

Indian Literature

Sahitya Akademi's Bi-Monthly Journal



March/April 2010 256

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Transcending Boundaries...

Rowing Together by Sukrita and Savita Singh, Rajkamal Prakashan, New Delhi, 2008

In a time of segregation and divide any attempt to transcend boundaries is exemplary. A creative passion for poetry, a vision to look beyond the regimentations of language, content and style have brought together two sensitive poets of our time. *Rowing Together / Saath Chalte Hue* is a bilingual presentation of poetry by Savita Singh and Sukrita Paul Kumar. Both the poets have translated each other's poems of their own choice. Savita a Hindi poet herself has translated English poems of Sukrita, while Sukrita adds a new dimension to Savita's poetry by translating it into English. This is not just poetry in translation but an endeavour to expand the horizons of poetic experience and create a dialogue across the two languages. Sukrita writes, "linguistic boundaries melt when the experience of the poem reaches out so easily to the other. And the poems of the other that chose to become native to each of us, sought another expression in yet another language." Savita also admits that the whole process had the same creative urge. "For me strangely, the experience of translation was the same as writing fresh poems... filled with the same restlessness and anxieties. In this way, as if, we

understood each other in a different way. 'Rowing Together' sometimes silently and at times talking, hearing the many sounds of nature and pondering over what we came to know."

It requires a lot of courage and conviction to dilute the authority of language and break into the silences expressed between the lines. Saying the unsaid is the biggest challenge for any poet. Here, both Sukrita and Savita have captured each and every emotive experience with such finesse so as to express not just one's own silence but explicating each other's poetic sensibilities. Reading two poets simultaneously may lead to inevitable comparisons but what amazes the reader is that both Sukrita and Savita have unconditionally empathized with each other's expression, setting aside their individual preferences. In a very subtle constructive manner they seem to co-habit a creative intellectual space. 'Rowing Together' has definitely enriched the poets and the languages bringing closer the world of Hindi and English circumventing any hierarchies between them.

In many more ways *Rowing Together* is not just a collection of poetry but a rare experience in itself. Just flip through the pages of the book and a whole new aesthetic experience opens up. A novel indomitable style of presentation

where the poems have been carefully put under different sections. Each section opens with a drawing, by Megha Singh. These black and white pencil drawings are a poetic expression in themselves. Ingrained with the freshness, vigour and zeal of a young mind these drawings have a great insight and fluidity. The layout and presentation of the text is such that the presence of poem on the paper can be felt much strongly than that of the poet. The poet's name appears only in one small corner of the page enforcing the significance of poetry, sensitivity, emotion and experience.

The anthology is divided into eight sections: Being, Creating, Othering, Seeing, Nurturing, Reflecting, Suffering and Dwelling. All these titles seem to originate from the deepest experiences of life. The diverse thematic compilation of poems has brought in a kind of openness. Themes are loosely threaded, acting as indicators while the rest is left to the imagination of the reader. It is not a guided tour of poetry but a platform where both the poets and the reader can enhance the nuances of meanings by creative intervention. This open-ended diversity is evident in the various strata of concept and presentation. The book explores the different possibilities of individuality and societal norms, highlighting the undercurrents in such interactions. These poems try and identify a distinct sphere of relationship

between an individual and his society which include immense affinity and objectivity at the same time. It is also a journey within. Time remains a constant indicator even as the poetic sensibilities oscillate between their inner self and the outer world. Sukrita and Savita Row Together creating, sharing, analyzing each other's mindscape however the basic temperament and mood of their poetry is quite different from each other. It is valuable that they have retained their individual distinctions. In present times of melting socio-cultural-linguistic rigidities an extended hand of friendship does not limit one's creativity; it rather enriches it, adding a new perspective and making new openings. Savita aptly puts it, "This initiative of renewal is perhaps such that it humbly enters into the process of change for a better world."

Feminist discourse has been central to Savita's poetry. In her earlier collections *Apne Jaisa Jeevan* (A Life Like its Own) and *Neend thi Aur Raat thi* (There was Night and There was Sleep) she has emphasized her feminist stance. She has always investigated the cultural metaphors of womanhood which have often led to a woman's subjugation and the inherent paradoxes of a society where gender discrimination is deeply embedded. At the same time there is a strange sense of confidence and empowerment in her tone. Her feminism arises from this twin experience of empowerment and

vulnerability of a woman. On the one hand she emphatically states, "I am no-one's woman/I am my own woman... And I have no Lord." on the other hand she creates the images of women who have suffered through ages. The poet seems committed to her cause demanding a social order which is more equitable and sensitive, Savita writes passionately about womanhood, her triumphs and traumas, realization of 'self' and about different layers of consciousness. Many of her poems in this collection such as 'Whose Woman am I', 'Women sit in Mourning', 'Woman is Truth', 'The Way a Woman Knows', 'Do Remember Nita' bring forth the same fervour of Savita's poetry for which we have always known her. This feminist idiom has been her strength and has always been identified with her poetry but at times it also defines her limit. Any such framework prevents the poet from a varied expression and a multi-faceted growth. However, in this collection Savita crosses her own barrier. Here she is immersed in deep thought, reflecting, talking to herself, calling out to Sara, Ruth and Allen, praying with a butterfly, identifying her own self with a tree, surrendering herself to a greater reality; probing the varied expanses of life with her own insight. Here emerges the genuineness of a poet who cannot be bound by any 'isms'. She liberates herself from the rigid structures of thought and language.

