

***Maps of the Impossible: Six Contemporary Hindi Poets – Readings and Translations* by Rajesh Sharma, Autumn Art, 2019, Hardcover, ₹ 400, Paperback, ₹ 325.**

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Drawn by the book's jacket with the iconic image of self-immolating Thích Quảng Đức, the Burning Monk, one is reminded of another image, more recent and as chilling – that of Mohamed Bouazizi. The image speaks, as if rising up to say, “The more things change, the more they remain the same.” Be it Saigon in 1963 or Tunisia in 2010, oppression and despotism remain unchanged. The eyes have hardly reconciled to the image when one is hit by the title, *Maps of the Impossible: Six Contemporary Hindi Poets – Readings and Translations*. The title as well as the image set the tone for all that Rajesh Sharma’s latest book offers – glimpses of things mundane, of things sublime, but most importantly of things explosive. “*Maps of the Impossible*,” the author elucidates, is about “affirming the poet’s peculiar vocation to see and to proclaim the unseen, to map the unmapped, to unravel darkness, to illumine. To create possibilities” (iii).

A collection of sixty-six translated poems penned by six Hindi poets, the book has been in the making for more than ten years. The poets – Kumar Vikal, Devi Prasad Mishra, Asad Zaidi, Ritu Raj, Pankaj Chaturvedi and Vyomesh Shukla – are all unique in their engagements with contemporary reality with its hidden political layers. And therefore, translating them must have been a rather formidable task. However, the author lives up to the challenge. He shepherds each poem, all the while ensuring to keep alive its tone and musicality. He has thus successfully brought the works of these six poets on the current global poetry map, making visible the mapping of possibilities the poets inscribe amidst an imposing and consuming present.

A translator’s job, it is said, is to translate words on the page without colouring them with personal bias, and yet capturing the poet’s voice, thought and emotion. A close inspection reveals that the translator has stayed as close as possible to the Hindi texts. For instance, Zaidi’s provocative poem “*1857: Saman ki Talash*” becomes “1857: Looking for Things Misplaced”. Interestingly, the translator uses the word “misplaced,” which evokes a wealth of meaning – of valuables that *did* belong to us once but have since been mislaid, or even displaced. Commenting on the poem, the author states that it is as if “1857 has returned, with an immediacy that it did not possess in 1857” (62). Thus, even though this poem is situated in the year 1857, the sentiment in it resonates even more urgently today:

In these times of shame / and of a sense of wrong / when any wrong done oppresses you / as your own doing / the ears catch the rumble of war-drums / of the mutiny / and also the hubbub that is so, so Indian / and the whispering of frightened pimps / and traitors / and the restive footfalls of chance-mongers (64).

Zaidi's sensibility shines through the poem as it comes to a close: "*Kuch apni batao / Kya ab duniya main kahin bhi nahin hai ananya / Ya tumhe hee nahin sujhta uska koi upay*". The translator deftly works it thus: "Tell us something of yourselves / Is the world now fully delivered of injustice? / Or is it just that you are blind, / that you just can't see any way out?" (67). Walter Benjamin touches upon this very aspect in his essay "The Task of the Translator" when he writes: "It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work" (261). In its translated form, a work might begin to see itself in a never-before-seen light.

Reading Pankaj Chaturvedi's "*Ek Hee Chehra*" or "But One Face", Sharma remarks: "[It is] an essay, in poetry, on art and philosophy" (141). It is indeed so, one feels, because the poem is about the subtle, fluid nature of reality which appears in a slightly different vein when looked at from different perspectives. "Looked at from one angle, / the Buddha appears to be smiling. / From another, he seems to be engrossed / in melancholy thought. / The third angle reveals the grace of living emancipation – / an imperturbable peace" (142). The translator has beautifully captured the poet's thought: "*Shreshth hai/ Pathar taraashne ki yeh kala / Par use shreshth hai / Iss kala ka antahkaran / Jo yeh jaan saka / Ki wah teen chavviyon main samahit / Ek hee chehra tha Budh ka*" when he translates it as: "Supremely fine is this art / of sculpting a stone. / But finer is the soul of this art / that could know there was but one face / of the Buddha / in all these three images" (142). A real translation, according to Benjamin, should be completely "transparent" to the extent that it "does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium to shine upon the original all the more fully" (260).

Poetry, at its finest, has the capability to encompass history, culture, politics, religion, philosophy, and much more. Since times immemorial, it has possessed the power to communicate myriad and subtle experiences which touch the heart. Hence poetry has been used as a vehicle to call a warrior to arms, to ignite fires within the hearts of common people and to

charm a belle into her beloved's embrace. History bears witness to the truth that poets have not often conformed to the rules laid down by society or the state. Their work may receive accolades, but more often it invites censure, exile, or even death. From the *fakir* to the *Raj Kavi*, the poet has always striven to write about his or her time. And therein lies the reason we need poets – for their dauntless courage in the face of tyranny. The six poets in this case all consciously engage with the darkness of their times. Poems such as “Bodies”, “Meteorites”, “Of Hell”, “At Such A Time As This”, “For A Wholeness” and “The Men of Rapid Action Force Search For...” are all instances of the poets' engagement with the harsh and horrifying realities of contemporary India. They raise hard political and ethical questions in order to foreground what would otherwise lie invisible under the seductive spectacle of progress. Take the last stanza of Pankaj Chaturvedi's poem “At Such A Time As This”:

At such a time as this
when everything has been put on sale
when in this all-sale
people cannot refrain from selling themselves
even if they can hide from one another's looks
when the race is not for ascension
but for self-abasement,
the only happiness we may earn is
to have emerged
with an unscathed soul
from the hell of impure desires. (122)

They keep reminding us, to use the translator's words again, that “[f]reedom is not something you download once and for all, and then forget all about it. It demands to be continually updated and firewalled. Freedom is a condition of being” (63). That is to say, freedom demands a constant vigilance on the part of the subject as s/he is prone to losing it in the very process of taking it for granted.

The problem at the heart of the matter today is described by American poet Dana Gioia, in his essay “Can Poetry Matter?”, when he states: “Society suffers by losing the imagination and vitality that poets brought to public culture” (14). “Poetry is the art of using words charged with their utmost meaning. A society whose intellectual leaders lose the skill to shape, appreciate, and

understand the power of language will become the slaves of those who retain it – be they politicians, preachers, copywriters, or newscasters” he further elucidates (Gioia 20). As public spaces shrink and neoliberalism spreads its tentacles, our institutions of education are fast becoming factories where imagination and creativity are suppressed except where these can be “profitably” channelised. The erosion of this freedom has resulted in asphyxiation. Oblivious to this catastrophe, generations of school-going children have grown up simply to become human capital that can contribute to the market. Consequently, those ennobled with bravado, pluckiness and the nerve to ask relevant questions remain only a select handful. For example, Ritu Raj’s poem “File” is a mediation on the merciless brutality of bureaucratic processes and institutional procedures which not only disrespect man’s essentially human search for a just hearing but distorts his very sense of life.

It is indeed befitting that Sharma prompts us to think the question: “Where would we be if there were no poets?” (vii). For centuries, it was the poet who gave a vision to the people on how to lead a better and more fruitful life. However, by the nineteenth century it was the philosopher upon whom came to rest the burden of showing and leading the way. And in the twenty-first century, as imagination, creativity and the ability to think of alternatives are getting stifled, the world again needs the poet – to inspire, to stimulate, and to create “maps of the impossible”. But this mapping, it must be emphasized, sometimes demands, to refer to Vyomesh Shukla’s poem “Taking Sides”, “a forceful simplification for the cause of justice” (150).

Works Cited

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