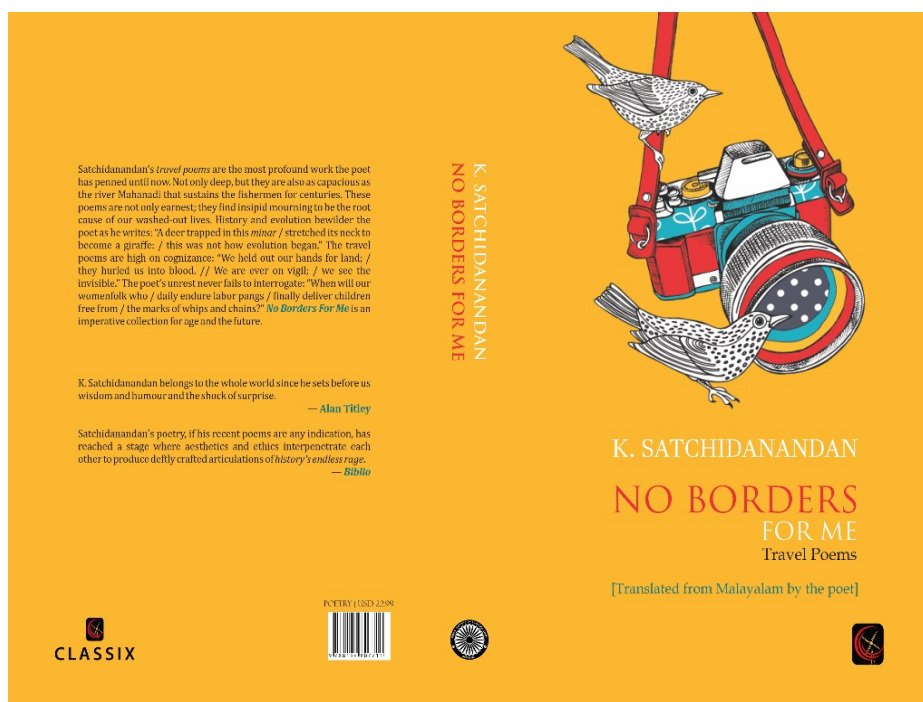


K. Satchidanandan. *No Borders for Me*. New Delhi: CLASSIX (an Imprint of Hawakal), 2021. 280 pp. ISBN: 978-81-948077-1-1



No Borders for Me is a collection of travel poems by the internationally acclaimed poet and academic K. Satchidanandan (1946-). It is a deep and delightful exploration into the idea of “alternative geographies” (i). Lyrics, language, melody, cultural memories, epiphanies, and mystical visions come together to create this extensive collection originally written in Malayalam. The book arrives at a time when several nations around the world have plunged into despair due to the viral wave of Covid-19. The book, without being didactic, teaches us to venerate the pleasure of travel and practice enduring values of love, tolerance, and cultural diversity. Readers are transported to the temples of Konark, Orissa, lanes of Italy, walls of Germany, heartlands of Bihar, and several other nations, cities, hotel rooms, rivers, mountains, grasslands, waterfalls; each place is a name, a memory, a fragrance of stories that only an intuitive traveller can express.

The book begins with an erudite Introduction, “Alternative Geographies: Thoughts on Travel Poetry.” It is bound to remind one of John Rennie Short’s books, *Alternative Geographies* (2000). The poet writes an extensive and scholarly

essay on the “specific poetics pertaining to travel poetry (i).” The essay is rich with critical inputs like, “Travel poems, unlike most travelogues in prose, prove that we are reservoirs of non-linear, non-temporal, non-spatial memories” (v). The essay highlights the essence of travel in poetry; from Valmiki’s *Ramayana* to Homer’s *Odyssey*; from the sea-faring English bards to Johnathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*; from Omar Khayyam (1048-1131) to the conceptions by Henri Lefebvre (1901-91) and Stephen Greenblatt(1943-). However, such ideas are not required for an initiated reader of poetry. Predictably, the poet offers an explanation: “The mystery of poetry is hard to domesticate and any attempt to explain, categorise and demystify it is certain to remain incomplete” (xiii).

The poems begin at the section titled, ‘From Indian Sketches.’ One may assume that the poet indulges in an Oriental celebration of the East. Instead, the poems are scathing socio-political narratives on the marginal yet, vital, ordinary folks who populate India.

