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POETRY FROM SHILLONG

Anjum Hasan. *Street on the Hill*. New Delhi: UBS Publishers' Distributors, 2004.

I started reading Anjum Hasan's poems hoping to find a routine book of poetry that requires a routine review, but to my pleasant surprise, I found this book extraordinarily delightful. After thoroughly enjoying this reading experience, I think I would rather express my understanding and interpretation than write a review. One thing that impresses me when I read Anjum Hasan's poems is the pristine quality of her verse and her light-hearted humour.

In Anjum Hasan's anthology of poems *Street on the Hill*, thirty six poems are mapped out in 5 sections titled 'Time of My Childhood,' 'Families,' 'Small Town,' 'Where I Now Live,' and 'A Place Like Water.' The first section has no prominent thematic unity except that it discusses a variety of childhood experiences. In these poems the female persona passionately recalls her childhood days and culls out memories of things around her like the middle class home, a dark room which a child fears to tread, childhood associations with people on the street, winter holidays, loneliness in childhood, convent school, the Bihari pakoriwallah, the mother seen in a child's heart, and so on. A tinge of irony and humour endows all that she places before us with a lasting impact. In "*June Night in a Middle-class Home*" she makes a graphic presentation of the lifelessness of a middle class home on a summer night. The lifelessness is seen in bedrooms with 'medicines and shelves of yellow-paged novels,' the girls who have lost their grand dreams,' children who grew up impatiently and also in kitchens that have an awful smell. The lifelessness is contrasted with the only life-like thing in the home:

The only thing like life is pushing
Under the skin of the still potato,
Under the zinnia's tight bud (4)

“*Dark Room*” is a poem that symbolizes the refuge adolescents seek in order to escape embarrassments caused by adults, as well as anxiety about becoming adults who ‘speak in tired vowels and practice deceit’ (5). “*Time of My Childhood*” lists the persona’s associations from childhood like the monkey trainer and knife-grinder, ‘women who led wordless lives, men who ran sweetshops in faded black ties.’ In her poems Anjum Hasan makes familiar images new again in the way she thoughtfully renders them, viz, “I was orange’s sour Novemberness” (“*Mister Language*,” 7). Later in this poem the poet’s itch for writing a poem at the age of seven itself probably makes her the ‘orange’s sour Novemberness.’ Orange, a recurring image in this book, is the sole winter fruit that is paralleled here with the poet’s loneliness in childhood. Loneliness in this poem receives an apt description in her act of ‘waiting, / face pressed between bars, for something nameless, / forgotten, remembered from the womb’ (7).

“*Coming of Age in a Convent School*” is different from other poems in its mood, particularly in the sense that the recurrent brooding solitude in several other poems is gone here. There is an unspoiled humour in the manner in which Anjum sketches memories of her adolescent years in a convent school. I particularly enjoyed reading the last three lines of the poem:

This is the year I realize that there are only,
Only women in the entire school building
And am astounded at the thought (8-9).

In the above lines there is a touch of irony that topples down notions of adolescent girls’ preoccupation with sexuality. The next poem “*Learn!*” to me seems to narrate the story of a film in which the children protect and keep a stranger hidden until the police take him away. The poetic personae feel betrayed because of their ‘affection for unreal things’ (10).

“*Neighbourhood*” makes use of a telegraphic style of verse that reflects the persona’s excitement at finding a Bihari

pakoriwallah making love to an unknown woman in front of her house. She calls it an ‘amazing act’ and ‘different’ and admires his ‘half-hour island of the defiant passion on the steps of somebody’s house,’ while there is chaos and an abusive atmosphere around him (12). There is honesty in the poet’s perception and she presents unadulterated truths in her poetry, the voice of which has the potential to evoke universal response. An example of such poetic voice is “*In my Mother’s Clothes*,” which traces the adult female persona’s thoughts on how it felt to wear her mother’s clothes. It gives her the unique feeling of being ‘neither myself nor my mother’ but rather like the six – year old who ‘slips on to her fingers her mother’s gold rings’ (13). There is an element of revelation here when she says that the act of wearing her mother’s clothes makes her neither a mother nor herself, but takes her on a journey down the memory lane to her childhood. Is this mix of adult and child consciousness responsible for her poetry being so unspoiled and untouched?

