

Critical Introduction

A Poet's Courage as the Promise to Fight for Right(s)

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Rositta Joseph's is a poetry of commitment, the strident voice of her social conscience writ large, and yet she has accomplished this through a humility and self-deprecation that conveys her social critique without being judgmental of us her readers, nor, indeed, of the general public, though she spares no one who abuses privilege or power. Her overarching theme and concern is the outcome of injustice, suffering and exploitation, in relation to which her focus remains public and altruistic, even when it is deeply personal, as she writes

Yet, my tears fall
For other broken hearts
And myriad desperate voices
Piercing the skies. . . .

Compassion is your gift to me,
Mother. ('Velankanni')
This "gift" of compassion is always concrete and

specific, never vague or platitudinous, as she seeks to better understand sociopolitical problems and more fully engage with core concerns of inequality, so that she may catalyse change that is systemic. Her poetic task is to unmask the bedrock injustice that pre-determines the future of the “toiling peasant child”, following in the footsteps of her parents, so that we may work to change, meaningfully and sustainably what Joseph despairingly describes as the inescapable sorrow that lies in wait.

Shall I speak of three ages in one age?
Three nations in one?
Or three worlds in one world? [. . .]

The toiling peasant’s child
Will sit on mud floors
Begin learning what the rest of the world has finished
Just enough to toil like enslaved
fathers and mothers [...]

One equaliser for all
Innocence at the beginning
Sorrow at the end
Always Inescapable. (‘Equaliser’)

Hence, her rejection of the structural and epistemic brutality of our times is trenchant and unequivocal. In an epoch where “third world” poetry is turning inward in troublingly self-indulgent and depoliticized ways, Joseph’s voice resonates a radically different perspective. In this next example, her scathing critique of elite hypocrisy uses a conventional image of the mask but with a powerful twist that awakens us to the fact that these masks become the

person hiding inside, disfiguring and dehumanizing them as captured in the pain-invoking image of stitching flesh, made more troubling by the deliberate blurring of the us/ them distinction. Is there no difference then between the elites as drivers of injustice and us as those who accept and confirm to it, when truth is the real casualty?

Permanent actors
With masks
Stitched to our souls. [. . .]

The Truth has died
Laughing at
The heights
We have reached. ('Post Truth')

Yet, it is simplistic to see her understanding of the magnitude of the forces arrayed against justice as always being able to prevail over the ethical. While it is true that at moments in the poetry, as seen in the lines quoted above, Joseph feels lost and despairing, at other times her courage and conviction come through equally strongly on the side of the angels of hope:

All is never lost
For
Those who walk
The straight and narrow path
In a crooked world. ('Return to School')

"All is never lost" and thus her impatience with all kinds of hypocrisy and self-seeking rationalizations is as refreshing as it is insightful. Joseph's poetry is not of

the kind that comes from privilege or dalliance. In the words of another poet, she has “paid its price”, as she asserts, [I]

Have neither the time nor the money
For the ‘right’ kind of holidays,
Have lived in a hurry
From one futile struggle to another – (‘Rebel’).

The fact that she can calmly and matter-of-factly confirm “I know the limits of my time and my purse” (‘Rebel’) raises the value and opportunity cost of her writing beyond self-indulgence and classist fashion. Her life is characterised by the “hurry” imposed by the bombardment of issues and catastrophes demanding her undivided attention.

Rositta Joseph’s poetic courage is infectious, all the more so because it is far from being dogmatic or propagandist, and hence simplistic. Her range includes deeply personal poems, which acknowledge and celebrate the core influences in shaping her thought and action. Especially moving is her tribute to her father for empowering and nurturing her growth. In terms of poetic skill, note the daring use of the single line occupied by “To” which dangles tantalizingly, creating both doubt and expectation, that fittingly culminates in the juxtaposition of the infinite (the universe) with the most mundanely concrete (the ground under her feet).

Of a most charming man,
Who alone possesses the power
To
Put the universe
Under my feet. (‘Father’s Day’)

Joseph demonstrates a rare skill in being able to articulate hidden political truths where others only see the stark beauty of nature, while at the same time opening up this natural space for wonder and enjoyment. The poem 'Kaveri' provides such an example of this skill.

Kaveri, do we know each other
From a previous birth? [. . .]

They try to claim you
Both religion and tradition
But Kaveri, you free spirit,
As the ancient tribals
Of your Coorgi forests
You belong to no one.
Dipping my fingers
In your soul- cooling water [. . .]

How many Chola champions
Have suckled on your breasts;
In your waters they baptized
Their endless empire
Of Thanjavur and Trichy.

The fraught complicity between exploitation of people and the manipulation of nature is subtly but surely expressed here, as compounded through the political and ideological use of tradition, culture and religion to serve the interests of power. And yet the river flows on, its "soul-cooling water" shared across all divides and differences, its "free spirit" uncontaminated.