The geographical expanse illustrated in the poems are local and global; rooted in place and placeless-ness; home and the world. The poet like a Sufi, like a dervish in swirls, embraces India, America, the UK, Russia, Macedonia, Albania, Italy, Orissa, Bengal, Bihar, Karnataka and his very own Kerala. Some of the poems like ‘Distances,’ ‘The Bridge,’ ‘The Snow,’ ‘The Language of Poets,’ and ‘Fragments’ are abundant in philosophical and philanthropic messages. The purpose of travel is not to behold but to absorb, grow, and transform one’s soul:

You write a script for a film
 unlikely to be played in an
 abandoned theatre in Beirut;
 it is full of the heart beats of ghost. (51)

On all the faces I see Malayalam,
 the birds of Malayalam flying,
 twisting and turning, like its consonants,
 ‘ka’, ‘kha’, ‘ga’, ‘gha.’ (53)

Everyday a heart breaks
 Poetry gushes out
 and clots. (67)

No Borders for Me presents not a poet but a consciousness, the state of tabula rasa. The narrative voice not only belongs to an internationally acclaimed poet who has ripened his craft with time but also to a child who offers refreshing ways of comprehending life. The voice is of a lively sage who will not let life melt into thin air or be sacrificed to the hatred among civilizations. We live in a technocratic age where there is a systematic marginalisation of Liberal Arts; focussed approach is forfeited to constant digital alerts and skill is preferred over knowledge. How may a book like *No Borders for Me* make a difference?

No Borders for Me does exactly what “alternative geographies” (i) do. It give us a perspective. We see language as the seed of civilisation, culture, architecture, fashion, relationships, and even economy. The beginning was not fire, music, vibrations but a word:

The alphabet rose from the earth,
 its mane ablaze in the sky,
 to begin its ceaseless journey
 into poetry. (180)

The book will be very useful in enriching soft skills of young students. It can be an excellent academic companion for teachers who conduct classes on personality development, emotional intelligence, leadership skills, and alternative ways of learning about the world. The textbook bound knowledge about the self and society is deemed to be challenged, once young readers see the world through the senses of the poet. The poet can hear the stones sing; in his imagination, the “elephant” becomes the “night” and to him “creation is an accident/and God an invention (271, 227).” It would be suitable here to quote a few lines from the poem, “The Berlin Wall,”—a reminder of boundaries, beauty, and birth:

Only the Rhine flowed on,
 receiving blood and ashes
 like an elegy for the abuse of power.
 River, show us that ceaseless spring
 of love you were born from,
 the dream-world at your bottom
 where identities don’t turn into walls
 and beliefs into gas chambers,
 the bellows of the beginning,
 the sacred future that turns red-hot
 in that smithy like pure rose. (195)

The most joyous aspect of the book is the gentle and almost impalpable presence of the poet. The poetic voice is self-less, free from judgement, and one that “seeks his own Buddha” (243). The narrator is a traveller and more than a flaneur; he, like the Romantic poets, pursues the magical in the mundane. Unlike many other contemporary poets, K. Satchidanandan has mastered the craft of dissolving into his own language. The poet is like the wind rustling through leaves at night. He is free like a bird in a lush valley. The poems are hungry for experiences and transformations. This does not mean that the poet is a nomad on a mission to relive his nostalgia for some kind of Utopia. Often his voice and observations remind one of the early Indian travellers, poets, and scholars like Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), Mirra Alfassa (1873-1973), James Cousins (1873-1956), Dilip Kumar Roy (1897-1980), and Taraknath Das (1884-1958). All of them, as illustrated in the pioneering book, *Cosmopolitan Modernity in Early 20th-Century*

India, (2015, First Edition) by Sachidananda Mohanty, established possibilities of a new kind of cosmopolitanism, citizenship, and twentieth-century modernity through travel, mysticism, and friendships.

No Borders for Me is contemporary yet rooted in traditional rhetoric and structures of poetry. The poems are effortless, and are a brilliant display of K. Satchidanandan's fluid style. His language is economic and tender. There is no attempt at any grandiose display of words. In his poems, the truth is only a fragrance, and not the finale. The collection is an excellent subject for research in Translation Studies; one that could interrogate the process and craft of integrating the sweetness of Malayalam into the rigour of British English. The book might not come across as avant-garde or satisfy the taste of readers looking to solve puzzling poetic tropes, architectural complexities, far-fetched metaphors, startling line breaks and astonishing turns in content. The poems call for emotional and sensuous appreciation of poetry. They have a Keatsian ability to recreate rich and memorable synesthetic experiences. K. Satchidanandan like Pablo Neruda (1904-73) is rooted in the songs of the soil. The lyricism and melody of the poems come from a poet who is ready to soak the world in all its gore and glory. The book is a must for readers who are looking for words that could make one teach, not preach; imagine but not fancy; dare to voyage, yet stay at home and above all, cherish beauty with responsibility.

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