

“ Amidst the political turmoil and clampdown in Kashmir, there is a need to revisit our political legacies and the right to dissent. Naidu’s political poetry invites us to reconsider if the personal is synonymous with the political. Her poetry, written from within the nationalist arena for our fight for freedom, significantly shaped her persona. ”

propagandist exhortations. Her poetic craft retains the deeply personal dimension in what is ultimately the communal activity of politics. It also implicates the subjugation of the nation in the oppression of women and necessitates the uplift of women in the nation-building she envisions. Indeed, the Civil Disobedience Movement saw women becoming mass participants in the struggle for freedom. Naidu was, in fact, one of the first women to be arrested for breaking the Salt Law. This gendered role is evident in ‘To India’ where she writes,

*Thy Future calls thee with a manifold sound  
To crescent honours, splendours, victories vast;  
Waken, O slumbering Mother and be crowned,  
Who once wert empress of the sovereign Past.*

As a bard of Indian English poetry, this was the public face of her Indian Independence activism. Even as she was portrayed by Europeans as an exotic ‘other’, and also too easily dismissed by some male Indian nationalists, by aligning herself with the goal of Indian freedom in her poetry, she resisted being constructed as an outsider. This is evidenced in her writing about her own poetry as a creative style that is demanded of her by the Indian public. In this niche, she actively embraced the personal and the emotional to sustain her political project.

Naidu’s political poetry also institutes the role of the poet in a public economy. In her refusal to disentangle poetry and politics, it is the function of the poet to inspire the masses. In ‘Awake’, she writes:

*The night is aflush with a dream of the morrow,*

*Why still dost thou sleep in thy bondage of sorrow?*

*Awaken and sever the woes that enthral us,*

*And hollow our hands for the triumphs that call us*

In one of her speeches, she directly addressed the role of the poet: ‘...and often they have said to me: “why have you deserted the pipes and flute of the poet to be the most strident trumpet of those who stand and call the nation to battle?” Because the function of the poet is not merely to be isolated in ivory towers of dreams set in a garden of roses, but his place is with the people; in the dust of the highways, in the difficulties of battle is the poet’s destiny. The one reason why he is a poet is that in the hour of danger, in the hour of defeat and despair, the poet should say to the dreamer: “If you dream true, all difficulties, all illusions, all despair are but Maya: the one thing that matters is hope. Here I stand before you with your higher dreams, your invisible courage, your indomitable victories.”’

It is intriguing how Naidu’s political poetry does not fully subscribe to binary divisions between the home and the world, or the household and the political community. Rather than posit such a dichotomy, we find Naidu conflating the personal and the private. The personal does not then signify the individual only as a socio-political unit of the nation, but it also comprises personal angsts and sorrows. This compelling formulation allows Naidu to be lyrical and yet not subsume the individual within the national agenda as an accidental footnote. In ‘Medley—A Kashmiri Song’, she writes:

*The poppy grows on the roof-top,  
The iris flowers on the grave;  
Hope in the heart of a lover,  
And fear in the heart of a slave.*

This is fascinating considering how usually writers’ political commitment finds form in their work that is indistinguishable from their politics. Naidu’s poetics resists such a regimented conformity in reimagining the individual vis-à-vis the nation. She is not just an ideologue, but also a poet. But, of course, that is why she was popularly known as the *Bharatiya Kokila*—the Nightingale of India.

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## A Game Of Poetic Descriptions

Yogesh Patel

### PATINA

By Kavita A. Jindal

The Wind In The Trees, UK, 2019, pp. 40, £ 6.00

### TIGRESS

By Jessica Mookherjee

Nine Arches Press, 2019, pp. 76, £ 9.99

### THE WAITING

By Usha Akella

Sahitya Akademi, 2019, pp. 64, ₹ 80.00

Poetry cluttered with lists or images dressed in poetic descriptions pretending to create a lyrical experience to revel in are quite common. It is also, largely celebrated by magazine editors and flourishing winning awards. So, I was not surprised to read in the June/July issue of *The London Magazine*, Paul Griffin’s essay ‘How Not to Write Poetry’, discussing how the teaching of poetry is left quite wanting. He laments that in this learning process students make ‘lists of words and then write poems using these words describing objects or situations.’ Recently, there has been a wider debate about ambiguity in poetry as well. Griffin also makes a point that ‘poems are very often little more than a jumble of disconnected images.’ The nature of the ‘spoken word’ culture that now engulfs us bears no compass to what real poetry recital should be. Additionally, we must remember that just the traditional construction of poetry with rhymes and metres does not always make poetry. It must deliver us to the challenging content. Hence, when I apply the mentioned canon to three recent collections here, I put them in this order: *Patina* by Kavita A Jindal, then *Tigress* by Jessica Mookherjee and finally, *The Waiting* by Usha Akella. I rush to point out, however, that each poet’s approach is completely different in lyricism, in applying traditional forms, and in making poems transcend from ‘describing objects and situation’. With magical simplicity, Jindal connects easily with readers by steering away from describing objects or situations. Mookherjee’s world is quite leaden with descriptions, and Usha Akella, suitably for her devotional quest, completely sheds worldly clutters and detailed events.

Jindal’s softer and measured but reflective voice serves her well in achieving a startling realism, often magical. Her scattered

observations are well weighed up to create a mood wrapped in an endearingly lyrical language. She has poignancy and grace laced in simplicity. In 'Anything But' this example of simplicity speaks volume where—'On Not Being a Muse'—a woman is objectified by an artist (man?) and has to deliver a portrayal, but in conclusion will not be 'static', call it her liberation from the expected perception.

