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a review of Indian Poetry

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S. INDIRA

A LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

Rositta Joseph. *A Poet's Promise*. Black Eagle Books, 2025, pp. xxxii, 132, ₹ 350, ISBN 978-1-64560-662-8.

To find meaning and purpose in life that is burdened with innumerable complexities and uncertainties has been the perennial quest for cons. Rositta Joseph's *A Poet's Promise*, a collection of 63 poems under various thematic headings, addresses this quest. The poet promises in the very first poem: "Let me depart birthing these lines, / If only you would cradle them / ... They will return your love / A thousand-fold" ("A Poet's Promise"). True to her promise, the poems here connect the reader to the poet's deeper self, her honest appraisal of her varied emotions, thoughts, reflections and reactions. They take the readers by hand to plumb into the surface realities and help them connect with the larger picture of life, thereby coming to terms with existential angst and acceptance of life in all its dualities.

Throughout this emotional odyssey spanning three decades, a strong undercurrent is palpable, an intense spiritual affinity that stands the poet in good stead when life throws countless challenges in the form of injustice, ingratitude and betrayal causing searing pain within. A strong streak of self-faith makes her the "rebel" who defies the onslaughts of time and life, despite being ignored for being "wrong" with "untameable pride."

As Prof. Sanjukta Dasgupta writes in her appreciation for the book: "Rositta Joseph's book ... is a scintillating collage of musings, that spans Eros and Thanatos, life instincts and death drive Rositta's poems exude a remarkable dexterity in the use of language, resonating with subjective perceptions and empathetic understanding,

often oscillating between angst and despair, and yet never ceasing to dream of a world that celebrates universal humanism. Rositta Joseph possesses the primary precondition that nurtures a poet's creativity – a fearless mind” (<http://www.rosittajoseph.com/book-review>).

In the section on “Nature,” the poet touches upon the callous, unthinking violence perpetrated by humans on Nature’s bounty, polluting its magnificence in the most unforgivable way. Through a touching visual image in “The Unkindest Cut” (5), she brings us a young girl standing at her window, watching with horror and dismay as a tree is felled – “Deep roots wrenched out / Hefty boughs chopped up / Ancient bark stabbed upon, / Repeatedly” signalling human ingratitude to life-saving trees.

In “Relationships,” we come across the most beautiful and elevating bond, as the poet pays a warm tribute to her father as he “alone possesses the power / To / Put the universe / Under my feet” (“Father’s Day” 11). Indeed, this blessing becomes a reality when the poet realizes that she has truly made “An eternal mark, / Somewhere, / Upon the universe” (“In Our Literature Classes” 34), when her students, having been guided by her, learn to carve new paths of their own.

Contrary to this, the most painful, lacerating experience awaits us in “Eros” (12-18), as the poet watches a loved one fighting a futile battle against a terminal illness. Having gone through a similar tragic experience, this poem bore an uncanny resemblance to my own intense anguish, making me relive all those moments. Undoubtedly, this poet does enable the reader to look upon suffering as a deeply shared condition of the world, and not just a personal experience.

Despite the excruciatingly painful experiences life flings at us, what helps us survive and move on is indicated in the next section "Emotions." In poems such as "Courage" (19) and "Sacrifice" (20), the poet reveals how these qualities are the life-breath of morality and the soul of spirituality, empowering humans to turn "... every cross to a triumphant sign / Taking mortals beyond the divine" ("Sacrifice") as exemplified in the lives of "Laksmi Bai" and "The Phoenixes of Bombay" (poems on heroic women, placed later in the book).

At this precise point, the poet brings in "Spirituality" that transcends all religions and their limitations, exhorting us to see the unity of existence, seeking the divine everywhere in the universe, awaiting "grace," as evinced in "Faith Anthem" (21) and "Will He Come?" (22-25).

A touch of fresh breeze wafts in now as the poet takes the much-needed comfort in her first and lasting love in the next section titled, "For the Love of Literature." As she enumerates an entire galaxy of literary stars from all continents, genres and time periods, any literature lover cannot but marvel at the kaleidoscopic picture, awed by the poet's profundity of knowledge.

