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Sonnet Mondal's Karmic Chanting – An Elusive Interlude into Sublime

Ashwani Kumar · Wednesday, October 23rd, 2019

Among the contemporary Anglophone poets in India, Sonnet Mondal is the most sublime and elegiac voice of human predicament and a rare poet of pure awareness. His recent anthology *Karmic Chanting* (Copper Coin, New Delhi, 2018) is a poetic autobiography of the journey of the self and satyagraha in the dark times.

In his 'ink and line' drawn zebra-shaped non-metric sonnet like verses, he navigates us through the transcendental expansion of creative possibilities of realising terrible and elevational elements of the life and death in its purest forms. No wonder, in his poem "Who Am I," his 'obsession to know / who am I / lingers like the sun setting beneath the wings / vagrant birds / emerging from nowhere / vanishing into nowhere.' It seems like as if his verses are born out of an interplay between Upanishadic bliss and Hegelian sublimation. Beginning with "Tushar's Apartment at Malabar Hills in Mumbai," Sonnet's seventy poems in *Karmic Chanting* are rooted in a primal, authentic Indian self and constantly expand our awareness about ever-wider realities of life after life in its sacred and sensuous forms. That's why we are not surprised when critics and poets discover a strange but intimately joyous twittering of voices of Rumi, Kahlil Gibran, Walt Whitman or Robert Frost in his verses. This intercultural hymnal linguistic reverie adds a luminous, and lyrical 'melancholic rust' to deeply meditative and philosophical poems in the volume. Further, the informal musicality of syntactical movements and tender verbal tonalities of his verses signify his masterly grasp over what he calls 'an anonymous cosmos,' where the fragments of life have a strong power of visual evocation and the cosmos revels in the most startling disguises of truth of unknown. And 'the urge to live…flies like an ambitious eagle,' in the words of the poet. There is no turn to 'periphrastic genitive' or hilarious shading of vernacular with Anglophone voice—everything is direct yet layering the language enough to forge a transcultural identity of the poet. There is no artificial 'table-beat' or convoluted harmonium-sounds; Sonnet is arbiter of his own identity with a caveat that 'the only similarity amongst us is/we are all different'. Guess, poets from Indian languages listening to him. The use of short, blunt lines produces anti-climactic effects. Sometimes line-breaks are haphazard, but tensile enough to affirm ascetic renunciation of daily experiences. If there is no shock, there is also no melodrama here. The announcement of the poem is often so elegant so fluid that language of his poetry becomes 'a trifling dot in the infinity.'

Like a wandering Bengali mystic, he can be philosophical on anything, even in "Strange Meetings" where he ponders 'A fleeting joy / With Gnawing pangs / Of apprehension / The stretch between / Experience and fear / Seems like the time taken by a fish / To reveal and conceal itself. / In front of the fish hook.' Drawing on esoteric joys of everyday life, his verses take us to a

heightened consciousness about the artistic possibility of poetry as emancipatory experience; ‘there are eyes behind your vision / from which you can’t escape.’ Each of his verse is filled with self-annihilatory autonomy, and emotionally indeterminate immediacy simultaneously. For instance, in his poem “Locked,” he wonders aloud about why ‘Sometimes / the iron in a lock / must be thinking / Why was I moulded / into something as such.’ The world of appearance in his poetry is often a dwelling place for deferred mediation on total freedom. Consider his poem “Beginnings” where he says ‘When I walk barefoot, pressing / ageless soil and gravel, / I try to think of the moment / when the earth war reared from ashes.’ Poems like “Grandma,” “Answer Me, Ma,” and “Grandfather” are a canyon of remembrances of a child who leads a double life that involves a superficial surrender to temptations of adult life and a secret longing for motherly-mescaline experiences of childhood. The anti-Oedipal instincts of his poems lead him to blurry the distinction between human and non-human as he says rather bluntly ‘we deserve to be on a par with animals and insects’ in the poem “We Deserve a Jungle.”

