

BOOK REVIEW

ENCOUNTERS WITH PEOPLE AND THE ANGELS OF HOPE: POEMS

by

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Authors Press, New Delhi

Pages: 240

Price: Rs. 450.00

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I would imagine Dr. H.K. Kaul sitting in his spacious library office as Chief Librarian at India International Centre, New

Delhi caught in the *Whirlpool* or *Whirlpools of all sizes and shapes*—engrossed in his deep thoughts. Dr. Kaul, a man of very few words with a dispassionate appearance of a *Derveish* but always with a broad smile whenever you approached him. That was about three decades ago. Gradually, I learnt that he was a poet. It was a paradox for me to reconcile his two personalities: a very organized and disciplined person and a poet. In fact, our imagination of *poets* is usually close to their being a little anarchic. It was after his passionate, incisive and creative long poem '*Firdaus in Flames*' which encapsulated the tragedy of Kashmir, was published from London that I was assured about his being gifted with performing both the roles with equanimity.

'*Encounters with People and the Angels of Hope*' is Dr. Kaul's latest collection of poems. The choice of themes, the use of metaphors and

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BOOK REVIEW

flow of expression reflect his deep insight in human nature. It equally reflects his intellectual and emotional responses to the world and events of life around him. He is just not *writing* poetry but he is reflecting through the medium of poetry with the sensitivity and creativity of a creative mind. His themes are so varied that every set of poems deserves a specific review and response. However, the constraint of space would not permit that. From System to Society through Social Behaviors, Culture, Spirituality and Environment he moves with ease and sensitivity and leaves a deep impression on the reader. The very first poem of this collection *Whirlpools* reflects this sensitivity:

Whirlpools remain active
In sleep, under the masks.
Only sizes vary.
Minds that matter get sucked in too.
Only the swirling remains in its
downdraft.

He has divided this collection of poetry in different themes according to his personal choice. He has cataloged these themes as: *Society and Culture; Struggle for Survival; Kashmiri Pundits; Crime and Violence; Religion and Spirituality; Environment; The Professionals and Craftsmen and Decaying and Death*. This classification, in my reckoning

is unusual. However, it equally establishes the connectivity of the poet to the world he lives in. It is within this classification that we realize the poetic responses of his experiences. His reflections are not some imaginary romantic flickers which exist in vacuum. These are the experiences of life which he has witnessed or may be suffered also.

From my perspective, the themes of his poems may be classified into two broad categories; Existential and Philosophical. The majority of his themes fall in the 'Existential' category. He reflects on these themes with the versatility of a well experienced poetic mind which has undergone the rigors of grinding of events of life. For instance, we should write books, essays and articles on our experiences with the unbending *steel frame* of the system with which we are confronted and which haunts us in the modern day life. The *cogs* of the system remain oblivious to the tasks assigned to them. This experience finds almost helpless expression from the Poet in these words:

Sitting back, watching
developments
Struggling, focusing on the ascent
All his life, couldn't put his finger
On a profound issue, couldn't fix
The new immoral world order.

BOOK REVIEW

(Poem: Calm Confidence).

This helplessness is reflected in poem after poem in which the Poet gracefully recounts the experiences of resistance to change which come from diverse quarters-society, polity and /or system, which, of course, he does not qualify or identify. According to him:

He dug in his heels to stonewall efforts
But they turned the very earth
Below the heels into the swamp
With the sweat of the likes of him around.

(Poem: Stonewalling Change)

The structures, which Dr. Kaul has keenly watched, keep on weighing heavily on his mind. He laments:

Their wounds and their wisdom were chained.
Hanging fire in the most salient divide
Ambivalence filled all spaces, everything
In the structure that was unable to deliver.

(Poem: Overhauling the Structure)

The Poet is confronted with the crumbling value system and he creatively chooses his metaphors to reflect on this emerging situation. He is careful to avoid sermonizing:

A new mindset
Blunt Axes
Shock, stimulate;
Tailor passions
Moods and methods
Won't let you stand firm
On solid grounds.
Shocks reaffirm
Rising hunger
For dissolution of the evolved-
Hunger for power
Blunts the axes further
As it blunts life on course.

(Poem: Blunt Axes)

We live in an age which is paradoxically striving to unite the humanity at different levels and yet we are faced with the processes that create and nourish *divisions*. These processes emanate from different sources leaving us in a traumatic state psychologically and emotionally. It is a formidable challenge. The Poet does not go in to the genesis of the problem nor does he offer a remedy. Perhaps that is not the forte of a poet. However, he identifies and soberly puts forth this binary in a manner that stirs you up:

Divides are growing wider every day
As the floods that pass through
Break their bases, turn their foundations
Into sediments turning vast

BOOK REVIEW

Fertile tracks around infertile.

The Poet in melancholy again addresses this issue:

How to bridge the divide?
The unions are timed to break
Creating generations of divides
That change all the time
In short times, small spaces
That grow and disappear...
(Poem: Bridging the Divides)

It needs to be recognized that these *divides* stare us in our faces and are manifested in different ways. They are manipulated also for the purposes well known. However, I should not deny the Poet the privilege of his mental flight to 'space' and 'universe' and watching the 'dancing atoms' as he has portrayed in the poem, but humble mortals like me would still discern the relevance of the poem at the social and existential levels which has resulted in mayhem and bloodshed locally, regionally and universally. This ugly phenomenon is a continuing process.

