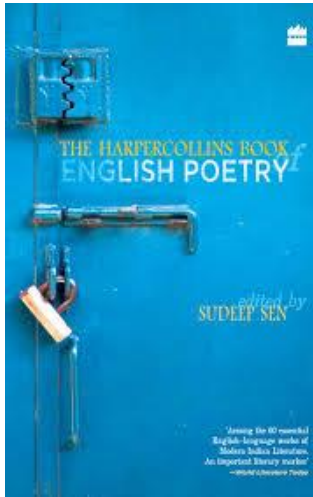


Kavita's Review of *The HarperCollins Book of English Poetry*, Writers' Hub

September 2012

This article was originally published in 2011 but was updated to coincide with publication of the book in 2012.



This phrase, borrowed from a poem, perfectly encapsulates what *The HarperCollins Book of English Poetry* [by Indians] has to offer. Published in July 2012, it is a fascinating peek into the consciousness of eighty contemporary poets.

India became a republic in 1950. In the sixty years since then, poets in India who write in English (one of India's twenty-two official languages) have been modernising their work in tune with the flow and fashions of poetry elsewhere. As in the rest of the world, this craft has mostly been sustained under-the-radar, with a few exceptions; and it has been unaffected by the limelight enjoyed by big-hitting fiction authors, while remaining within the category of 'Indian Writing in English' or 'English Writing by Indians' or whatever else this genre is to be called.

The poets who are represented in the pages of this particular anthology reside in India and also in the broader Indian Diasporas of the United States and Canada, the United Kingdom and Europe, Africa and Asia, and Australia and the Pacific. The publisher, HarperCollins, has made a deliberate decision to tie-in this anthology with a celebration of sixty years of India being a Republic and therefore the writers included are all born post-1950.

But what makes this anthology singular? One important factor that gives it an edge over some others is that the bulk of the poems are new and not previously published in individual volumes. Seventy-one out of the eighty poets selected have contributed new work for this book. As the editor, Sudeep Sen writes in his foreword, 'Anthologies of new writing serve as perfect vehicles and repository that showcase and highlight the best in current literatures. They also capture the pulse of literary culture...'

Speaking as one who is taking the pulse, what is remarkable here is the broad range of style and form and the array of preoccupations represented. Out of the almost four hundred poems in this book, I've had the tricky task of picking a tiny proportion of just fourteen to feature in the accompanying current edition of the Hub's Poetry pages. As a reader, I notice the confidence inherent in the writing, a confidence that shows in the risk-taking, the experimentation, the casual display of erudition, the mixing of myths from the European classical with the Indian classical. Not that confidence was missing at any time before, but the poets here seem to carry in their

head a firm idea of their place in the world. Naturally, they know physically where they are (or one would hope they do), be it Cuttack in Orissa or Brooklyn in New York, but what I am also referring to is their knowledge of their position within frames of international reference.

This poise and assurance is a product of satellite television and our global age. As each place in the world begins to look the same, the people in it are less strange to each other. They may not adopt each other's lifestyle, but they know exactly where they stand on those graphs of world communities. No one represented here belongs to a lost or innocent tribe. I would argue that for writing in English, this is a boon, as evidenced by this book; there is pure ease in using and shaping the language to each individual poet's needs and to their 'place'. This is, in essence, a world anthology too.

Sen calls it 'a parallel shifting and mapping of poetic terrain' and says he based his choices purely on the use of language and structure. His preference was for poems which had 'more texture than the obvious' and those that displayed 'originality and muscularity in syntax and word-choices.' I put it to him that perhaps age played a role in the way this anthology turned out, as its contributors are between twenty and sixty, but he replied that, in fact, agelessness is a defining factor of the contributions and on balance, I think he is right. One reason for agelessness is that the themes of poetry stay the same even if the mode of delivery changes.

There are many poetic forms deployed in this book, and a listing of formal verse patterns used is provided in the foreword. The sonnets, triolets and pantoums jostle with rare stylistic forms, such as Bhartrhari-style shataka (a collection in one hundred verses from the sixth century Indian grammarian), which Rukmini Bhaya Nair is experimenting with, as a linguistic academic as well as a poet. I noted a smattering of poems in the ghazal form, now popular internationally, the ghazal going the way of the haiku, no doubt. In the best ghazal-poems in English, the musicality matches that of the form in Urdu, and this was achieved by Anand Thakore, who is also a musician, which may mean he has an advantage in keeping to the true rhythm. More unusual in form was a long intense sequence entitled 'Use scissors to cut the map into four scenes' contributed by Amitava Kumar. The four scenes set in Kashmir are actually intertwined short stories laid out as poems. They are among the most harrowing work in the anthology. Another long, original sequence was from Priya Sarukkai Chabria, 'Everyday things in my life,' and surprisingly, other than these two, there were several more lengthy poems, some of which I've excerpted for the selection on the poetry pages.

Although Indian poets have been mining prayer chants and other classical Indian forms of poetry for their writing from the beginning, it is interesting to see many different examples of such work in this book and the assertiveness with which it is delivered. If you read the anthology as I did, from beginning to end, one notable insistent beat will reveal itself to you: the Temple.

Poetry in English from other lands has always included religious references. In fact, it is rare to read a collection where there is not a single allusion to the stories of the Bible. And this is understandable, as these stories have provided the language with

its similes, insults, prayers, song, and idioms. The language of Christianity (as set out in the King James Bible in English four hundred years ago) is an intrinsic part of modern English.

By way of contrast, in ***The HarperCollins Book of English Poetry*** the repeated references are to Temples. Whether visited for tourism or worship, the temple is observed meticulously; its carvings and idols, and the mythologies depicted are picked over for analysis; while at the same time all of this seems to provide immense inspiration to the poets. As India is a Hindu-majority nation, I suppose it shouldn't be a revelation to me (although it is) that the everyday language of the poems is tinged with detail of the small religious rituals that are enacted daily in all parts of the country, and it is these details that mark this book in a way that nothing else can, as an anthology of Indian Writing.

Kavita A. Jindal

To order ***The HarperCollins Book of English Poetry***, [click here](#).

The phrase 'Cubicles of Consciousness' used as the title for this article is borrowed from the poem 'Fading' by Alaichanickal Joseph Thomas, published in ***The HarperCollins Book of English Poetry*** (HarperCollins India - July, 2012) edited by Sudeep Sen.

Three poems by Kavita Jindal are included in this book:

Such A Thing As A Cloud Would Sully Your Tongue

Aljez at Midnight

It Was In May. The Sky Poured

A selection of poems from the anthology is published concurrently on the [Poetry Pages](#).

Review originally published at <http://www.writershub.co.uk/features-piece.php?pc=769>.

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