Through aesthetic experiences of wrinkled silence and languorous forgetting, he comes across in his poem “Left-Out Love” as a naturalized self-stylist of the highest order in the sense of erasing unattractive and regenerating beautiful. ‘When realizing the known / seems beyond the bounds of hope / we depend on the unknown.’ And ‘we no longer remain / a subject of our choices,’ he gently avers in his preferred mode of satyagraha. He does raise his voice against the injustices of war and xenophobia in poems like “No body Speaks of You, Syria,” “The Syrian Children,” and “Differences,” but most of the time his ‘solitary muse’ refuses to get directly involved in the conformational politics of the day. This is paradoxically predictable, for absorbing the sizzling heat of both the oven and season, Sonnet practices what philosopher Søren Kierkegaard called ‘impossible faith’ for humanizing our multiple fragmented selves colluding with each other. In this process of unpacking of our strange desires and identities, Sonnet speaks to fragility and precariousness of our existence and the accompanying voices of his verses are psychotically energetic ‘like defeated soldiers banished from the duchy of blood.’ Thus, this refusal to smell ‘the world without light’ is in part deliberate and arbitrary too.

What makes Sonnet a cerebral primitive mystic and a pragmatic Buddhist in *Karmic Chanting* is the lyrical, luminous cadence of his authorial voice—eternal and transitory simultaneously. His verses are utterly convincing and surprising creating a new grammar of poetic language. Free from the clutter of multiple voices, or verbal trickery of real-unreal rage, his verses paralyze us with the immediacy of a dream-like voice, so demotic, so lunatic that haunts us, and also takes us on spiritual adventures into encyclopaedic inventory of hypnotic images, and startling colours of strange desires. Consider this profoundly powerful and disturbingly quiet violence of two-line short parable-poem “Why” in which he bluntly probes ‘Why does life seem / like the skyline impressions of an aircraft’. What gives narrative momentum in the verse is his uncanny emotional directness about the love, longing and betrayal and his philosophical undressing of the most mundane human experiences. For instance, his poem “Aperture” is less about exterior reality; it’s about expanding our understanding of ‘the unknown inside-vast, virgin’. To illuminate this, he further says that it is ‘just functional amnesia and secret nostalgia. / Your shadow would pull out of you. / And so, would the eyes be spading your hush.’

In the pop-Foucauldian world view, wicked mistranslation of concealed political truths is the most destructive literary power. That’s why a sinister grace in his poem “Talaq Talaq Talaq” embraces you in the ghostly corner of power politics, or how else you recall ‘the four plastic sunflowers’ in his bedroom that tempted his girlfriend to bring ‘new plastic flowers’ into his room. ‘No matter how much you camouflage,’ he admits in a Laconian twist that ‘some icy words from your slithery

tongue / would always reveal you / publicizing your confessions.' And Sonnet has mastered this art of mistranslation with a painterly eye, and through perception, both inward and outward. I am told that like Rimbaud he also started composing fictional verses at the age of seven and ran away with 'forests, sun, riverbanks,' his favorite poetic escapades. In *Karmic Chanting*, he demonstrates that he creates dense, granular verses from carefully layered narratives, making use of an array of literary devices—flashbacks, multiple time-in schemes, and ambiguous plots through slippages. It is exceptional in contemporary Anglophone poetry, where most of the poets are busy arranging words in monosyllabic order and also repeating cliched throwbacks from the cyborgs. Most of us are prisoners of our own catastrophic confessions, but Sonnet leads us into surrealistic landscapes of freedom where Gods beg before humans for redemption. This is what makes his poetry so humanizing and utterly charming. In short, *Karmic Chanting* is an unmediated meditation, a daring ambiguity about the multiple worlds we inhabit and the fragmented selves we inherit from our collective past. If he has managed to pull it off, it is largely because he relies on 'stealth and invisibility' in his Karmic journeys across the world.

Karmic Chanting unmistakably marks the arrival of a 'philosopher-poet' in the contemporary Anglophone poetry in India. Call it a poetry of 'mystical and cosmic' lyric movements or 'the charity of wilderness,' as the poet himself qualifies it, Sonnet Mondal is uniquely his own voice, whose words drift like 'a stranded kite / between the melodious and the mysterious'—and his unfinished poems end up 'strolling, dancing, jumping like the Bauls of Bengal.' When I finished reading his poems I was emotionally overpowered by the 'floating chimeras and shining instincts like sunbeams on river skin' and started 'fading out with rains,' untimely torrential rains. Thus, in the end I was left with no choice but hear his soft, forbidden voice echoing in my hidden tomb in the Arabian sea. Are you surprised why in the concluding poem "Asides," Sonnet speaks of his own fate, and our destiny—'when I am here / there is a world locked inside me? / And when I am gone / my world would roam the earth'?

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