*Gladly I will do it all Anything but be  
Static while you are active Anything but be  
The one from whom you source  
What you make your own.*

Jindal's poems show us that the beauty around us is not the derivative of any ostentatious aesthetics but the metaphorical patina. *Patina* brings time, history and value into play. This metaphorical *patina* assimilates from one's reactions to adverse encounters in life. Her poem 'Piccadilly Line Salon' brings this point home by the poet putting us in the middle of women peering, pouting, slicking, and flicking doing their make-up in the morning on the tube. It contrasts with 'Should I rustle in my satchel? / Check in a mirror/ for bits of breakfast pear/ stuck in my teeth?' We are left wondering about the artificial images wearing the make-up versus charming and unassuming reality; the pitch is of the artificial against the natural. Jindal succeeds in her craft with lyricism and restrains as displayed in her other poems about the lack of clean water for some, Brexit, hashtag, Trump, and Boris. Thus, while the poet engages with personal perspectives, she also indulges in current affair concerns. Here is a poet that claims 'When slow living comes back in fashion/ I will claim as I have always done/ ...That I was here first.'

In *Tigress*, Jessica Mookherjee wants to shout and narrate the world that makes her crouch, the world that overwhelms her. The events in the poet's life play out her torturous journey growing up as a migrant child in the merry-go-round of cultures, lands, adulthood, and the parental canopy tearing itself as an umbrella of safety to feed uncertainties. Starting from 'me lurking inside her (mother's) eggs, like a tiny spark', the unborn child arrives on a plane from Bangladesh 'from one/ part of the dying Empire, landing like an actress', father condemned as a Hindu, to the adolescence

of 'I open drawers, letters, cupboards, read everything/ to lie, cheat, steel my way into someone else's life.'

The more heart-rending is the figure she cuts of her mother, a woman struggling to define her being. The poem of the title, 'Tigress', captures the inner wars of this woman who would be a tigress but resigns to submission.

*Behind her husband's back  
She plans an attack.  
Until it starts to get dark. Until its time  
to take her pills.*

This collection is not all about immigrants' life, or about growing up in alienation, or trying to figure out parents lost in making a new home as migrants, or about struggles. It is also about a woman's wrestles with hostile realities, father's unemployment, mother's illnesses, poet's negotiation with two tugging cultures, deciphering the

meaning of conflicting images of fatherhood and motherhood, a difference between a house and a home, complexities of distances and proximities of relationships, intricacies of family, issues of depression, misplacing oneself and trying to find that self again. One minute the poet clings to a fallen tree as an embodiment of mother and love, the next, she finds 'Damp sea sat outside the pub'. Yes, these poems are 'describing objects and situations' with overload, but they transcend by creating impressions which lead the readers to deeper—sometimes disturbing—debates. These are the poems lived—often autobiographical—pushing a reader to confront uncomfortable themes.

In *The Waiting*, Usha Akella distils the quest for parmatma, the supreme soul, to frequent questions pitching her earthly being in a disparity.

*Which is the palace of illusions?  
this grief?  
this heart?  
this poem?  
your silence? (Poem 9)*

Akella's approach here is not of the *bhakti marg*, but of an unending ache for *moksha* through questioning, a *Jñāna yoga*, one of the most difficult of all the different *marg*. Akella is a master of traditional metrical forms but she pursues here the music of language over that. She demonstrates her affinity to the spiritual aspects in her drama poem *Ek*. However, to read this collection in isolation again and make assumptions about limited subject matter explored by

this poet will be a mistake, as Akella's other collections do ignore this aspect and explore various other themes of life, including her passion for travel as in her collection *The Rosary of Latitudes*. The philosopher Martin Heidegger has suggested that God cannot be coalesced into any known quantity, but must be sought afresh. Akella tries here to make her quest fresh with a self-crucifixion:

*I am nailed on the cross of my own  
being*

*This is divine Love, I suppose.*

Does the awakening come from self-inflicted pain? Does the duality need punishing? Perhaps the idea is that the awareness of *dwait* is necessary to realize the *adwait*. To return to the cocoon you need to be a butterfly first.

*Three Steps,  
and I am back  
a butterfly in a cocoon.*

This is not a centrifugal dispersion into a singularity, but a centripetal collapse, akin to a black hole, into the singularity, God. That is why the poet is on her own cross. The poems here are not indulging in 'describing objects and situations'. They are quite contrary to Mookherjee's lyrical details of everyday living and experiences. Sahitya Akademi has published this poetry collection, but I am told that it is a curse in itself, as it is not geared to traditional publishing practices, hence not easily obtainable.

A recipient of many awards and widely published internationally, **Yogesh Patel** was the Poet-of-Honour recently in New York at NYU, Nassau Community College and Hunter College. His poem recently appeared in the May issue of the prestigious *London Magazine*. An editor of *Skylark* 1969-2001, he currently runs the Word Masala Foundation and Skylark Publications UK to promote the diaspora poets. By profession, he is an optometrist and an accountant.

#### Book News Book News



*A Death in Delhi: Modern Hindi Short Stories* translated and edited by Gordon C Roadarmel, a collection of fifteen stories by some of the most prominent writers in the field, focusses on urban middle-class individuals and especially those whose lives are marked by alienation and loneliness. Among the writers included in this volume are Kamleshwar, Nirmal Verma, Phanishwarnath 'Renu', Krishna Baldev vain and Mohun Rakesh.

Aleph Book Company, 2019, pp. 244, ₹399.00