

Book Reviews

B. Madhopuri, (2020). *My Caste—My Shadow: Selected Poems* (Trans. T.C. Ghai). Delhi: LG Publishers Distributors, 2020 ISBN 9789383723706, Rs. 295

Reviewed by Akshaya Kumar

Punjabi Dalit literature has a different texture and a distinct poetic register which cannot be gainfully accessed unless it is prefaced by a historical context. The poetic collection under review—Balbir Madhopuri's *My Caste-My Shadow*—strategically begins with an enabling introduction by the Dalit historian Raj Kumar Hans. Hans maps out various Punjab-specific multiple discourses of social emancipation which in a way have appropriated Dalit dissent in fundamental ways over the centuries. The Punjabi Dalit poet has to wade his way through the thick theological and ideological miasma that these discourses spin to dissuade him to express his sense of humiliation. Despite the so-called Punjabi prosperity or large-heartedness, the humiliation is quite palpable, but it often goes unheard due to the presence of an overwhelming rhetoric of the dominant peasant-politics. If at the level of theology, Sikhism with its promise of an egalitarian caste-less society defers anger; at the level of ideology various left-inspired movements of agrarian Punjab also distract the Punjabi Dalit from articulating his stigmatized existence.

Balbir Madhopuri, who is a well-known poet and short story writer in Punjabi, announced his arrival on the national scene with the publication of his autobiography in English translation under the title *Against the Night*. The critical acclaim that this autobiographical account received has prompted him to publish his poems in English translation as well. *My Caste-My Shadow* carries thirty-four poems translated into English by an established translator T.C. Ghai. From the angle of translation, it is important that the translator does not take control of the anthology singularly, rather he translates 'with' the poet. In Dalit writing 'ownership of experience' is of paramount significance, and the strategy of translating 'with' the poet, helps both the poet and the translator retain the sense of the 'original'. Ghai is needlessly apologetic about the inadequacies of English in capturing the colloquial intimacies of the Punjabi tongue. Translation is both an exercise of gain and deficit,

and as such it needs to be hailed as an effort for its dialogic potential.

In his poems, Madhopuri comes across as a poet who does not break into long harangues, nor does he sound as a greenhorn revolutionary. His idiom is patently reflective and cerebral. The opening four poems in a way can be called 'manifesto poems' that presumably spell out the poetic credo of the poet. Instead of defining what poetry is, he chooses to begin with what poetry is 'not': "Poetry is not mere words/ ..."(31). Through this strategy of negatives, he achieves two results—one, a non-combative dismissal of the poetic practices of the so-called mainstream, and two, he opens the possibilities of an alternative poetic credo. Soon, he acquires the confidence to define what poetry should be in the affirmative voice: "It's the agonizing cry/ of a black partridge/ snapped by an eagle/ as it flies out of a sugarcane field/..."(31). The recourse to natural imagery seemingly helps the poet by-pass the sanatani metaphors of culture. The refulgent capacity of nature to bring lustre to life enamours the distraught poet: "Bring back the seasons/ .../ the mango blossom/ heart's peacock begins to dance/ ..." (78).

But in the Punjabi context, the pull of local culture is too strong to be kept in abeyance. In "A Wish for My Poetry", Madhopuri succumbs to tropes of culture as he wants to 'join the stream of poetry / that narrates/ the tale of Eklavya and Banda Bahadur/ and the struggles of Pir Buddhu Shah/ and Pablo Neruda's compassion" (36). Despite exhorting his readers to "give up the Kissa tradition" along with "the Sanskriti of Sanskrit" (99-100), he invokes Sahiban, Mirza, Farhad and Icchran from the cosmos of the Sufi Kissa tradition. In a poem "The Contracting Circle", the poet even regrets the loss of cultural markers in his memory: "Have forgotten many things/ like dreams/ the flight of birds/ my ancestry/ my language/ and the land of Siyals' progeny" (87). Such mixed array of invocations lends a solid cultural horizon to his composite Punjabi past, but Dalit anger is sufficiently toned down in the poetic bargain. The constant play of 'nature versus culture' binary determines to a large extent the predicament of a Dalit poet in the Punjabi context. Even as Madhopuri invokes nature as the ground zero of culture, his images reveal different levels of intensity, pointing towards fluctuations in his anger or dissent—from "Tsunami Waves"(39), he tapers down to "Hot Wind" (71) and even "Waves in the Mind" (93). In one of the poems, the poet clamours for "cool breeze": "A crane should not stray from its flock/Doves should coo in courtyards/ A cool breeze should come to

mourn in droves/..."(74).

In the Punjabi context, ideology does make its atavistic presence to inspire hope among the oppressed. In a poem entitled "Red Speech", Madhopuri continues to harbour the dream of a red revolution: "The flood waters can't be dammed/ however hard they try/ One day it will explode like a volcano/ the fire that smoulders underneath the straw" (96). In the poem "The Song of the Land", Patwari, the local land measurement officer, receives critical flak: "Stop these dubious measurements/ O Patwari/ Sons of the soil have only one village" (47). The idiom of Madhopuri is thus inseminated by different impulses—cultural, natural and ideological which lend necessary artistic thickness to his poems. In the process Dalit anger is transmuted into Dalit agony which makes his poetry distinct from the virulent poetry of Marathi Dalit panthers. The addition of a chapter from Madhopuri's acclaimed autobiography towards the end adds to the richness of the book, but it threatens to overshadow the poems included in the anthology.

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Anandita Pan, *Mapping Dalit Feminism: Towards an Intersectional Standpoint*. New Delhi: Sage, 2021, ISBN 9789381345559, Rs. 1150

Reviewed by Bincy Mariya N

Dalit feminism, as an ideology and movement revisit and revitalizes the cause of Dalit women. It emerges as a major movement to challenge the structural oppression and inequalities perpetrated on Dalit women. Being hailed as a movement with emancipatory potentials, Dalit feminism exposes and examines the intertwining nature of caste and gender and reiterates the plurality or differences of Dalit women's experiences. Dalit feminism demands that the systematic erasure of their multifaceted issues should be unearthed. The ideological underpinnings of Dalit feminism affirms the need for Intersectional Standpoint as it has an instrumental role in liberating Dalit women from the conceptualization