In the section 'Creating' all her five poems need a special reading – 'For One's Own Language,' 'Prayer', 'Blue World', 'Life of Such as Us' and 'Where are You Taking Me, my Poesie'. In these poems she discovers the inseparable relationship of a poet and her language. She writes, "Living in one's own language/waking up in the soft light of one's dreams." Here language becomes a precondition of poet's existence; words lend immortality to many in this world who are ready to lose the light of their eyes, waiting for poetry. "With thirst and anguish/ For our own Language/Our own history" Savita's poems literally live through a creative challenge in today's materialistic world. The depth of passion she brings to these issues can also be seen in her bonding with the nature. Sharing her joys and sorrows with woods, dreaming amidst trees, she wishes to convey that 'I am also a tree,' spread in their roots, resting on their branches, sharing her life with them. She intimately waits for a bird to fly off some tree, to merge into her and make a nest. She is trying to relocate herself and develop a sense of belonging.

To the strong imagery of nature Savita attaches certain philosophical strings to her poetry in 'Truth has wandered away' she asks: "But where can truth go/It must be surely somewhere around/In the weak shadow of our pale soul/Hesitating thinking/ From where it begins and

where ends the path.” Savita is exploring the path of uneroded beauty. She yearns for peace and freedom preparing herself to stand against all odds in her quiet resilience for saving all that is beautiful be it nature, poetry or human bondage and freedom.

Sukrita’s poetry stands out as distinctly different from Savita’s passion. Her tone is more controlled while concerns are the same. In fact, both of them bring a completeness to each other’s poetry. On the very first reading Sukrita comes across as a poet whose words echo of loneliness, whose poetry has a streak of melancholy but as one reads on such feelings fade away. Sukrita’s images of uncertainties of life become overpowering. Her poetry becomes intense while bringing alive the pain of a woman soldier in her much appreciated poem ‘When the Snakes Came for Shelter.’ This poem is dedicated to Freedom of Nyamubaya. She presents a paradoxical situation of a woman’s life where war is fought not just on frontiers but in every minute of her life. Sunungukai, a soldier, fighting the war of independence for her country, feels safer sleeping by the side of snakes while male gaze continues to haunt her. The war on the frontiers end. Soldiers rejoice in victory but what happens to Sunungukai is shameful. War continues for her. She is still fighting the ‘war of independence’ for self dignity. This is one of the finest

poems by Sukrita, where you can feel her anguish. There is a deep pain but no pity, unlike her self related poems where the quest for truth ends up retreating into her own shell.

Another poem that resonates in the mind of the reader for a long time is ‘The Hunt’ on violence in Gujarat. Sukrita writes: “Ghosts of unborn children/not resting till/they enter bodies of/their killers and of/those who raped their mothers.” The poem negates the criss-cross of communalism, hate and violence. Sukrita empathizes with a whole world of marginalized sections of society be it the orphaned children on the streets, the homeless seeking shelters or the rickshaw pullers. Attempting to teach them the alphabets the poet realizes—“I learn many lessons/ From their instant recognition/ Their intimation of home and/ My own homelessness.” She also identifies with the void and loneliness of the elderly ‘Ageing in America.’ These poems form a part of the section ‘Othering’ but here the other is very much an extension of self.

Sukrita’s most sensitive poems are in the section ‘Reflecting’—‘Bonding’, ‘Connections’, ‘Stream of Consciousness’, ‘Through Space and Time’—all these poems reflect the gentle, contemplative mood of the poet and her undying optimism in human relationships that lie deeply internalized. Sukrita has some beautiful images of ‘Mothers and

Daughters' submerging into each other. In her poem 'Connections' she actually thanks her mother not in a weak compassionate moment but because she knows how mothers have borne the cross over their lean bodies to keep moving in and out of their children's dreams. She writes: "all those/ moons and stars/ toss and turn/ in the universe/ waiting for you, Amma/ to connect them / with us/ sleepwalking on earth." Creation is a process of agony and emancipation. Sukrita understands the tribulations of the language being confined to set agendas. She argues

against the 'Language of conditions / of Conjunctions' but welcomes the words falling as rain, dropping as stones, freezing as ice and 'Melting in thought/ Floating in the mind' trying to break the silences, finding newer forms of expression.

In all, *Rowing Together* comes to you as a breath of fresh air and makes for compulsive reading. Barring a few instances where the impact has been diluted, the transcreation captures the true spirit of poetry.

Rekha Sethi

The Rainbow of Pain

The Rainbow of Pain, Venus Crossing by Kalpana Swaminathan, Penguin Books India, 2009, Pp. 244, Rs.275/-

This collection of a dozen short stories by Kalpana Swaminathan is not like anything you would expect from your average IWE (Indian Writing in English) title. Swaminathan's surgical realism, if we may give it that name, makes a brave departure from the surfeit of baggy prose and exoticisation that has come to characterize a large part of fiction being produced by Indians in the English language.

Yet what she offers is no breath

of *fresh* air, not really, but rather a dispassionate look at human lives. Lives that are teetering on the brink of some disaster—some disease, some loss of faith, some accident waiting to happen. So she swerves away far from embellishments and colour and bravely paints word-pictures that are dismal, grave, painful but pregnant with meaning and shining with the light of the real. While her brutal honesty is commendable it does not always make for easy reading and there are descriptions in this powerful little book that can make you feel sick.

The twelve stories are stitched together with a thread that is spun