

PAIN HAS A LASTING EFFECT IN VINITA AGRAWAL'S POETRY

By Aju Mukhopadhyay

In both *The Longest Pleasure* and *Words Not Spoken* the two books of poems by Vinita Agrawal, the same trend of thoughts and expressions flow out of her heart and mind; a stream of pain moving through her poetry gives a sort of artistic pleasure; pain is more deep rooted and potent to give sweet pleasure than what we get from mere entertainment. Her first book of poems *Words Not Spoken*, published in 2013, contained 82 poems. It was her debut appearance. It reached our hand in 2014. And after little over a year's gap her second book titled *The Longest Pleasure* containing only 24 poems has been published from Kentucky, U.S.A. There must have been an urgent urge to publish this chap-book. Poets are ebullient enough to go for more volumes than more in one volume.

Broken love in the appropriate theme for pain which lingers with perpetual break and broken promises. "The Windstorm Came In March" is the first poem in this book where natural calamity symbolizes a calamity in lovers' life. The windstorm in Nature causing devastation in the garden, uprooting and breaking the trees, signifies the severance of love's relationship which is obviously mourned by the poet.

how could I possibly not mourn
the severed Sal, Teak, Rosewood, Laburnum,
whenever I mourned the loss of love
after we had parted.

The Windstorm Came In March /Pleasure /4

Even before teens the two would be lovers met and planted seeds of Amaryllis.

A month later the deep red, funnel shaped blooms trumpeted out.

Shining in our eyes, blushing at our delighted whoops!

That day we held hands. Mother baked us a cake.

Robert and Amaryllis /Pleasure /12

But unfortunately the boy was planted in Bhutan with his father, transferred.

We never met again but I have to say that every time I cried,
you came back to me - tasting of air in a mountain kingdom
stirring in the heart of a blood red Amaryllis.

Robert and Amaryllis /Pleasure /12

The tale of first love had bloomed but did not last. It recurs ideally some times in other poems but not in flesh and blood. Somewhere lurks promises for love but her hunger for it ever eludes her as in “Looking for Love” and “Summer We Called Home”.

The poet adds a degree when she says that the lost breathe of the lover breaths into flowers. Love feels that the lost lover relives in flowers, never wishing him to vanish into nothingness. The French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre feels that the being is the unique foundation of nothingness. But Lo! She comes to it from her idea of Shunyata or emptiness which was at the base of her first book.

When all is gone, nothingness must remain
If only to prove that what was real once
is debris and rubble now.

Something Somewhere /Pleasure/15

Besides these unfortunate love affairs a related deep anguish gnaws at the core of her womanhood; because of her birth as girl becoming a woman.

See how a girl lives amidst thugs and rapists without any protection. Hiding she escapes or is trapped for a fatal blow.

He was a paw.

A city-bred shark.

Eyes beady like black stamens of scarlet poppies.

Hide and Seek /Pleasure /9

For she knows,

Never tell you what I really thought or how I felt
only what you wished to hear

....

Being born female is a crime

I'd be so soundless that I might not be at all

Some Things I Knew The Day I Was Born / Pleasure /8

The poet as a married woman celebrates the silver jubilee of her marriage as it coincides with Tiananmen Square's silver jubilee. The first jubilee is an individual affair but the second one is the tale of a communist regime where the innocent students' cry for freedom was brutally suppressed.

Twenty five years later my marriage and the massacre of Tiananmen
Are both celebrating their silver jubilees;

....

Unaware, that on its silver jubilee, I'd be reminded with deadly hurt
Of what it was like to live in oppressions long shadow

Jovan Musk and Tiananmen Square / Pleasure /

The images of the oppressors and their symbolic relationship with river and tree mark the characteristic poetic diction of Vinita. "Absolve me of being born a woman" (Breaking") is her earnest urge to get rid of all hesitations, faith and faithlessness. On a sojourn to Burma (Myanmar) the poet took the photo of a woman which reminisces her experience of Burma.

The streets of Burma are seldom dry. Water and blood are shed equally.

....

Every night she lights butter lamps for their return
begs the earth to yield not beans and asparagus
but peace, peace, peace.

The Way A Photo Speaks /Pleasure /18

In a fierce condition created by storm the poet remembers her mother, as often she does, who would have managed all calamities of nature by her witty presence and adroit actions, we acknowledged in silence
how we missed mother's presence.

She would have outwitted the fierce conditions by now

(Wrought By The Storm / Pleasure /6

The loss of her mother is realized in the same silence as it was in her first book of poems,
After mother passed away, the house shrank,
silence expanded

Words Not Spoken /Spoken /19

And the experience of

I don't remember anything about the day we emptied mother's ashes in the river-
Missing Person /Pleasure /14

is linked to her earlier tale,

Daddy carried you in an earthen pot
all five kg of ashes

Mortakka /Spoken /45

Poets usually have a penchant for the have-nots; deprived and tortured. With her piercing eyes she discovered the paltry existence of the rag pickers under the shining opulence of the proverbial rich people.

I saw existence morph from penthouses and slick condos
to the wall-less homes of ragpickers

Pedder Road Flyover /Pleasure/5

The irony of life is that they remain the same whether under the British regime or in Free India.

But somehow the families here still picked garbage,

Pedder Road Flyover /Pleasure/5

Their best friends are the street dogs as they were before,
traffic dimmed around three in the morning.

A few hours of oblivion must have felt good
with loyal street dogs curled up warmly by their sides.

Pedder Road Flyover /Pleasure/5

In "Conversation Inmates" Conversations cover all activities and space between the activities. Even contemplation and silence include conversation with oneself. It is a poem detached, fulfilling itself though rare in her treasure.

