

Rubana Huq, ed. *The Golden Treasury of Writers Workshop Poetry*. Kolkata: Writers Workshop, 2008. 410pp. ISBN 978-81-8157-801-3.

What do A.K. Ramanujan, Agha Shahid Ali, Feroz Ahmed ud Din, Gopal R. Honnalere, Keki N. Daruwalla, Kshitij Mohan, Meena Alexander, Mamang Dai, Nissim Ezekiel, Ruskin Bond, Shama Futehally, Suniti Namjoshi, Uma Parameswaran, Vikram Seth and Yamini Krishnamurti have in common? Well, at some point in their lives they all saw their creative and poetic urge in print within the covers of a Writers Workshop book. Indian Writing in English (or Indo-Anglian writing as it was then called) has come a long way from its uncertain beginnings, and since the founding of this non-profit and non-political institution (Writers Workshop) in Calcutta way back in 1958. As stated in its motto, Writers Workshop consisted of “a group of writers who agree in principle that English has proved its ability, as a language, to play a creative role in Indian literature, through transcreation from India, the Commonwealth and other English-using territories.”

The present book under review is an appropriate tribute to the completion of fifty years of Writers Workshop and with ninety six poets under one cover (some big names now, others faded into oblivion after the first flush of their creative muse) stands as a proof of the role that Writers Workshop played on the “pace and space” of the poets. For several years it was the only platform that most writers of Indo-Anglian literature had. The poetry that was born out of national politics, peasantry, and folklore infused with the coloniser’s tongue sounded different and assumed a separate identity and this was the only platform for self-expression. Professor Purushottama Lal (more well-known as P. Lal) offers at the beginning of the anthology a brief introduction defining the “credo” of Writers Workshop where we get a brief history of how this enterprise of alternative publishing survived without plush foundations to back it, without advertisement, and without large-hearted patrons; how he had to lecture in many Western countries and convert the hard-earned remuneration into resources to sustain his dream publication venture – “pumping the shekels thus earned to keep alive a gasping ideal” as he explains.

As mentioned earlier, some of the poets included in this anthology have become world-famous; others have either drifted to more materialistic concerns of life or have never published poetry again. For instance, a poet like Feroz Ahmed ud Din from Bangladesh had published only one book of poems in 1975 and had never been discussed ever again; someone like artist Praseet Sen, who called his poetry “visuals,” and has only one volume of poems to his credit before he died in Bombay in his early fifties; writers like Amitava Kumar who forayed into the world of prose writing after his 1996 volume *No Tears for NRI*, and has now joined the bandwagon of diasporic academics in the United States; the famous danseuse Yamini Krishnamurti who wanted to combine her poetry in words which was very occasional with her “poetry” of movement and gesture; the economist Sekhar Aiyar who works at the IMF in Washington DC and published his only volume of poems in 1998; or a young poet like Vihang Naik whose latest books of poetry have been reviewed by *The Journal of Poetry Society(India)* and *Indian Literature* of Sahitya Akademi and whose first book

of poems, *City Times and Other Poems*, had been an instant success in 1993, and who today thanks Writers Workshop for the platform, adding “brand publishing houses are shying away from poetry publishing. This is how one feels/justifies the existence of WW.”

All these poets share the same space with people such as Tilottama Rajan (daughter of the novelist, critic, poet and academic Balachandra Rajan who published her first book of verse at the age of sixteen and is now Professor of English and Theory at the University of Western Ontario, Canada); Debjani Chatterjee (born in Delhi and resident of UK, recently appointed Member of the Order of the British Empire [MBE] in 2008), Suniti Namjoshi (who also lives in the UK), Kamala Das (recognised now as one of India’s foremost poets, who introduced herself in her biographical note in the first WW volume *The Decendants* thus: “Born 1934. Education – nothing to speak of. Married to Madhava Das, with three sons. I write short stories in Malayalam. Health – poor. I cannot think of anything else to say about myself”; the poet-painter Jane Bhandari who was born in Scotland, educated in England and has lived in India for the last 35 years; the multilingual Gauri Deshpande who voiced definite feminist concerns in her work; or the Sri Lankan poet Jean Arasanayagam whose latter-day poetry focus on encounters, journeys, personal conflicts and relationships, and whose Writers Workshop poem entitled “Colonizer/Colonized” depicts a postcolonial angst:

The blood of the colonizer that runs
In my veins is also the blood of the
Colonized, an island invaded,
An island raped
Subjugated/victim,
Conqueror/victimizer.

There are also female poets in the volume, such as Monika Varma, Ira De, Tapati Mookerji, and Lakshmi Kannan, of whom little is known. One is delighted to encounter in the volume some early poems of Ramanujan; the nostalgia for his homeland, Kashmir, in Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry; the now famous lines of Kamala Das: “I speak three languages, dream in two, write in one”; the bald wit of the gay poet Hoshang Merchant; the diasporic angst in early Meena Alexander; the cynic strain of Daud Haider, the renowned poet of Bangladesh, as translated by Lila Roy; the declaration by Pritish Nandy, “you cannot escape the waters that cradle you”; the confusion of the Australian academic-poet Syd Harrex (“In the alphabets of India,/ which letter should I select/ as an entrée to discovery?”); the simplicity of Ruskin Bond (“As I walked home last night/ I saw a lone fox dancing in the cold moonlight.”); the “Morning Prayer” of Nissim Ezekiel (“God grant me privacy/ Secretive as the mole,/ Inaccessibility,/ But only of the soul”); or selections from Vikram Seth’s “Mappings” who was hailed by Professor Lal to be writing at least a decade ahead of his times.

