

## AUTUMNAL CHORDS: A MARGINAL PLACE IN POETRY

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If she decides to come,  
she may not.

If the forecast is, she will come,  
she will not come.

Some months ago, her remote whisper  
are the last rains falling in Kolkata.

Taking her on our side,  
we keep white flowers on doorways.

We step into our smiles, longings,  
absences, waiting in due time.

‘Waiting for Summer Rains in Kolkata’

Among the many things that poetry effortlessly accomplishes, is the renewal and repair of the everyday, the holding of a quiet, compassionate light to each day’s dark, and the widening of the strong limbs of night to embrace all that is fallen and lost. Not all poetry has an axe to grind, a theorem to establish or a belief to popularize. It is possible for poems to be luminous and yet unseen until beckoned by the right moment of experience. Such poems seek nothing but to honour the soil of life that has birthed them and to return to it the nourishment it richly deserves.

In Jaydeep Sarangi’s *letters in lower case*, one comes across a similar urge. The earth-brown cover of the book depicts a rain of alphabets - the protagonist ‘letters’ in lower case. But these

poems are equally letters in the sense of being epistles to the world - letters that encapsulate an inordinate wisdom on its workings and teach us how to cohere with all its contradictions. The seventy-nine poems in this collection branch out to life in its myriad shades and teeming irreconcilabilities, documenting its steady, cyclical progression from despair to hope.

The title bespeaks much for these poems and for their particular stance towards the world. The lower case, here, is the case of the everyday traffic of writing and life. It is ungaudy, non-pompous and devoid totally of the slightest sense of self-importance. It is, however, at the same time, essential, integral, vital to existence and impossible to live without. By urging his poetry to stand tall and firm in lower case, the poet establishes the role of poetry as confidante and witness to life's routine transactions and its existential plurality and surprise. It also affirms poetry's marginality and the epistemological significance of the marginal position in the world.

The book is divided into three sections titled 'Laws of the Land', 'Gesture of Surrender' and 'The Window you Hold'. It is possible to read these sections in terms of the relationship of self and the world and to find them as explorations of 'Reality', 'Desire' and 'Possibility'. The poems in the first section engage themselves distinctly with the world as it is, squarely encountering its injustices. In most of Sarangi's poems, the currency of reality is raw description sans mantles of metaphor, sarcasm or idealism. His is an eye that takes keen pleasure in recording the world as it is rather than imaging it in accordance with visions it cannot or does not wish to live up to. Such embracing of life's is-ness can lead to a lack of coherence but it is precisely this experiential incoherence that marks Sarangi's oeuvre, his poems being distinct bridges between life and art.

In 'Road to Almora', the tranquillity and religio-spiritual significance of the Himalayas that lights up the poem is sternly contrasted with its last lines where "an old rickshaw puller perspires/ who never read Gandhi or Ambedkar/ history waved its delicate hands,/ the ride screamed to a stop." History, as Sarangi points out, can bypass the hapless, and social revolutions can leave many distressed lives unaffected. Life, however, goes on, settling into "a dreamless nonsensical sleep". In 'An Etymology of Gain', the poet eats the farmers' "tears, sweats, words" In 'A Love Poem for Jose Mujica', the inspiration is to describe the farmers' "fair green face/ And the pain of the world in one line."

In the second section of the book, the poems surrender to desire and the heart's multi-layered longing for peace, stability, justice, reciprocal love and human faith. In 'Losses', the poet writes, "Losses are gains somewhere", convinced that the arithmetic of loss and gain is too wide to be mapped out entirely in relation to one's narrow self and circumstances. 'Someday you will suggest me to rain elsewhere/ What shall I do with my heart already given to you', states 'Morning', emphasizing a firm vision of the permanence of love in an ephemeral world. "Let me cry for myself/ my lost image in you" urges 'Light on My House' underlining the inalienable relationship between the self and the other. Throughout these poems, Sarangi's metaphors for emotions are both unusual and strongly resonant. Drawn out of the several recesses of day-to-day living, their force both charms and astounds. In 'Magic in Deep Breathings', for instance, age becomes "a conversation with faded colours". In 'Is there a Window?' the window becomes a metaphor for leisure and respite from a life continually duty-bound.

The third section of the book dwells on nostalgia and the possibility of a future that springs from the security of the past. A number of poems in this section are dedicated to family and friends, charting maps of a time that can be revived in memory alone. 'In Folders', for instance, documents a startling range of memories of place, sport festival, culture, literature and cuisine in tracing one's identity across time. 'A Poet's Unworthy Bio-note' metaphorically discusses the distances between biography and the summary note that professionally recounts it. "The present is/ a half-closed door/ None can come and go/ without pushing the half-closed part", writes the poet in 'Dreams' establishing the nebulous connection between the conscious and the subconscious, between past and present, and reality and dreams.

The tone of *letters in lower case* is distinctly autumnal, its postmodernist conscience clear, and its postcolonial memory teeming with historical connections across temporal and cultural frames. The idea of homing, belonging and finding meaning in existence through relationships is a dominant theme within these poems as is the necessity of the self to committedly participate in the wider workings of the world. No human can or should be an island to oneself, these poems seem to assert. Rooted in a strong ethical consciousness that duly marks the presence of the socio-culturally underprivileged and dispossessed, Sarangi's poems valorise a marginal perspective on the world and evince extraordinary faith in the power of poetry and in the role of the poet as an architect of the future. In 'The Future is a Poet', Sarangi writes, "a poet is/ the

arriving wind/ delayed without a fuss/ broke loose/ recalled.” If poetry is the mending of the broken, the restoration of the ravaged and the invigoration of the weak, then the poet in society is akin to both the visionary and the healer.

Such existential healing, however, can be performed, as the poet asserts, not in the mainstream but only at the hems, the pockets and the interstices of self and culture. This repair and healing of the self on the one hand and of the rift between the self and the world on the other, is precisely the aesthetic and emotive function that *letters in lower case* performs. Its ideology, in its deep humanism and in advocating the role of love as the connecting force between all forms of being - human and non-human, and sentient and non-sentient, establishes these poems as wide-ranging anthems of selflessness, redemption and abiding contentment in the pleasures and potential of the human soul.

#### WORKS CITED

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