The second section ‘Families’ consists of eight poems. In “*My Folks*” the poet characterizes certain uncharacteristic qualities of her clan / folks, who despite having ‘hills in their blood’ seem to be moving out of the hills, and who, despite being story tellers ‘with vast memories’ have ‘no name-plates.’ Hence they are in a place and yet far away ‘to another place and time’ (17). They are extraordinary because they can never do ordinary things like ‘lose shyness’ or ‘build houses unselfconsciously’ or ‘live outside books.’ Could we say that in the poem “*England*” there is a diasporic touch in the speaker’s nostalgia for England, the country she leaves as a child for the ‘small hill town’? Images of England preserved in several artifacts seem to slowly vanish away:

Images from
childhood turned island as images around them were eaten
away (19).

and then ‘we became other people.’ Thus the poem ends in its travail for nostalgia of England with anathema:

This idiotic recollecting, this tender ache just below our
breathing – what should we do with England?’ (19).

In “*Shy*” Anjum’s examination of shyness is strong and the poem characterizes shyness as ‘quivering emotion’ associated with ‘quiet bedrooms on winter afternoons in near-forgotten, hill encircled towns, where children lisped tentative answers to the question of some serene matriarch, and ate, anguished by undistinguishable crunching, the brittle butter biscuits from her tins.’ Once again attitudes about shyness have undergone a sea change:

There’s no longer the implication
of grace in being reserved (20).

Even the simple idea of ‘ordinary days’ turns special and regains colour in the hands of this poet who writes that ‘we are the sum of our ordinary days’ (22).

The anthology contains refreshing reminiscences of Shillong, a hill town where Anjum spent much of her life as a student. “*To the Chinese Restaurant*” recalls the time spent by youth in a Chinese restaurant to while away the boredom of their small township. “*November Haiku*” is another poem of a hill town’s winter, with ‘early dark tumbling from leaf to cherry leaf’ (25).

“*Boats*” seems to be a kind of surreal poem that depicts dreams of the subconscious for fulfillment of the heart’s hopes. In “*Families*” families with ‘things’ and the ‘thingless families’ are brought under a simultaneous scrutiny and comparison. ‘Families with things’ are “steeped in recollection and / private wit, in shopping bags, records, curtains, letters, / our things – in lieu of, to fill in, give weight to,” whereas the ‘thingless families’ are characterized as “the straw-haired children who build / their make-believe home in a disused jeep trailer” and by the ‘one-bed empty house’ (27).

'Small Town,' is the third part of Anjum's collection that begins with a poem that typifies a woman writing a poem. The persona of "*The Pregnant Woman*" traces her experience of the aches rather than the joys of pregnancy, in which she states that:

She isn't ill
But in the night her child lies awake inside her.
That's like being ill. Not knowing
What your body is thinking. (31)

I find each of Anjum's poems to be a snippet that traces a minuscule thought on tiny but significant issues like pregnancy, people's idiosyncrasies, life in a small town, etc. In "Afternoon in the Beauty Parlour" the poet makes a valid point about where 'genuine sisterhood' lies – in a convent? maternity wards? the beauty parlour? Yet the ironic view that culminates in this exploration is that it lies not in a convent or maternity ward but in the beauty parlour, which is a 'good place to grow old in' and 'where jealousy, men and untruthful mirrors / are denied entrance' (33).

The two poems "*Small Town*" and "*Hills*" describe the quality of a small hill town with the smallness of the people and their indifferent attitude. The first poem sketches a sporting goods store owner who has an opinion about a 'man knifed and left to die with his face down / in a drain,' but who however 'shuts his door and sleeps' (35). The second one contrasts the attitude of the hill people with the grandeur and solemnity of the hills. It describes the quality of the hills from varied angles – as 'home,' as 'rabid, / the small people fighting their toy fights / but drawing real blood,' 'the tomfoolery of the houses,' and at night time revealing the 'romance of lights' (37). In contrast, the attitude of one hill town's people is viewed against the backdrop of the attitude of another hill, which has witnessed the humility of the emperor Tipu Sultan, who never thought that he owned the hill near Mysore.