In the poem 'The Temple at Tanjore', deceptively simple questions strike at the heart of the nexus between

institutionalised religion and the entrenchment of political power for personal gain.

Why should fort after fort,
Wall after wall,
Protect an old temple?
Questions enter first,
Dragging me after. [. . .]

This ode to
Enormity and symmetry?

This realisation has led the poet to reject conventional belief and its rituals, but not spirituality itself.

My idols have crumbled,
My ideals shaken,
My heart broken,
I look down at icons that tumbled. [. . .]

To live in a world at war with itself [.]
(‘Innocence At Eighteen’)

This reflects the views of the poetic persona at eighteen, which becomes further refined and larger-than-personal, identifying the bigger picture.

Worship becomes woe
Faith turns fanatic
Religion looks revolting. [. . .]

Then, just one prayer
To be

Religionless
Stateless
And
Godless. ('Just One Prayer')

These lines are as forceful as they are courageous, coming from both the heart and the head, from someone who has lived this pain. Many will think this but few dare to say it out loud, and hardly anyone with this poetic power that yet retains real anguish.

One of the most important and unique characteristics of Joseph's poetry is her ability to nuance and delineate socioeconomic class, situating herself within her critique of classed values and norms, as seen in 'Middle-Class Indian Memories'.

[. . .]

Endless love affairs with libraries
Western fairy tales and Eastern folk tales [. . .]

First job, first book
First dreams and first promises
To change the world [. . .]

Sly memory
Brings me a silk saree or a story book
A picture I drew or a look
From loving eyes
A coffee or a cake or fresh lemon juice from mother's
hands
The scent of rain drops on dry earth
Teacher father's smile reflected on my students' faces
Sister's sister talk,

Lover's laughter
And I forget everything
Except for the memory of
Pure joy.

The middle-class here is marked by its self-absorption and aggrandisement. Yet, the challenge is to remain aloof and unmoved from the gentle critique of our classed preoccupation with books in libraries on the one hand, and the (false) dichotomy between westernization and nativization, or more realistically the crazy mix we have all inhabited in our childhood. Then, there is for her “no greater peace /Than to come home.”

One cannot but help noting the shift from the naively impractical idealism of youth (first job, first book ... to change the world), which is again a function of this aggrandisement of the middle class as change agents for the underclass, and hence not innocent. This movement then leads to the soft and lyrical section with which the poem ends by invoking the cherished moments of middle-class life, at once ordinary and special, trivial and momentous, small and large. The love and protection of family is beautifully captured in a few poignant images, exquisitely wrought to invoke the feelings that transcend narrow class boundaries but are still firmly rooted in the middle-class milieu. To universalize these is the trap that Joseph refuses to embrace, situating them in her past as their essence and not their trappings.

It is because of her hard-won awareness that Joseph is able to recognise that this life and its values are also limiting, even misleading if one wants to see the larger picture and to intervene in the bigger battles. In ‘Memories’, a haunting

poem that both embraces and fights nostalgia, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, she writes

We live in the past,
The present seems dead,
The future is too fragile,
Vanishing before we visualise.
From the faint lingering warmth
of ancient embraces,
Out of the fading imprints
of old sight-seeing journeys,
Over the scanty fragrance of
the free breaths we took aeons ago,
We fight to live. [. . .]

Prisoners in our own houses,
Separated from most of what we cherish,
We cling on to the feather
That can give us new life -
Memories.

In the last lines, the poem pushes beyond the immediate confines of its pandemic context to encapsulate a broad principle of contemporary life, unable to resist or contest the tragic developments of our times, be they at home or abroad. Ours is a generation marked by the normalization of violence, the fetishization of disparity. Joseph is only too aware of

Wrong choices to stay back in wrong places
In a wrong land, with wrong people[.]
(‘Return to School’)

Yet, ultimately, the poems and the poet are irrepressible. Like 'Lakshmi Bai' and the heroines in 'The Phoenixes of Bombay', Joseph is "A heart / Embracing the universe." She recognises the fragility of this moment, the hugeness of the task ahead of her, the disappointments that are inevitable:

I have fallen from the sky
A hundred times;
Surviving
Only because
Someone
Had softly spread
My dreams
On the ground. ('A Fine Balance')

Her solution is to think globally, to envision planetarily, and still to remain firmly rooted to the earth and its people. Poetry is an avocation, not a pastime, wherein she asks rhetorically,

Is writing one poem per day
Enough to fool yourself? ('Waiting to be Refuted')

Instead, Joseph demands of herself and the world to

Give me wings
Make me a child
That I may give to each
In body, mind,
Heart and soul. ('Two Worlds')

These poems share with us the poet's special wings

that allow her to survey the universe of her values, yet to see through the eyes of a child as if for the first time, while at the same moment to plant the seeds of her dreams on the ground, so that all who wish may hear.