Love for literature then flows into "Love," the most sacred of human emotions. The poems on love bring a hint of recognition and an indulgent smile to readers as they read "Change" (38-41) and "Space" (42) wherein the poet loses herself in her beloved, giving away her space, her "well-guarded queendom" ("Space"). These poems bring to one's mind Shakespeare's "marriage of true minds" ("Sonnet 116). Here, marriage is not just a physical union but a spiritual communion, beyond all physicality, and beyond time and space, as explored in poems such as "When We Meet Next" (43).

The poet's passion for travel takes her to a number of "Places," the title of the next section. What we see here is not just a tourist's vision, but the probing psyche of a sensitive poet-traveller, a deeper reflection on the unpalatable, unsavoury truths underlying the glory and pomp of places as seen in "Chowmahalla Palace" (51-52), "Ahmedabad" (48-49) and "Manipur" (87-88).

Some places such as Araku (a beautiful hill station in the Eastern ghats of India) and the city of destiny (Vishakhapatnam, a lovely port city on the Indian east coast, facing the Indian ocean) do enchant her with their scenic beauty and pristine nature. "Highway Chronicles" (55-56) and "Moonlight Sonata" (62-63) are romantic in tone with the poet losing herself in love amid the glory and terror of Nature. The deeply evocative imagery employed here offers the readers a delightful sensual treat, allowing them to immerse themselves in the rhythm of Nature with all its sights, sounds and smells.

However, poems such as "Kaveri" (57-61) and "The Temple at Tanjore" (67-74) stand out as masterpieces in this volume, as they address the human need for shared spirituality. In these poems, the poet weaves history, religion, tradition, architecture and a myriad other strands together. The defiant spirit of the poet finds a kindred soul in the river Kaveri as she too is a free spirit and cannot be claimed by religion or tradition. The entire trajectory of Kaveri as she flows through Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, connecting kings, empires, temples, deities and the shrine of Mother Mary at Velankanni is fabulous. The manner in which the poet looks at these universal mothers of compassion, mother Kaveri and Mother Mary, quenching people's thirst physically and metaphorically while cleansing their souls finds deep resonance with readers, connecting the topical to the transcendental.

“The Temple of Tanjore” is the crowning glory of this volume. Stunned by the enormity of the temple, the poet struggles to communicate the cosmos, the infinite vastness embedded in the cosmic figure of Lord Brihadeeswara. Enshrining immortality, the temple bears a lasting testimony to the vision of a monarch who sought to create heaven on earth. Paying homage to a vast number of builders, sages and scholars who perfected the vision of Raja Raja Chola, the poet does not forget to salute the toiling millions – the labourers, water-bearers and thousands of nameless devotees who too have contributed to the magnificence of this mighty temple. She remembers the animals too – the “bull, horse, elephant armies fetching marble mountains” to create this ode to enormity and symmetry. The poet paints the whole temple with its entire structure and its idols, extolling the various forms of Shiva and Parvati with their myriad manifestations and names, employing such an evocative imagery that the reader can visualize it and partake of the sacred experience.

The section “The World” is then presented to the reader, touching upon universal themes such as existential angst, fear, destiny, the unfairness of life, truth, cruelty and the hope that flickers and sustains humans. The poem “Post Truth” (95) poses a highly philosophical question – “Who are we? Permanent actors / With masks / Stitched to our souls.” The poet seems to be resigned to the fact that

We no longer need reality
With a soul mate in AI
And a philosopher in ChatGPT.
The truth has died
Laughing at
The heights
We have reached.