The next two poems “*March*” and “*Songs of the Fruit*” bring out a very imaginative description of the seasons. March is seen as a transitional month from winter to spring and autumn is seen as breaking into winter. The poems follow the various fruit seasons that are typical of hill topography. The hill scenes depicted reveal Shillong viewed in its varied hues and shades of nature. The last poem in the section “*Mawlai*,” describes in a nostalgic tone an area in Shillong called Mawlai, which one crosses daily on the way to the North - Eastern Hill University. The poem captures the unchanging nature of the familiar scenes one sees from the NEHU bus while crossing Mawlai, viz ‘mauve beef hanging in its pockets of fat’ or ‘the new houses and old houses where the same sort of people lived’, and so on. The whole irony of passing for 17 years through a place, where they never really got off’ or ‘bought things from its shops’ or ‘stepped into someone’s boiled vegetables-smelling houses’ is noteworthy. It brings out the divide between the passers-by and the area they dare not explore. Hence the last three lines bring out the idea of the place as a blot or a blank spot in one’s memory of Shillong:

We’ll keep quiet

then
and try to ignore that sense which is not pain but has
pain’s
cloudliness
and its regret and its way of going and returning (42).

The fourth section ‘Where I Now Live,’ commencing with the poem of the same title, effectively reflects the divide in the persona between her alienation and her longing to be part of the life around her. Though she says:

I long to be part of the sweat and the sunshine,
The vinegar and blood of people together anywhere (46),

She is ‘ill at ease’ and ‘like a parachute on fire’ or ‘this cloud somebody tore up,’ she is bound to be alone. “*Kitchen*” renders a detached description of the Indian kitchen--its frightening sameness, its cocooning comfort. Her metaphorical associations with the

kitchen ring true: 'my grandmother's crinkled skin on my fingers,' and 'one hungry voice in my ear' (46). Again 'To fashion life into a thing eaten, worked / slept away, to meet despair with tea, / to be like your mother' illustrates the women's lives spent all in the kitchen. However, the final lines bring out the contrast between the arbitrariness of the kitchen and the detachment of the observer:

My kitchen will not hold me, will not
teach me the good in repetition.
I will be a doubting woman
with an unreasonable love
for shining adjectives. (48)

"*Gluttony*" identifies a vivid memory of the food cravings one had earlier, and its reverse now--'the dreams of having 'chicken noodles with crisp cabbage' or 'thinking being older will make up for the times we've said no / at a party when we meant a loud craven yes' (51), reveals the idea of gluttony taken with a pinch of salt. However, with age the persona is anxious to see anything other than food as seen in her lines: 'all we want is a clearing somewhere / like a page in a book suddenly without words.' "*Holiday*" has a tinge of irony when the detached poet - observer makes note of a holiday her friends from a vast city have in 'a dirty town at the base of a hill,' with its 'white-haired waterfalls.' Equations are worked with the play of light and darkness, tidy and untidy, pure and impure between the little town and the vast city, with the inhabitants of the town blank, hungry, tacky and those from the city full of deceit, flashy and rich. "*Rishikesh*" paints in prose a sardonic picture of the sad state of another hill place where tourists throng. The prose form in verse suits the mood of the poem that tells indirectly that there is nothing great or sacred about Rishikesh, where 'religion is touched with the mud of poetry.'

'A Place Like Water' constitutes the final part of this anthology. The final set of six poems serve as a quiet finale to the whole poetic anthology, with their silent ruminations on the 'real sea,' the 'wet city,' 'food of love,' and 'yellow curtains' and so on.

Each one of these poems etches a sensation, a feeling and a train of associations that deviate from the routine processes of thought on these issues. For instance, in “*Beach Town: Off Season*” one finds that the sea with its commercial attractions has become unreal and artificial. So the persona longs for the real sea, ‘beyond the exterior of things that want / but ought not to hold us’ (58). Similarly, curtains in “*Yellow Curtains*” bring with it associations with ‘acts of selfishness’ which turn the house neat, guileless, middle class’ and so seem to be like ‘iron curtains that create a divide between the haves and have-nots.

Anjum Hasan has a great future as an Indian English poet. Her poems are well-crafted and express a depth and ingenuity uniquely characteristic of poets like Nissim Ezekiel and A.K. Ramanujan. The poetic texture and the diction in her poems reveal the great capacity of this artist, who is not only a poet but also a novelist in the making. This first anthology published by Sahitya Akademi speaks volumes of the great potential in Anjum Hasan, who, perhaps because of her exposure to philosophy (as a student) and to literature, has successfully brought out not only poems but also a novel.

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