

Book Review

Dust Decked Rainbow Quilts by Laksmisree Banerjee

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Review of *Dust Decked Rainbow Quilts* by Laksmisree Banerjee, Penprints, November 2023, pp103, Rs 250/-

Dust Decked Rainbow Quilts by its very title triggers the imagination in so many directions. There is an immediate visual image that comes to the mind and I for one was transported to my childhood where I could see my mother and my aunts laboriously piecing together patches of multi-hued cloth from clothes no longer being worn with the beautiful kantha stitch that Bengal is so famous for. In the folds of these patchwork quilts, often have I snuggled up to my mother or my elder sisters and heard all kinds of tales. So, the title itself made me so nostalgic for a past that now seems irretrievable.

All of us who love poetry have our own reasons for doing so- for some of us, the seductiveness of using language in a certain form and playing with words is perhaps most enticing; for some poetry is synonymous with romance; for others with deep spirituality; for some it is a channel for turbulent thoughts or for light and wonderful moments; and for many it is a form of therapy- both the writing as well as the reading of poetry. I would like to say that *Dust Decked Rainbow quilts* has all of these elements and more; it has something in it for everyone and will surely resonate with every individual who cares to read it. To give you some examples:

If you have ever wondered about life's mysteries as surely you must have and the nature of death, the poem 'Jigsaw' tells you how:

It comes sudden with stealth

This throttle and embrace of death

in one moment all ties snapped

in one moment we are free or trapped

In one moment so perplexing

Death becomes the apex of life...

beyond all understanding.

Now while ‘Jigsaw’ reflects upon time, life and death, ‘Chance Meeting’ has a different tone and is a deep connect with God and godliness. It talks about a chance encounter with a sad God who directs the poet to look within in search of God rather than try to figure out what God is composed of, through ascertaining caste, creed, colour and religion - the common markers of identity created by the human world we inhabit, which blurs what true spirituality. The poem ends with:

God reappeared in the skies blessing me

as I cried in joy , my hands stretched upward

Yes I have found him...I have found my answer

It is Love, love , love, the endless river of life.....

Not only is the poem spiritual, it is also a subtle critique of a world where intellectual discourses against caste, creed, colour and the like, have not succeeded in overthrowing the notions which have been sources of conflict rather than cohesiveness.

Again, to look into this wide canvas where Laksmishreeji paints pen pictures, I was delighted to come across the poetic rendering of a story that I have always loved, that of the Emperor's new clothes entitled 'The Naked Emperor'. The poem is scathing in its indictment of societal hypocrisy, sycophancy and the herd mentality of people through such descriptions as:

The crowds clapped and clapped and clapped

In unstoppable revelry at this royal nudity

and kissed his feet, though not quite reachable

Some were servile, others stupid and foxy

some obsequious, some perfidious

men of wisdom reduced to tomfoolery

all a part of this mindless chicanery....

and there is a certain almost delicious pleasure or even glee that one senses in the narrator when the poem ends with:

When suddenly a laughing child

awakened the delirious world

'Look, look', said he, 'the emperor has no clothes

And stones at last , at the very last, were hurled

What I especially also enjoyed was the fast-paced tempo and rhyme of the poem which was just right for the theme of the poem. At this point I do want to talk about Laksmisree Banerjee's use of language. You know it's a fact that the most effortless poetry and the simplest of lines come with immense crafting and I am always reminded of my undergraduate days when I was fascinated to learn about the length of time it took Keats to fashion those iconic and seemingly extremely simple lines, "*A thing of beauty/is a joy forever*".

Now I have no idea how much time Laksmisreeji has taken in moulding and sculpting each of her poems in *Dust Decked Rainbow Quilts* but I certainly found the wide range of poetic forms, the tone, the tenor and the rhythm of her poems brilliant. It is almost as if her mind and heart are quite like the trunk containing the patchwork quilts- a reservoir of thoughts in words that want to tumble down, trip along, dance, sway, hurtle onwards- and take you along through a storm of emotions.

I have mentioned the tempo and use of rhyme in 'The Naked Emperor' and I now want to mention the one line that the poet repeats in 'Two Souls in Company' (Mother and son). Apart from the concluding stanza, all other stanzas end with the line

On Park Street, that famous road of India

The line is haunting. All at once you see the symbolism of life, akin to a road leading you on and the many experiences you have as wayfarer. You have all kinds of nuances creeping in, from the cultural context of Park Street and the many stories housed in the various stops there be it the famous eatery, Flurys or the Park Hotel or Mocambo , Skyroom and well known schools and

colleges like Loreto House and St Xaviers that are located in the area- truly it evoked a riot of feelings in this reader who suddenly realized that indeed, Park Street lit up during Christmas is somewhat akin to a holy ritual. I think most Calcuttans will agree at the memory trip the name Park Street can make one go on.