“Moon Song” (93-94) and “Memories” (89) are dedicated to the devastating, traumatic experiences of the 9/11 tragedy and the COVID-19 pandemic that shook the entire world to its roots, assailing people with constant fear, anxiety and uncertainty. Poems such as “Middle Class Indian Memories” (90-91) and “Innocence at Eighteen” (82-85) do bring pleasant, endearing memories albeit with a tinge of sadness, even as the illusory nature of happiness lies exposed. Nevertheless, the undying, incurable optimism of the poet makes her hope against hope that the children of the rich and the poor alike will retain their innocence and rise to shine “Like a million stars / In every universe” (“Two Worlds” 101-102). Even in “Waiting to be Refuted” (104), her idealism is evident as she hopes adults realise that values do matter in life, not just skills.

From compassion for human suffering emerges her anger against injustice and from that anger, a deep desire for change. In the words of Prof. Malashri Lal, “Rositta Joseph’s book *A Poet’s Promise* traverses a rich landscape of experience which primarily explores the idea of compassion. Whether it’s the trees speaking their own language, or human dialogues that often betray the meanings of words, or reminiscences that leave jagged scars, Rositta’s sophisticated verse is both poignant and vivid. The implicit appeal for empathy and kindness is the subtext that reaches out, a timely reminder in our troubled times” (<http://www.rosittajoseph.com/book-reviews>).

The section on “Woman” begins with the predictable feminist ideology in “Shackles” (105) and “Deep Brown Ocean” (106-107) and connects “The Disrobing of Draupadi” (108-113) to the Nirbhayas and Abhayas of today, graphically presenting the sordid drama of yore that bears a sure resemblance to the same heinous crimes of contemporary times. However, it is the brave tale of not

only Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi, who stood “Defeated in life / Victorious in death” (“Lakshmi Bai” 114-16), but also the tale of the immense courage and sacrifice of “The Phoenixes of Bombay” (117) – ordinary women who rose to offer honour, food and home to fellow riot victims, “Repaying hate with love / War with peace” that sparks great admiration and respect.

The homage to the truly human and undying spirit of womanhood blends seamlessly into the last section of this volume – “Survival.” The first poem in this section is aptly titled “A Fine Balance” (118). Indeed, life is a tightrope walk between all the dualities of survival and death, love and hate, compassion and cruelty, trust and treachery and so on. Balancing amid all ever-confronting opposites is, according to the poet, what life is all about. What enables human kind to achieve this feat is grace, companionship or perhaps an anonymous higher intelligence or power. As the poet admits – “I have fallen from the sky / A hundred times; / Surviving / Only because / Someone / Had softly spread / My dreams / On the ground” (“A Fine Balance”). This is the strength and the hope that carries her forward. Despite her “‘democratic’ country” where “freedom dies a little more / Each day, with every change of rulers” (“Lent to Lent” 122-24), the infectious hope that “... someone else might / Live and / Win” (“Lent to Lent”) the battle of life makes her move on, hoping to see the dazzling dawn and blooming flowers, savouring peace and victory (“That Whereby Men Live” 132). As Alexander Pope says, “Hope springs eternal in the human breast.” The book closes with the poet declaring to her readers – “Hope is that Whereby Men Love” (the last line of the last poem, “That Whereby Men Live”).

Overall, this is a must-read anthology. These poems afford the readers a vicarious experience of the entire journey of the poet as she evolves from being a 'rebel' to being 'resilient,' a journey that is appealing and adorable primarily because it is so identifiable. There are no abstractions or esoteric phrases, only simple words clothed in the wisdom of life that readers can easily relate to. The choice of words, the turn of phrases, above all the highly evocative imagery that paints beautiful word-pictures and barely hides the ubiquitous irony – all of these have the potential to help readers navigate life's journey through myriad complexities, finally emerging as survivors. While the book offers emotional catharsis to the poet and the readers alike, it also encourages introspection, fosters empathy and inspires creativity. The poems can certainly help young readers to strengthen critical thinking and develop cultural awareness. They can enable them to positively come to terms with the hiatus between great expectations and bitter realities, to continue striving towards genuine happiness, for, as the poet says, "All is never lost / For / Those who walk / The straight and narrow path / In a crooked world" ("Return to School" 129-30). After all, poetry has that power to be a great tool for self-discovery and personal growth.