

Bashabi Fraser, *The Homing Bird*. Devon, UK: Indigo Dreams, 2017. 34 pp. ISBN 13: 978-1-910834-34-3.

Rabindranath Tagore emphasised that life and society could reach to the highest realms of freedom if they actively endeavoured “to solve the problem of mutual relationship” (Tagore, “Freedom” 628). Bashabi Fraser’s *The Homing Bird* is, to put it in the words of Tagore used elsewhere, “a harmonious blending of voice, gesture and movement, words and action, in which [Fraser’s] generosity of conduct is expressed” (Tagore, “Creative Unity” 495). In her collection, Fraser, through the canvas of fourteen poems, has judiciously addressed the necessity of adhering to the integrating spirit of human unity, mutual-understanding, love and respect in this world, interrogating at once the divisive forces of society.

With a deep insight into Partition and its miseries through the experiences of her scholar parents, Fraser’s *The Homing Bird* addresses the abysmal issues of a history charred by violence, pain, loss, “(un)-belonging” (Fraser, “The Crossing” 16), memory and nostalgia of a “displaced multitude” (“The Crossing” 17) due to the senseless imposition of the “lines of interpretation” (*The Homing Bird* 20). She, like the Female Muse of Creativity, emphasises love, fellow-feeling and cosmopolitanism, interrogating the existence of “shadow lines” (Fraser, *Tartan & Turban* 51) which partition nations. The reader of *The Homing Bird* can easily decipher that as a transnational writer Fraser has been successful in weaving the cultures of the East and the West towards a creative ideal, authenticating her formidable creativity and apt awareness as a “progressive writer” (Hasan xiii).

As writing is an activism for a writer to express her/his political standpoint, ideology, worldview, dreams, visions and ideas through a harmonious fusion with imagination (Dasgupta, “Surviving”), *The Homing Bird* not only decodes and interrogates the act of the “one-man commission, cutting/a nation with a knife-edged pen/In the privacy of his room” (“The Homing Bird” 6), but also reverberates with the resonant spirit of liberty, multiculturalism and togetherness, as poetry is the other tongue that shadows the languages of humanity (Fraser, *Images of Life* 24) beyond barriers. In the introductory poem, “The Homing Bird,” the poet is in dialogue with Kolkata and Edinburgh, “Kolkata do you miss me?,” “But have you accepted me, Edinburgh?” (“The Homing Bird” 5, 12). Through a graphic description of “the second city of Empire” and the “City of Literature” (“The Homing Bird” 9, 13), Fraser has euphonically conjured a poignant narrative between the two cultures. Through memories of the Raj, partition and her childhood in Part I of this poem she creates a nostalgic aura for the “city of contrasting histories” (“The Homing Bird” 10), while in Part II she as one of the “post-midnight children” (“The Homing Bird” 11) with a global spirit embraced Edinburgh, the “intimate city” (“The Homing Bird” 12) with an “urban inspiration” as an “embodiment of strength” (“The Homing Bird” 13) for voicing

her “thoughts in celebratory confetti/ Over this city, to merge with its cloud canopy/ And dissolve with its rare sunlight,/ Suffusing my lines with the skyline of Edinburgh” (“The Homing Bird” 14). “Anchoring Aesthetics” is the next poem, where the poet recreates personal “reminiscences of a distant life” through the “warm friendship” of the Bengali Cultural Association, to whom the poem is dedicated, who interconnected “Through the dancing rhythms of time” a nostalgic quintessence that anchored and replenished the poet in her life (“Anchoring Aesthetics” 15).

In the poems “This Border” and “Walled-In: Walled-Out,” we observe the poet firmly interrogating the segregating spirit (“Walled-In: Walled-Out” 18) ushered in due to the implementation of “strange lines” (“This Border” 16) which construct “one shared past with two histories” (“This Border” 16) and spaces to cocoon oneself against “the territory of his enemy” (“Walled-In: Walled-Out” 18). The anger against such an “irrational division” (“Introduction,” *Bengal Partition* 4) metamorphoses into a prophetic sermon when the poet urges humanity to “remove walls from minds/ Discovering bonds in human kind” (“Walled-In: Walled-Out” 19) for a life of “friendship and families” (“This Border” 16). The poet’s spirit of debriefing continues in “This Difference” and “In my India.” In the former, she nostalgically champions amicable memories of association over differences which are “carefully architecture[d]” (“This Difference” 20) among humanity “enflaming friction” (“This Difference” 20), competition, neglecting nature’s integral continuity; in the latter, she recollects blissful times of her parents in India when education sharpened reason to prosper with “the Spirit of Rabindranath/ In tune with Gandhiji’s tolerance” (“In my India” 25, 26), but laments on the total loss of all values of federation. The loss of aesthetic and moral values, fellow-feeling and compassion in present India not only bereaves the poet but also obliges her to interrogate and demand “Give me back *my* India!” (“In My India” 26), India as it was in the time of her parents. Between these poems there is “India Calls,” lauding the “multi-ethnic vast nation/An unparalleled diversity” (“India Calls” 22) where the old and the new exist together echoing the spirit of *vasudaibhakutumbakum* towards a progressive future through “a land reform movement/ About better distribution,/ About social service, about destroying/ Corruption by dreaming idealists” (“In My India” 26).