“November” is another nice poem giving an image of the poet in very artistic and poetic language when she seems forlorn like a bird worried. In poet’s life nose dives into the mud of hopelessness and frustration.

“More Useful” is a short poem telling long history of poet’s life suggesting that like a tree if it is cut down and its different parts are used by humans for different purposes, “Such a death would be more useful”. But cutting down a tree is robbing environment of its asset. Does the human life not have more usefulness to the society? But as a woman she feels useless in society.

Why can't I be chopped like a tree

Torso falling to the ground in obeisance

More Useful /Pleasure/21

It is a grievous outpouring, not a solution to her problem. “Sea of Time” is quite short and cute poem telling that life, iced or frozen almost without a movement or progress, has to be floated “with riverine intentions /into the sea of time” (22)

The idea is negative touching Nietzsche but opposing his ‘will to power.’

“Home” differentiates between home and house. Home is intimate love while house is a formal construct. But it touches again upon the set idea of a woman confined within the hegemonic world of a man.

My home is in the centre of your palms

Sunk in the wells of your destiny

That you carry like a liquid in your eyes

Home /Pleasure /23

Vinita often compares herself to a tree. Plant life vibrates in her, metaphorically. Sometimes birds too give her company. “This broken home is like a chopped tree trunk /Showing rings of life ruthlessly axed” (Home /Pleasure)

Her poetic journey seems to be a saga of broken life; hope and broken hope, leading to hopelessness throughout her poetic journey.

Come nearer

Let me show you the age around my eyes

and the very little time they have left, to hold their shape.

It's all about her eyes, seeing her through her eyes what she has become, meaning what "I am" (Eye Am /Pleasure /25)

The images of trees and flowers used as metaphors, carried into the self of the poet often conspire to take her to decay and death, to the autumns of life. Autumn was favourite to the Bengali poet Jibanananda Das.

Despite loess caressing the roots
and the damp, earthy aroma of trees,
a brokenness clings to the winds;

Time Lag /Pleasure/27

On this autumn connection a famous haiku of Matsuo Basho, the 17th century Japanese poet, comes to mind; how he in a single line imaged the death and decay of autumn. Poet Tagore also gave such an example of autumn haiku by Basho: "On a bare branch a crow is perched - autumn evening".

While reviewing her first book of poems I compared her pessimistic vision of life as *Shunyata*. Even amidst sorrows and pains and deaths we rejoice the sweetest songs in them, they are so intimate to human heart. Faith in nihilism resembling something like shunyata exists in Vinita Agrawal's poetry as she has full sympathy with Buddhist ideas. But after the first book, journeying through this sleek volume of poems, from childhood love through remembering her mother's passing, the fate of the have-nots and womanhood, linking them to her personal life leading up to the autumn decay and death, I find a process of decadence in her poetic thought process. Grief and glum, decadence and defeat leading to ideas of death are preponderant in her poems. What I wrote while writing on the poems of K.K. Srivastava has resemblance here, "Here the pains of life becomes the verve for creation, the convictions of truth as he experiences turns to poetic fervour, his poetry though brings sadness, is convincing, rhythmic and artistic." 1

I like the poetry of Vinita Agrawal for their imagery, subtle insinuations and depth of feeling, apart from the other things discussed.

References

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Bio

Aju Mukhopadhyay, settled in Pondicherry, is a bilingual award winning poet, author and critic, writes fictions and essays too. He has authored 30 books and received several poetry awards from India and USA besides other honours. He has published two volumes of short stories some of which have been chosen for noted anthologies. He has contributed essays on literary and environmental subjects in more than 50 scholarly books. He is a member of the Research Board of Advisors of the American Biographical Institute and registered in the Who’s Who of Sahitya Akademi, India. He is Vice President of the Guild of Indian English Writers, Editors and Critics. A member of many national literary and environmental institutions, he is also published as writer on animals, wildlife, Nature and Environment.

He has so far published seven books of poems in English besides two in Bangla. One more book of poems is ready for publication. Eight books contain critique on his poetry among others besides such critiques on his poetry and fiction scattered in several magazines. His poems may be broadly categorised in three groups: On Nature, poems with spiritual overtone and feelings and poems on social, political subjects, some of which may be categorised as rants. He is very subjective in his subtle feelings and expressions. He is known as one of the noted writers of Haiku and such genres of poetry from India. Such works by him has been published in many international magazines and ezines. His haiku has been specially chosen by some editors and awarded ranks on merits. Quite a few of his poems of the Japanese variety have been published in international anthologies and collections. He has his poems published in 16 anthologies which

include two recent publications one of which is an Indo-Australian anthology of poems by three poets each from Indian and Australia, titled Poetic Conventions. He edited some literary magazines in Bangla and is placed in the Editorial Board and Advisory Board of some literary journals for Indian English writing. As Guest Editor he edited <http://twenty20journal.com>, an American Ezine for its Indian Edition; Summer Issue No. 3, 2011.

Besides the awards many of his poetic works have been acclaimed and honoured like one of his poems remaining at the top of the list of poems in www.asianamericanpoetry.com from December 2007 for about three months and inclusion of his poem in the list of top ten recent poems by www.Poetsindia.com. Lucidity Poetry Journal from Sugar Land, USA has awarded him Certificate of Merit for his poem, “Structural Violence” in June 2011. The American Biographical Institute offered him the American Order of Merit.

Following are the books of poems published by him in English. The Witness Tree, In Celebration of Nature, The Paper Boat, Insect’s Nest and Other Poems, Aju Mukhopadhyay’s Poems on Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, Short Verse Vast Universe and Short Verse Delight. The last two are books of Haiku and Tanka with some essays on the subject of Japanese short verses.