As the Poet moves on from theme to theme, the discontent of the new generation does not escape his mind. He articulates this discontent and the consequent despair in these words with sarcasm:

The new generation moves away

Evolving at every step to climb a number

To climb a lamppost, or at least a tree.

Seeing nothing on the horizon

To replace the changing self

Festering in their cauldron to explode

Creating new arcs of crisis

In the lure and the promises of the future.

(Poem: Biting the Bullet)

The Poet shares this despair and is forthright in underlining the conundrum. His reflections assume helpless forms expressed in subtle but bitter expressions. He says:

There was nothing new

Under the sun here.

Windows of opportunities

Were wished away.

In exasperation, he concludes:

The broken bridges of tolerance

Could not steel his resolve.

Favours were for power and pelf.

Broken between morality and power

Could not switch on the right buttons.....

(Poem: The Reset Button)

The discerning eye of the Poet takes note of contemporary realities confronting societies. His powerful poem *Arms of Terror* reflects agony,

BOOK REVIEW

fear and vulnerability of average common man in the face of this growing dread full phenomenon. The Poet appears to be a victim as well as a passive passerby. Still, his canvas unfolds gradually to depict larger issue of 'Sale and race for arms' which he skilfully weaves into fabric of his poetic expression. These intricacies usually remain out of comprehension of common innocent minds.

The Poet is not unmindful of historical injustices heaped upon downtrodden and hapless groups of Indian society. His depiction of the painful journey of a Dalit woman in his poem *Bharati : A Dalit*, whose struggle for mere survival through hard work are wrecked by different social forces and she ultimately lands up as a '*yogni, devdasi*'. Dr. Kaul skilfully exhorts the government to address the sufferings of downtrodden and victims of caste based oppression in his poem '*Protect Me, Sarkar*'. The idiom of '*Sarkar*' which has a popular local connotation looks natural and at the same time is appealing. He concludes the poem with this sublime and yet powerful message:

Sarkar, protect my rights, my liberties,
Protect me, Sarkar or else, I will rise.

Kashmir is at the back of Dr. Kaul's mind. However, that would be an oversimplification. It is in his conscious and sub-conscious mind. He is imagining Kashmir whenever he mentions mountains, rivers, lakes and fragrance of flowers. One has not to make an effort to discern this phenomenon while reading his poems. He has devoted a full section to *Kashmiri Pandits* in his collection. I should call them *Poems of Pathos*. Dr. Kaul is the heir to a grand physical, cultural and spiritual legacy. His community had their own indigenous Vedas, Shastras and Kashmir Shaivism. They had their own Ganges (Gangabal). They had the celebrated *Asthans* of Ksheer Bhawani and Hari Parbat. Ironically, they had lost their 'Sharda Peetha' when Jammu and Kashmir was truncated into two parts after the Jammu and Kashmir War of 1948. Be that as it is, today Dr. Kaul (personifying a community) sitting on the "slopes of Shankaracharya" hill facing the Dal Lake is wondering where to go because he "has no home in this ancestral valley". (Poem: On the Slopes). He portrays the scenario of the abandoned homes and weaves this pathos in his poetic expression which inwardly shatters the sensitive minds. He surmises that the people who had to leave had the expectation that this would never happen with

them yet it did happen. His poem 'This Naav (Boat)' with powerful metaphors concludes on a sad note:

No oar to let it move from here
No *naavi-i-vola* (Boatman) to take
it back...

It may be noted that a great deal of literature has appeared on Kashmiri Pandit migration. However, Dr. Kaul's poems belong to a different genre and these reflections are the product of a painful inner churning which stare him in his face. This pain and anguish shakes a person and one keeps on imagining 'How can it happen'? Does it have a sociological angle or is it a political maneuver! Let the reader judge. His another poem '*Boatmen of Kashmir*' projects the poignancy of this class which has been the result of the tragedy of Kashmir. However, the poem is loaded with the historicity, sociology and psychology of a section of population which touches the heart of those who have been part of the place.

The preference of metaphors determines the character of a particular poetry. Dr. Kaul has mastered the art of selection and use of metaphors that accord a distinct pattern to his poems. His poem '*The Fossils and Their Play*' display this quality. In this powerful poem, he has

tried to decipher the cycles of 'life and death' and approach the 'debris of consciousness' by using the metaphor of 'fossil'. His idiom encapsulates this philosophy in these words:

The fossils hold layers of traumatic
Changes, cycles of life and death
Wisdom of the right passage
In their dark tunnels for the future.

In my reckoning, this particular poem should have been the concluding poem of this collection. The insightful parables of this collection motivate you to ponder and undertake a journey inwardly. His poem '*On Collision Course*' where 'they' aim their stones at the devil, soon come to realization that:

The devil was *nowhere* seen
The *sacrifice* alone had powered
Our legs and arms, had led us to
garb
The stones, pocket them to stone
the devil.
The collision course at the
crossroads
Took hundreds to sacrifice.
The devil remained far away,
elusive.

Our entire life struggle centers round our efforts to stone the 'devil' which remains elusive sitting silently somewhere within us.

BOOK REVIEW

This collection of poems are the reflections of a sensitive creative mind which is constantly engaged in the '*tapassiya*' of developing his perception regarding our existence. It appears that he attempts to delve deep in the consciousness of his mind and

come to grips with layer after layer of this abstract structure; yet holds the secret of our existence. He weaves the tapestry of his poems with the competence of a talented poet. This collection would be a valuable addition to the Indian English Poetry. ■