“Fog on Hill Cart Road” and “Fog on M8” are sequel poems, as are “Cricket – Eastern Style” and “Cricket in Sussex.” In the former pair, we explore an uncanny, chilling sensation through the imagery of the fog – on one hand it is “slurping round/ The shadowy bends/ Its black humour” (“Fog on Hill Cart Road” 27) while, on the other, it is a “cold smoke-/ Slithering tongues/ From a demonic/ Cauldron” (“Fog on M8” 28). In the latter pair of poems we explore a graphic depiction of an Indian roadside cricket which are played by “the batsmen/ Of the future” (“Cricket – Eastern Style” 31) and watch with much

awe and vigour, along with an English cricket signifying the game and its intercontinental importance beyond the English boundaries. “The Midnight Calls” attests to memory and association being timeless, psychological and it can never be curbed, disconnected by imaginary walls. This poignant poem emphasises the truth that people residing in “one half of the reeling globe” (“The Midnight Calls” 30), far away from home, remain connected to their roots, fearing the “midnight and small hour calls” (“The Midnight Calls” 30) bringing in the sad message of a near associate who has departed.

The concluding poem of the volume, “Home,” bears a note of internationalism above and beyond barriers, along with personal overtones. Irrespective of one’s far residing space, “home” remains a space of warmth and nostalgic memories. Artistically decorated with vibrant images from the world of flora and fauna, this poem not only enthrals the heart of the readers, but also provides solace to a mind away from home, as was the effect of the nightingale’s song upon Keats. While most of the poems in this collection embark on the ideas and associated painful, nostalgic memories of Partition and implementation of borders leading to the creation of the “other” through the formation of separate nation states, the concluding section of this poem emphasises the necessity among human beings to encompass the spirit of togetherness, which has been epitomised through the poet’s mother when she “welcomes other guests through/ Her open door” (“Home” 33). The poet’s mother, like Mother Nature, warmly embraces every child nurturing her/him without any discordance and division for a progressive future of humanity. Besides recollecting a personal memory of her mother’s life to which the poet was an eye witness, the concluding sentence of the poem designates the poet’s despondency on the spirit of togetherness ceasing to exist amongst humanity after her mother’s earthly departure.

The Homing Bird is a concurrent study of two cultures, nostalgia, memories for a long desired “home”/“space” bereft of dissension. Employing simple words bearing powerful expressions Bashabi Fraser, the cosmopolitan poet, has created an aura guided by her vision, ardent conviction and foresight. The poet has successfully created a Dantesque odyssey for the reader to explore a solace within their self, after experiencing the desolation of Partition externally created, sowed among humanity; in the concluding section, by unravelling her mother’s gesture similar to Christ the Redeemer [Rio de Janeiro]. Her mother becomes the Female Messiah, whose was a life of inspiration on the principles of unity and fellowship. At par is the cover of the monograph as a signifier of the pervading spirit of nostalgia, memories and an odyssey “hand in hand” as “the heaven of union lies ahead” (Dasgupta, *Swades* 63).

Works Cited

- Dasgupta, Sanjukta, trans. *Swades: Rabindranath Tagore's Patriotic Songs*. Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2013.
- . "Surviving in My World: Growing of Dalit in Bengal." YouTube, 30 November 2015. Web. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_NQuevxbcpY. 21 July 2017.
- Fraser, Bashabi. *Tartan & Turban*. Edinburgh: Luarth Press, 2004.
- . "Introduction." *Bengal Partition Stories: An Unclosed Chapter*. Ed. Bashabi Fraser. U.K.: Anthem Press, 2006. 1-57.
- . "Introduction." *Images of Life: Creative and Other Forms of Writing*. Ed. Saptarshi Mallick. Kolkata: The Book World, 2014. 17-32.
- . "The Crossing and the Conflict Zone: The Sense of (Un-) Belonging in Bengal Partition Stories." *Partition Literature: An Open Praxis*. Ed. Srideep Mukherjee and Manan Kumar Mandal. Kolkata: Netaji Subhas Open University, 2016. 16-21.
- . *The Homing Bird*. UK: Indigo Dreams, 2017.
- Hasan, Mushirul. "Foreword." *Bengal Partition Stories: An Unclosed Chapter*. Ed. Bashabi Fraser. UK: Anthem Press, 2006. xiii-xvii.
- Tagore, Rabindranath, "Creative Unity." *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*. Ed. Sisir Kumar Das. Vol. 2. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996. 493-569.
- . "Freedom." *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*. Ed. Nityapriya Ghosh. Vol. 4. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2007. 627-28.

Saptarshi Mallick
St. Xavier's College, Burdwan
Email: saptarshieng@gmail.com