I would do an injustice to the editor, Rubana Huq, if I did not mention the handsomely produced and special layout pattern of the anthology. Dedicated to her

three English professors at the University of Dhaka and to Professor P. Lal, like all Writers Workshop books it has the ubiquitous handloom sari cover with the golden colour calligraphied title embossed on it; but within the covers all the pages are done in the manner of a collage with photographed material where the old biographies, the poems themselves and also the current positions of the poets are juxtaposed very artistically to give us a feel of the vintage value of this collection. According to the editor, this attempt to do a special layout “would talk of history, to history and engage readers to travel through the picture gallery captured by a five-year old JVC camera presenting images of the original collection that may help all become a virtual partner of the less quoted pages of time” (17). The endeavour of course comes with its share of technical glitches when, for instance, the biography of Jane Bhandari (112) gets superimposed beneath the serious-looking sketch of Joe Winter’s face (126). Haq’s personal endeavour to trace out the current location and status of some of these writers is also commendable.

One of the most interesting aspects of this anthology is the inclusion of the responses of several poets to the questionnaire that Professor P. Lal sent to them. This was related to the charge that the Bengali poet and critic Buddhadev Bose made against Indian writing in English calling it “the inconceivable loss of a mother tongue” (25). So A.K. Ramanujan is annoyed and states, “As someone professionally concerned with language, such statements do not make much sense to me. It may be because I am not sufficiently literary to understand what men of letters say about language” (25). Adil Jussawalla admits that he didn’t know poetry in any other language and berates Bose for either “not having done his homework” or for lacking “a vision of history that ignores the results of two of its most significant events: large-scale migration and large-scale colonialism” (34). From the tongue-in-cheek reply of Arvind Krishna Mehrotra stating that he wrote in English “because that language offered more scope to my emotions... the question is like asking why do you wear a black coat and not a red one” (56), to Deb Kumar Das’s declaration that “Mr. Bose has missed the point of Indo-Anglian poetry completely; so completely, in fact, that one wonders if he was interested in understanding it” (76), to Gieve Patel’s statement that “we are not concerned with being appreciated in England or the United States, but in our own country” (94), to Gopal R. Honnalgere who felt that “the early poets were Indians trying to be Englishmen in Calcutta whereas the modern ones are aware that they are Indian writing in English” (99), to the matter of fact way in which Keki N. Daruwalla asserts “why a foreigner cannot change or re-create a language” (138), to Kamala Das stating, “English being the most familiar, we use it. That is all.... Language has no colour prejudice and it does not observe the rigid rules of narrow patriotism. It serves anybody who chooses to serve it” (148-49); the readers can clearly evaluate the feeling of the difficult times through which Indian poetry in English had to tread and also the sincere conviction with which these poets went on writing in the genre. So when Saleem Peeradina speaks of not subscribing to the “mother-tongue” myth, stating “My tongue is that in which I can best express myself,” or when Prithvi Nandy replies in an angry tone:

Yes, Indian writing in English is the result of Anglomania in the same sense that such writing in Bengali is the result of Bengalomania.... According to Buddhadeva Bose, a London plumber is a native because he hears English in the streets; however much I love English and feel in it I am foredoomed to foreignness because I learnt the language, not picked it up... (282)

one feels the sense of unity that prevails among creative minds in a multilingual and multicultural nation as India.

Some of the poets in this anthology get just a page or two for their poetry whereas others are allotted greater space. Though the choice of poets for any collection is always a subjective one, the editor seeks apology for all omissions and makes it clear that she has essentially chosen “poems and not particularly the poets, the music and not the craft, the magic and not the mundane, the spirit and not the flesh” (17). She even reiterates what Arvind Krishna Mehrotra opined in the preface of his 2002 anthology, *The Oxford Indian Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets*, “no literary history can be expected to cover everything” (17). We as readers also feel the insufficiency even though we do get a taste of the kind of Indian poetry in English the ninety six poets have contributed for the last fifty years. So even if one is not a person with a poetic bend of mind, one would surely love to possess this limited copy collector’s item which, apart from the poems themselves, is a historical document of a specific genre among the several unique literary movements in India. The last few lines of Uma Parameswaran’s poem, “For P. Lal,” written in July 2008 especially for this volume, is a glowing tribute that perhaps all the poets published by Writers Workshop over the last fifty years would like to acknowledge in a collective voice:

We who were present at your table, and we who were not,
Remember you today:
Tulamiah Mohiddeen, binder;
P.K. Aditya, print setter and machinist;
Shyamashree Devi, the woman behind the man
seated at the head, Purushottama Lal,
who gave us the wherewithal to walk our first steps.

We who were at your table and we who were not,
Give you our greetings, our thanks.

Somdatta Mandal
Visva-Bharati University, India

© Copyright 2009 Asiatic, ISSN 1985-3106
<http://asiatic.iium.edu.my>
<http://asiatic.iu.edu.my>
International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)