

Book Review

Review of *In the Labyrinth Poems*, Payal Nagpal, Signer, New Delhi, 2020 ISBN: 978-81-920134-5-9

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Volume II

Perspectives - A Peer-Reviewed, Bilingual, Interdisciplinary E-Journal

Janki Devi Memorial College

University of Delhi

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As 'Eng Lit' people, we are trained to have a critical eye when we review a text of any kind. One is expected to be detached, impersonal and objective. I have no quarrels with such expectations except when it comes to reviewing poetry. Poems either appeal to me or do not. And my reason is always personal. I cannot label a poem as good or bad in any way unless it is at the very technical level of form and language. Years of training take a backseat when I review poems and hence I do so only of poetry that I can 'feel'. Payal Nagpal's book of poems, *In the Labyrinth* is one such collection.

Language, words, expression, writing - indeed articulation itself, especially through the pen, and that as wielded by a woman, are at the core of Nagpal's poetic oeuvre. She is conscious of the power as well as the powerlessness of words and she uses them, sometimes with a disturbing impact but more often with wry humour. The opening poem is one of my favourites and speaks succinctly and sharply, from the initial lines 'I wield the pen / To write the unknown, unwritten' through, to the conclusion, 'Wish I could forge a weapon of hope, / There would be the stars, then, of my desire'. In seven beautifully crafted lines, the poem subtly moves between the energy that comes from 'wielding' a pen, the potential for it to be a 'weapon' and yet, the wistful understated realization that it can only be a 'wish'. The poet appears to be engrossed with the act of writing and there is an underlying sense of a yearning to be able to seize thought or capture a moment/ a persona through words in writing as we see in the poem 'Can words wrap moments?' There is a

kind of anxiety too in the (in) ability of words to be unable to contain time as time moves swiftly and words may become dated or may be able to only re-enact, possibly incompletely, a previously lived time as Nagpal wonders in ‘Do we stretch the boundary of words as we write?’ In the poem she asks whether we can forget new words ‘Or, are we all tied suffocatingly / In the mesh of this our world?’ In another, she frets at the way that words tumble; she speaks of trying ‘to catch them’ and how they ‘contain’ her, ‘tease’ her and ‘poke fun’ at her ‘timidity’. She wonders almost with a quiet desperation, ‘How long will I manage to keep the book / Closed?’

Anyone who has read TS Eliot’s ‘The Hollow Men’ will find echoes of the last stanza in the thought behind many of Nagpal’s poems. Just as Eliot refers to the ‘shadow’ that falls between ‘The idea / And the reality’ among other things, so too does Nagpal appear to be hemmed in by notions of the ideal from which she wants to break free and thus she says, ‘Voices shriek in my ears, / Critical, they remind me I am trapped’. The poet’s strong desire to be unrestrained is again captured in her question, ‘Can there be a space/Free of encumbrance- / Of the iffy yes and no?’ An abhorrence of societal conventions and taboos can be marked through the word ‘trap’ that features in her poems either specifically as in ‘Rule of convention or surge of mutuality?’ or again in, ‘Is love to be constrained? / Trapped in moorings’ or as part of the general tone in the backdrop. The poet can call a spade a spade as we see in her poem entitled ‘Is the stranglehold of custom sanity?’ where she points out the bitter truth that while custom may be seen as sanity, ‘It also shows how colourless custom is’. A soulful cry can be heard in the words ‘Will there be time and space / For us to meet? / without barriers / That poked into our lives / Like spokes from various known / Unknown insidious quarters?’ Freedom, to her, ‘is a small bird’ and it ‘chirps without stop’, flies to match the stride of the eagle, ‘swoops down / In a non –predatory flight / To the window sill’ and she watches it ‘grow in my mind’. A wonderful example of form and thought

woven together to create a symbolic picture. The poet wants to be free to be in a world where nothing is 'forbidden'. She says clearly in a poem that 'The forbidden tempts'. It tempts because she perceives spaces without boundaries as 'zones of hope'. The last poem in the collection sharply defines 'Utopia' for the poet as 'Where I can speak my mind'.

The freedom that the poet craves is the freedom to just *be*, to not be forced to fit in, to not subscribe to a prescriptive world. We see that in several of her poems with varied degrees of longing and assertion. Candidly she says at the end of one of her poems, 'But for once I do not want to fit in, / Do not aspire to obey. / I want to be edgy/So I could flow tangentially / To not belong to / The chalice/Mephistophilean?' In yet another poem, she talks about standing at the gate 'Feeling secure but deprived. / I pick the delectable fruits, / And rush forth / Escaping the predator's watchful gaze telling me / How women seldom cross these paths'. A strong indictment of societal norms that lay down rules to define a woman and her life is seen in her words 'Call it the body / That harbours two beings, / speaks two languages, / Programmatic, ritual born. / Social memory tells what to do, / What not.' She goes on to say, at the end of the poem, 'Voices emerge / Like tiny splinters / Busting age-old myths / Whispering to fellow travelers- / Grab those corners, this be woman, woman/ For owning, protecting'. A note of anger can be detected in the cry, 'Stop measuring her/In set milestones' in a poem where she mulls over the question as to whether a woman would ever be looked at as anything more than a chest box 'That which has stuffed in it / A husband and a few children?' The poem ends with the exhortation, 'Let her be seen as a woman'.

The poet explores Relationships and their intricacies, intimacy, solitude, grief, melancholy, loss and so much more through her words, almost like a surgeon with a scalpel. She unflinchingly uncovers the many layers that we are all cloaked by or with which we disguise reality. When one puts the book down, there is an understanding of what Nagpal says in her introduction to the

collection that while writing remains an act of betrayal, 'it is time to embrace the treachery and articulate the many voices'. Payal Nagpal takes us through the labyrinth of people and voices through her poems and as she says in her poem 'Muse', 'Muse/ Is treacherous/ It ever prompts space to become bigger', 'Showing /Secret spaces', 'I shall be lost in them/But emerge victorious one day'. In the way in which she crafts emotions into words, Nagpal is indeed victorious.

About the reviewer:

Swati Pal, Professor and Principal, Janki Devi Memorial College, University of Delhi, has been a Charles Wallace Scholar as well as the first Asian to receive the John McGrath Theatre Studies Scholarship at Edinburgh University.

Prof Pal is the author of several books on Theatre, creative and academic writing. Her newspaper articles articulate her views on education and her research in drama.

She is the Vice President of the Indian Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (IACLALS). Prof Pal has presented several papers at both national and international conferences and has been the recipient of several awards. She also translates from Hindi to English and writes poetry. *In Absentia* is a collection of poems written by her. (Hawakal Publishers, 2021)