to translate high ideals into action in the early years of independence drew the attention of several novelists, satirists, poets and filmmakers. The process of disillusionment or *mohbhang* with independence had started with the communal violence unleashed during Partition. It was reinforced in later years owing to the structured inequality, caste rigidity, gender-based discrimination, rampant corruption, institutionalization of political dynasties, and the indifference of the political class to the masses. On the one hand, Saadat Hasan Manto, Khushwant Singh, Bisham Sahni, Dharamvir Bharati, Amitav Ghosh and several others captured the violence, bloodshed and trauma of Partition in their fiction. And, on the other, Shrilal Shukla, Phanishwar Nath “Renu”, Nagarjun, Harishankar Parsai and innumerable authors raised the issue of people’s *mohbhang* with the new power structure in their works. In Hindi poetry, these two narratives—horrors of Partition and dissatisfaction with the new political

establishment and socio-political realities—have been exquisitely strung together by Narendra Mohan.

An eminent poet, playwright and critic, Narendra Mohan mixes memory with history and the personal with the political in his five long poems. The collection in Hindi was published as *Meri Lambi Kavita* (2016), which Ved Mitra Shukla has translated and is brought out as *Long Poems of Narendra Mohan* (2019). The five poems are: “A Fire Shifting Places”, “The Rabbit Painting and Blue Horse”, “Dear Bahina”, “Just for a Dream”, and “Shadow, Fragrance and Sharmila Irom”. Mohan has divided these poems into three categories. While the first poem is a social critique of the “imperial system in the pre-Partition and Partition days”, the second and the third poem make the readers reflect upon what the poet calls “a coercive social system”. And the last two poems are a scathing attack on the ruling class.

Shukla, a poet himself, has elegantly rendered the Hindi long poems into English. It is the ethical duty of bilingual authors to translate both contemporary as well as classical texts into English and other modern Indian languages. One of the advantages of translating a living author is that the translator may seek the advice of the author and avoid accusations of distortion and misrepresentation. The current work has the approbation of the poet. Narendra Mohan writes in the preface that for each poem the translator had long sittings with him discussing syntax, rhythm and “subtleties of the poetic formulations”. The words, images and symbols have not lost their fragrance in English and the translator successfully manages to strike a balance between faithful and semantic translation, an age-old concern of translators.

The eminent poet and critic K. Satchidanandan praises Shukla for successfully carrying “the contexts and connotations” of long poems at a time when short poems are increasingly becoming popular and long poems rarer. It was a challenging task for the translator, as Shukla puts it, “to rewrite lived experiences of pain, and memory and history as felt and penned by the poet”. For him, the translation of five long poems was not merely putting them from one language into another, but a “kind of rewriting poetry”.

The first poem, “A Fire Shifting Places” narrates the tale of Yusuf, a teacher, who like Toba Tek Singh, is declared mad, after his wife and children are killed during Partition. His world is ruined but he along

with his friend Vishnu uses madness as a strategy to evade the mob:

*Suddenly Vishnu became attentive
 Observing cruel wind
 Whispered slowly...
 "Do some drama, Yusuf, drama!"
 And both
 Laughing like mad persons
 Had crossed the market.*

Yusuf inhabits a world in which a sane person could be lynched. The violence of the Partition era continues and the poet ironically calls it "nautanki of the Nehruvian era". This "nautanki" continues amid daggers, lathis, flames, and "arrogant faces and mounted soldiers". The character of Yusuf who the poet creates from his childhood memories continues to haunt him even today. He becomes a part of the poet's psyche, his being.

The breakdown of communication, which had become a hallmark of Partition, continues in the poem "Just for a Dream". It is the story of three friends—the narrator, Samarjeet, and Satwant—who were born on Independence Day on a running train, in a refugee camp and a field of roses, respectively. The bloodshed of the old days has continued; swords, spears and knives are drawn out once again. Samarjeet who was born and brought up amid violence is traumatized, "Ashes of dreams fly in front of him and/He pines just for a dream". Dream has been replaced by the memory of terror and the fragrance of roses turned into the smell of gunpowder.

The third poem, "The Rabbit Painting and Blue Horse" deals with the theme of repression of women in a society marred by communal strife. Suchitra, a press reporter, has tolerated the hollow customs for years but she becomes liberated and independent at one stroke after meeting Salman at a painting exhibition. But the lovers have to pay a price for breaking the cultural codes. The oppression of women is also the theme of "Dear Bahina", which talks about a seventeenth century female saint, Bahinabai. Her husband, who was thirty years older than her, tortured her for accepting Tukaram, a shudra, as her guru. Tukaram changes her entire world, nevertheless, and gives her a new identity.

The last poem in the collection is woven around the theme of violation of human rights of Manipuris and their marginalization in the

Indian capital. The poet uses two fictional characters, Mahabali and Murkhanand, to narrate the story of Sharmila Irom's struggle against the Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA). Irom asks in the poem: "Where is Manipur in Delhi, Mother?" The massacre of Jallianwala Bagh is compared with the bloodshed committed at Malom in Manipur to highlight the continuity of violence after independence.

Mohan's five poems are of contemporary relevance, and challenge the repressive structures of power and autocratic regimes both in pre-independence as well as post-independence days. Shukla's translation will benefit both academics and readers, especially those who were unable to access these poems in Hindi.

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