In a very different tone is the poem that pays a tribute to Jayanta Mahapatra entitled ‘People’s Poet Jayanta Mahapatra In fond Memory’. There is wistfulness, gentleness and an insightfulness obviously stemming from a strong relationship with Jayanta Mahapatra that is woven into the lines such as:

Jayanta da...

you carried the human soul tenderly

on your back like a fond father

your arms cradling the body of life

the softness of smiles and aches

with your ever moist love.

You made nothing of nothingness

encased sorrows in coffers

of blazing vermillion sunshine

your scorched self could still

hold the incandescence

of a thousand lamps

There is a wonderful musicality in this and a number of other poems in the book and one sees the use of alliteration beginning of course within the title itself, *Dust Decked*, which undoubtedly aids in creating such harmony; so, ‘fond father’, ‘nothing of nothingness’, ‘scorched self’, ‘famished fishermen’, ‘slumbering selves’, ‘speaking silence’, ‘treasure troves’, ‘shredded soul’, ‘shunned and spurned’ these are a few examples of the lilt of the language used by the poet in this poem.

One of the most interesting sections of the collection was the section under ‘Ruminations’ called ‘Shorts’. When I read the short entitled ‘Smiles’, it was as if the poet was a kindred spirit. The poem talks about the numerous times that the poet has smiled through all the joys and vicissitudes of life and it ends with the lines “*The last milestone may just be/a stepping stone to reciprocity*”.

This immediately makes one recall smiles sent out that have gone unanswered and the yearning for reciprocity.

A short that bespoke inner strength and an undaunted spirit was ‘I dare to wear the sun’ which goes

I fight the night of black shadows

as the tangerine dawn arrives

showering its gold dust on me

I bathe in it saffron succulence

wrap around its light to invite

my eternal companion with heaps of hope

I do not pray as my soul breathes in it

my butterflies disperse the spectres

with the love of the melting sun

as I dare to wear the sun...

In this and many other poems we see so much use of colour literally and symbolically- black, tangerine, gold, saffron that one feels as if a painting is being created; the visual element is so creatively and so organically culled out by the poet. I cannot resist, in the same vein to quote the poem, *Blue*, which reads

Blueness is all/when the birds

flute and ether call

I run in ecstatic disarray—

enchanted blue

I embrace you

longing with ageless dreams

to explode in sapphire of ablutions...

love ever pulling at my seams

when the world is in haul

hoping for the rains to come

and wash away in streams

all the battlefields of hate and gall

Nothing escapes the eyes of this poet. She makes us travel with her ‘From London to Northampton’, she makes us listen to ‘Santhal Melodies in Viking space’, she brings us ‘JFK in Nairobi’ and so much more. These are all only a small example of that inner eye that Wordsworth spoke of so long ago, which is alive to every flicker in any part of the world. An eye that originates from a heart that throbs with response at every sight, word, movement, piece of art such as for example the poem dedicated to Vincent Van Gogh entitled ‘Sunflowers on display’. There is really such a natural fusion of all that the poet has encountered that one experiences an almost cosmic unity of all elements through the words of the poet.

Two poems deserve mention. One is ‘Siachen To our unknown soldiers’ and the other is ‘Cellular Jail of Andaman’.

‘Siachen’ begins and ends with the following verses

Sleety tempests come and go

rapidly along the edges of life

slithering through precipices

of night-watch and day-watch

blinking eyes on insurmountable heights

cruel frostbites and scorpion bites

we remain decided sentinels of freedom...

On the highest battlefield of this cold-hot world

we are the ones who script forgotten, illegible history

sing unsung heroic songs of bravery often erased

we are the ones who dance in the silence of doom

we live and die in anonymity, in glory gone silly

give up lives, families for our national family

still we remain ever decided sentinels of freedom....

This was truly one of the most poignant tributes that one has read for our unknown soldiers especially at Siachen. In similar vein, ‘Cellular Jail of Andaman’ is a testament to the valour of our freedom fighters and the poet tells us,

Today the Andaman Islands remain

mute witness to divisiveness across centuries

Nature captures in the fortress of history..

As or freedom fighters still bleed tirelessly

sleeping martyrs still wailing for travesty

in every seclusion of this Kalapani Jail...

Illuminating perennially/our hopes of a better day of Sunshine love...

If you haven't read Laksmisree Banerjee, do so. For you will surely find veritable pots of gold at the end of each of the rainbows that are her poems.