

**“AND KNOW THE PLACE FOR THE FIRST TIME”: FOREWORD TO ANURAAG SHARMA, « PAPA AND OTHER POEMS »**

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The voice of Anuraag Sharma that eloquently resounds in this volume is but one of the author's multiple voices as dramatist, translator, critic and, in the avatar which here concerns us, poet. In this his latest collection of poems, the reader encounters images that crystallise or expand around human relations, ties of kinship and friendship, as exemplified in the father-son relationship that gives the book its title. Private epiphanies flash into consciousness to illuminate and transcend a public world that has failed to deliver on its promises and has burnt itself out: still, through the word, the poet strives to make sense of disparate lives, others' and his own.

The locus of many of the poems is recognisably subcontinental, but the reader should not expect to find a hyperspecific instance of 'Indian poetry': Anuraag Sharma resembles a Satish Verma rather than a Jayanta Mahapatra, with Indian motifs appearing in order to ground the poems in a determinate time and place rather than to adumbrate a full-scale critique of Indian realities. Certainly, scattered across the volume we find lexical Indianisms from a variety of registers, among them 'mohalla', 'peepal', 'Parijat', 'samskaras', 'kurtas', or 'charminars' - as also evocations of the Indian cultural heritage, as in the poem 'The Century just gone by', which speaks of the Ajanta caves and of Dhrithrashtra from the *Mahabharata*. However, if we take the poem 'Evening at Pushkar', set at the celebrated site in Rajasthan, we find lexical markers of 'Indianness' such as 'baboo', 'ghats', 'Pooja', 'mantras' and 'hina', yet the subtitle is 'For Les Murray': the poem is addressed to the distinguished Australian poet, and seems less the record of an intercultural encounter than an elegiac tribute to friendship, to its fugitive moments of intimacy whose seal it is the poet's task to press down ('the day / thus documented / countersigned by evening'). Comparably, 'A Morning Walk (For Ilu)' includes such autochthonous signifiers as 'neem leaves' and 'varandah', as well as 'little fluffy squirrels' (which those who know India will recognise as neither the grey nor the red squirrels of the West but the piebald homegrown variety); nonetheless, the poem's dynamic spreads outward from the Indian and local ('varandah' is in any case originally a Portuguese word and thus not exclusively Indian) and embraces the universal, concluding: 'The earth is all performance and a promise. / Vision is the otherness, anotherness and a wish'.

The Indian poet seeking universality may feel his aim is best served writing in English: poetry is notoriously hard to translate, and English will ensure the poet not only an international platform but a pan-Indian audience without recourse to translation. Nonetheless, that same Indian poet will be conscious of pressure, both internal and external, to adapt and bend the language of the former colonial rulers to the subcontinental context – this even though he aspires to a vision that transcends the local, for universality as perceived in English by an Indian poet cannot and should not be exactly the same universality as that experienced through that same language's filter by the poet's British, or Canadian, or Australian counterpart. In addition, in Anuraag Sharma's poetic world we also find non-Indian cultural references – an epigraph from Charles Baudelaire via T.S. Eliot ('Mon semblable, mon frère!') and allusions to Greco-Roman mythology (Sisyphus, Prometheus) and, more than

once, to the Christian iconography. Different cultural universes are thus placed in dialogue, not antagonism, with each other.

Logically, then, we should expect to see the English language refashioned – albeit within the bounds of accessibility – in Anuraag Sharma’s hands, and that is indeed what happens. On the one hand, we find shining new examples of such expected poetic devices as alliteration and assonance (‘weeping the hot wax within’; ‘The mirror shows its back / blackened, glossy and blessing’), or enjambement (‘I look into the sky of your / friend’s colour across the / boundary wall’). On the other hand, we also encounter sparkling wordplay that stretches and tests the limits of the language: ‘pulling and pulleying’, ‘tearing the envelope of an enveloping darkness’, ‘An across is first a through, / then beyond ... then gone’. In the last-cited case, prepositions become nouns and the rules of English burst open like a ripe pomegranate.

Many of these poems are encounters of one and another kind, and even if we hear only the poet’s own voice they are less monologues than halves of an implicit dialogue. Thus, in the closing poem, ‘Andrea redeemed’, the poetic ‘I’ appears as that of a man addressing his life’s partner, thus celebrating the dialogue that is the poem as a form of human union (‘as the micro-moony one / On your finger tip is mine / mine only ...’). Also of particular significance here is ‘Papa In O.T.’, addressed to the speaker’s father and thus attuned to the volume’s chosen title. The speaker declares: ‘There is a there / where you are; here is a here when / let me go then / I and I ...’. As Wordsworth famously said, the child is father of the man. Through something as basic as the father-son relationship, Anuraag Sharma constitutes poetry as a privileged means of understanding both other and self. Reading his poems, we may follow in the footsteps of the T.S. Eliot of ‘Little Gidding’, and, with the poet as our guide, indeed ‘not cease from exploration’ until, finally:

... the end of our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.