

Dipika Mukherjee, *The Palimpsest of Exile*. Alberta: Rubicon Press, 2009. 34 pp. ISBN 978-0-9809278-9-4.

This is a small, elegant, and beautifully designed book. Not quite papyrus, not quite parchment, not quite scraped-again, but nearly so. The centaurian typeface makes for easy reading and the photographs – *yes*, there are photographs here, and very appealing too – make one feel as if it would be a blasphemy to not find some significant meaning embedded in the poems, the words, which are carefully lain in measured lines on about twenty-four pages. The poems are divided into five distinct sections: “The Palimpsest of Exile” (1 poem), “American Angst” (4 poems), “Affectionately Amsterdam” (3 poems), “Malaysian Musings” (1 poem in two parts), and “India in My Soul” (8 poems). I am assuming the title of the book itself – *The Palimpsest of Exile* – mirrors *all* the poems and therefore gives them their underlying frames.

Of course, the two words which stand out in the book’s title – “palimpsest” and “exile” – are *not* simple words: they invite all manner of engagement/s and their complexities of meaning have been discussed and reflected upon from Freud to Derrida with the likes of Barthes following in several footsteps. This is not the place to discuss the sophisticated scholarship which beckons the more literary-minded among us and we can thus safely leave the more extended examination of these poems and their unusual/unique placements to our professional critics and academics. But we do need to discuss some of this book’s wonderful challenges!

The author of this delightful collection (it’s her first) is known to many of us in the fields of post-colonial/new writing: she will not mind the current reviewer stating that apart from being vivacious, she also incorporates within her corporeal frame an exquisite hint of spiritual reaching-out. What I mean is that in many different and interesting ways Dipika Mukherjee is a tease, and teasers usually meet with myriad reactions and responses – as I suspect the poems in this book will. The very use of this daunting word “palimpsest” (I asked my creative writing students – 45 of them – what the word meant and not one, not one, knew!) can be seen as the opening tease(r). The photograph which hits us as we open the book shows vast horizons, merging-land, sea and sky feature, making the human rightfully small, almost inconsequential (one is reminded of the great landscape artists of classical China). The opening poem tells us:

the palimpsest of exile is an afflicted volume,
pages filled with erasures,
silverfish slivering sentences, sui generis.

So this is a unique rendering, and we are blessed because the author has provided for us the key to the book's overall point: to experience, albeit uniquely, the "affliction," the "pages filled with erasures," which comprise the palimpsest of exile. Even if we find the alliteration of "silverfish slivering sentences, sui generis" a little overwhelming (as I do) we cannot but muse over the poet's deliberate search for such. This poem opens with a reference to that tormented icon of post-colonial/new writing, Naipaul:

Naipaul said: *To be a writer, that noble thing,
I felt I had to leave.
Actually to write, I had to return.*

The paradox herein contains that sense of "exile," the sense of being divided between the writer and the writing. Mukherjee's own displacements, like Naipaul whom she must have some admiration for, both make her happy and not-happy (sadness is another matter). The affliction, I suppose, resides in the experiential; the incessant need to "up-and-go," to find "home" wherever and however. This divorce from the physical which grounds us and the spiritual which sustains us must become, at some point certainly, the focus of acute anxiety/anxieties. Perhaps this is why our poet ruefully says:

Tracing shadows, inking them real..
I know not why we go
travelling timezones

until homes are the milestones,
in the solstice and eclipse,
waxing and waning, of self.

Home and Self: do we find our "self" in our "home"? This is, apart from its obviously rhetorical stance, the theme of Mukherjee's poems. The theme is a question, indeed many questions, because it encompasses so many different shades, contains so many diverse points and counterpoints, demonstrates so many contrasting emotions and feelings. Like all of us who travel, criss-crossing timezones, our history is frequently shaped by our geography/geographies – in this sense our poet is sharing with us a global, a universal experience; an experience which can only best be described as "exile" and uniquely so – a palimpsest. How does memory take hold of the multitudinal, the minutiae and convert these into viable anchors for the spirit experiencing dis-location?

The opening poem in the "American Angst" section pointedly tells us that even the simple act of wearing clothes (what, how, why) becomes an issue

because one is never, really, prepared for the surprises and the shocks of change as it impacts on our individual sensibility. Hence

A tongue protrudes in anxious anticipation
of spilling instead of blending.

In our contemporary sense of being genuinely “global” we are encouraged to blend, to blend *in*, but the poet astutely realises that this is not an easy process, even given a choice (for many among us don’t have the luxury of choice as we find ourselves displaced, in exile!). The poem “Foreign Passport” which describes the harrowing experience of the poet’s son being interrogated by the American official/s specifically narrates an incident which compels the utterance:

When they took my nine-year-old son to a barricaded place, the
noise of O’Hare airport was drowned by the rushing of my blood.

I like O’Hare airport; I think it’s one of the world’s best airports. But the place itself transforms into a monster if what we go through turns hellish as it does here for the mother anxiously questioning the intimidation of her son. To travel itself is relatively easy; to blend is an altogether different story.

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