

Eastern Muse: Poems from the East and North-East India, edited by Malsawmi Jacob and Jaydeep Sarangi

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Within the staggering diversity of literary and cultural forms, what makes way for the particular power of poetry is, perhaps, its apparent innocuity. Minor, fluid and unassuming, poetry can gently but steadily make its way into, through and across structures of power and authority, seep into their fault lines and relentlessly make room for questions. On account of its generic marginality, the transgressive potential of poetry is less obvious and less acknowledged, though history remains witness to the fact that the clarion call for its most important revolutions were first articulated in poetry. Poetry, for Matthew Arnold, was a criticism of life and one realises that every worthy poem is a statement about the world, a worldview that advances a distinct ideological position from which to understand and interrogate it. A good anthology of poems, by that logic, would constitute a pluriverse of voices unweaving the world's tapestry in a rich riot of perspectives and offering collectively a unique window upon life and our particular place in it. *Eastern Muse: Poems from the East and North-East India*, edited by Malsawmi Jacob and Jaydeep Sarangi, is an anthology that does just that.

Divided into two sections, "Poems from East India" and "Poems from North-East India", this pioneering collection offers a careful selection of more than 150 poems by 27 talented poets across almost 11 Indian states and their diaspora. While "Poems from East India" brings together selected poets from Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and the diaspora of these states, "Poems from North-East India" showcases a selection of poems from the eight states of North-Eastern India, namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. Within the pages of this book,



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illustrious and well-known names in Indian English Poetry such as Jayanta Mahapatra, Tabish Khair, Mamang Dai, Sanjukta Dasgupta, Bibhu Padhi, Bashabi Frazer, Shanta Acharya, Easterine Kire and Robin S. Ngangom are found alongside equally powerful but lesser documented poetic voices, rendering the collection a valued possession for readers who desire to be acquainted with the writings of a wide spectrum of Indian poets, both mainstream and not. One confronts here an astounding range of forms, themes, moods, styles and linguistic registers. Geography, history, economy, politics, society, culture, ecology: every sphere of human experience undergoes in these pages an intensely personal poetic interrogation that leads the reader to the essential question of both national and human identity. What, in fact, may be undeniably concluded from a close reading of *Eastern Muse* is its strong investment in a decolonial poetics of identity.

Identity, one realises, is an extremely tricky notion that both affiliates and separates. On the one hand, identity establishes a pattern or an equation of belonging to a group, whether family, clan, caste, class, profession, language, gender, sexuality or nation. On the other hand, establishing a pattern of belonging or affiliation with any one group would imply marking a distinctness or separation from other/s. How then should identity be negotiated so as to affirm one stance without negating another, to vouch allegiance for a particular group without othering someone else, while, at the same time, fostering a sense of community? The poets featured in this collection seem to find a way out in a decolonial articulation of identity whereby identity becomes a subjective narrative fleshed out through personal history, local geography, cultural memory and indigenous linguistic epistemologies rather than through overarching identifications with grand, Eurocentric theoretical models. For every poet in this anthology, the evils of colonisation are not just alive but have been compounded by the seductive narratives of neoliberalism in the postcolonial spaces that they inhabit. They see the transnational logic of free market capitalism as an inherently neocolonial strategy whereby postcolonial elites collaborate with Western authoritative structures to perpetuate control and domination. It is through such a decolonial awareness of contemporary cultural politics that the satire of this volume is inspired and sharpened. The irrationalities, hypocrisies, inequalities and injustices of their everyday world become for these poets significant points of transgressive poetic entry to explore questions of capitalist hegemony and the illegitimacy of the neocolonial episteme.

In Bashabi Frazer's "Barbed Wire", for instance, the barbed wire that stands for powerful, impenetrable national borders and is "born of the vision of nationalist assertion" ends up becoming a detestable symbol of Man's "well-deserved prison state" (32). Similarly, in Tabish Khair's "Immigrant", which bases itself on Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*, the poet-speaker sceptically wonders if in trading his voice for a new pair of legs, the bargain struck has been fair enough. Sharmila Ray, in "I've Forgotten How to Write a Love Poem ...", laments the impossibility of intimate communication in a world riddled by uncertainties and violence. Jaydeep Sarangi's "Alienation", in construing alienation as a "disease", very subtly conjures the

subalternity of Dalits in the Indian culturescape. In “The Unbearable Tyranny of Not Knowing”, Guru T. Ladakhi poignantly documents the alarming rate of suicide in Sikkim, crafting out of the sombre reality of unexplained deaths a powerful poem that “melt[s] us all into islands” and urges us, in both resignation and protest, “to burn all your broken things/ burn them without a word” (138). “A Tale of a Sleeping Village”, by Sanjukta Dasgupta, embodies a trenchant criticism of the rise of militant insurgency in India’s rural pockets and the victimisation of deep-seated innocence by ruthless power. Dasgupta writes:

Simple villagers grew guns that year
Learnt to press fingers on triggers
While the ploughs gathered dust (77)

In her poem, “Consumed”, the Shakespearean sentiment “All the world’s a stage” undergoes a bitter capitalist rewriting as “All the world’s a shopping mall/ All men and women big shoppers” (80). Rabindra K. Swain’s “The Prime Minister” presents through scalding satire the apathy of those in power and their voluntary blindness to “the woes of his toes walking miles/ on the piles of dry blades of paddy” (58). Saroj K. Padhi, in his poem, “Elusive Monsoon”, compares the monsoon’s betrayal of the promise of rain to the deception of “self-proclaimed God-Gurus/ who outraged million maidens in the name of a religion” (88). Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih’s poem, “Jalebi”, brilliantly satirises the roundabout neoliberal jargon in saying,

don’t we think, twisting round and round;
don’t we speak, twisting round and round;
don’t we act, twisting round and round,
like *jalebi*? (146)

A large number of poems here draw the reader’s attention to the issue of gender inequality that inheres in the Indian socio-cultural fabric. Shanta Acharya’s “Loose Talk”, for instance, offers a powerful revisionist-feminist take on history. The poet writes, “With tongues of fire I speak / for grandmothers and mothers in silent revolt,/ for daughters and sisters striving to be heard/ lending my voice, sharing our story” (92). In Lalnunsanga Ralte’s “Optional”, the poet laments the “curse” his government has given him by obliging him to put his futile father’s name on all valuable documents, while the name of the mother who raised him to be what he prides himself on, becomes optional, “superfluous, apologetic” (154). Mamang Dai’s “The Sorrow of Women” describes the insecurities and tragedies that are the particular lot of women in a world where concerns “about escape,/ about liberty, men and guns./ Ah! The urgency for survival” (179) rule. In Tashi Chopel’s “The Construct”, “The women/ screaming for better sense/ Are slapped into silence/and latched behind doors” (223). Tiamerenla Monalisa Changkija’s “Take This Name” draws its theme from the Ao custom dictating that a married woman’s name must be returned to her family, clan and village after her death, and the poet crafts out of it a piece as profound as it is satirical:

Take this name,
take it.
Like all women,
with nothing left to give,
that's the only possession/that can be returned. (248)

While poems such as those of Eastern Kire, Tapati Baruah Kashyap and Malsawmi Jacobs evoke human experiences from a deep ecological standpoint, several other poems such as Robin S. Ngangom's "The Quest as Beginning" and Mamang Dai's "Man and Brother" use local myths and legends to interpret the relationship between nature and the human world and to chart a way for the future vis-à-vis the traditions and wisdom of the past. Again, there are poems such as Mona Zote's "Anti-lovepoem" and "An Impression of Being Alive" that brilliantly evoke the barrenness of the present by positing it against a horizon of possibilities that never happen: "We have learned/nothing. You wisely add:/ Really,/ there was nothing to/ learn" (201).

"But words have lost their wings" (264), writes Malsawmi Jacobs in her poem, "The Forgotten", while Sarangi believes, as he writes in "The Trusted Army", that "[p]oets shake hands with green grammars of the land" (115). In all, one realises the monumental editorial efforts that must have gone into shaping an anthology as deep, inspiring and powerful as *Eastern Muse* and which will go a long way towards making words winged again and towards laying down a denser poetic grammar for the world to engage in.

Biography

Basudhara Roy teaches poetry, women's writing and postmodern criticism in the Department of English at Karim City College, Jamshedpur, Jharkhand, India. She has been an alumnus of Banaras Hindu University and holds a PhD in diaspora women's writing. As an academic, reviewer and poet, her work has been widely published. She is the author of two books, a monograph, *Migrations of Hope: A Study of the Short Fiction of Three Indian American Writers* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2019) and a collection of poems, *Moon in My Teacup* (Kolkata: Writer's Workshop, 2019).