

BARE SOUL by Kalpna Singh Chitnis

Reviewed by Satyapal Anand

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For a lexicographer ‘you’ is the nominative and objective form of address for the second person pronoun, and no more. For a poet it has multiple meanings. It could be a direct address to anyone in an internal monologue including one of the many personae of the poet. As an address, better known as ‘dramatic monologue’, it presupposes the second person.

These poems, though divided into various parts, are all sequential. In the first sequence of Kalpna’s poems, ‘you’ is always at the receiving end, collecting, as it were, all her contentious complaints or irenic and self-effacing admissions. Sometimes the speaker is belligerent. At other times it is just a grumble noise bordering on a jeremiad, but it is always there, in a person qua person situation. Let’s try to find out from her verse itself who this anonymous ‘you’ is. Let us take a visualized scenario. It is raining outside, and ...

All night,

you held my hand

by my bedside...,

and I slept like a baby

all night.

All night,

the sun, moon and the stars

prayed for me

in their very hearts...

All night,

I was the most blessed child.

A care-giver, an affectionate lover, is reminded of a certain night when, holding her hand, he prayed on his knees by the bedside where the protagonist, a ‘beloved’ slept ‘like a baby’. A couple of other examples we will also take.

*There is a nook in my place
no body walks in there but me!*

*One night,
when the moon was pale
and my heart mute,*

I saw you there...

*I never told you where I live,
how did you find out?*

Or do you think, it wasn't you?

That it was, just my dream resurrected?

The 'lover' is now presented as the only other presence in the otherwise secluded 'nook in my place', a deep furrow inside the hidden self, where no one is allowed. If he knew he was there doesn't matter to her. All that was important was the fact that she knew he was there. The eastern influence in terms of the other self in a Mithun incarnation or a Yang Yen avatar is evident in all poems in this section.

It is the second segment that gives to the readers more than they can absorb. It is no longer a meek

female part of Mithun that articulates herself; it is assertive. Partnership, yes; submission, no, that's the summum-bonum of all short pieces in this section. Lines quoted below from two different poems do not mollify; they might even ruffle the feathers of the male part of this God-ordained union.

*I gave away myself,
and my crown, treasure,
empire and swords*

were all yours, at once...

*The only thing I had left,
was my childlike faith in you...*

*Then what was that doubt
in your mind my warrior,
that you had to shackle me*

and walk me through the crowd?

From childlike faith to discovery of the sordid truth leads the protagonist to doubt, disbelief and, finally, mistrust. This has been the primeval story of the womankind. Then comes a time when she has cultivated resilience to fear. She has learnt to live among ‘serpents’ and ‘scorpions’ – for, she thinks that is the only fate ordained for her.

However, this mood also doesn’t last for long. The idea, that of the twin mithun creation, the female half which is creative and regenerative can live alone takes hold of the poet and although she is tired

and bruised, almost half dead with the life-long skirmishes she has had, she still hopes that in her nihilistic urge for decimation of self as a separate entity, both can be one again.

The fragile ground we stand on is stone cold,

and in the darkness, as we unchain each other

from our hurt and remorse...

the lava of centuries oozes from our hearts,

and we float into each other's eyes...

we savour the darkness bestowed upon us,

That’s how it is. In this section, the sequential treatment of episodic mutualism is resolved in favor of ‘floating in each other’s eyes’, separate but avidly longing for each other. But before that final resolve of ‘each for the other, though apart’, the poet passes through various moods of crisscrossing faith and denial. The reader sways with the moods as they occur in short pieces and goes along, walking step by step with the poet as she gives a voice to her silently eloquent monologues.

After a long journey,

I have found you,

now resting at your threshold,

in moonlit night,

I'm waiting for you know

that I'm here...

I have come all the way

not to try your love for me...

I'm here to tell –

I can't afford not to love anymore!

A time has come when I must dig up various connotations of the word ancient used as an adjective for all the episodes in this tale. It is Ancient Love, Ancient Quest, and Ancient Remorse – all in the past - , and then Being Nothing and Everything which is a conclusion of sorts - placed in the present – as specified by the word being and contrasted with the past as specified by the word ancient. The word refers not to the past in quantum generality such as near past, but to the past in hoary antiquity or, in other words, before the advent of history. Mythology is full of tales of gods and men entwined in marital and non-marital relationships, tales that are told and retold in every age. Eastern mythology, particularly of the Hindus in India could very well apply to the poet's endeavor to look deep inside the coves of human suffering, particularly of the female of homo sapiens in this frame of reference.

I will borrow only one example from the next segment Ancient Remorse, and then would try to resolve the quandary in the light of the last two sections. Here it is.

Rooted in defilement,

my heart like a pond

of fresh lilies...!

In my silences,

I hear the serpents whisper...

in my pure intoxication,

I let the scorpions crawl, right into my heart...!

In my fearlessness,

I do not refuse anything that you have to offer me,

in the name of love and trust,

assurance or appreciation...

neither do I resist my tears

as you unveil...

you have given me the glory of tasting

the sweetest venom of life,

that I accept...

challenging my every impending death...

promising a new life every-time,

with my last breath

A pure pond of fresh lilies in which were introduced whispering serpents and crawling scorpions, but even that situation is acceptable because the poet has learnt to partake of the sweetest venom of life. One is reminded of the Hindu mythological story of the *sagar manthana* (the churning of seas) by gods and demons and the discovery of poison that was consumed by the gods to rid the world of evil. There is no evil here, only death-in-life and life-in-death, a constant struggle between end and beginning anew; 'impending death' and 'new life' alternating in equal sequential measure. I would call it, not remorse, but resolve when the poet says: promising new life every time / with my last breath.

In fact, nothing ends; new life ensues with every last breath – and the cosmic story of *mithun* goes on. 'Being', 'is-ness', 'non-being', 'nothing' – these are mere words but in terms of Indian meta-mythic frame of reference, these are two sides of the same coin. Nothing is destroyed; it is reborn and then dies again to be reborn again. In this section, the poet ponders over the question with 'ifs' and 'buts', and then finally reaches a conclusion. Drawing from easy to understand constituents of life as we know it, *panch tattva* (air, water, fire, earth, sky), she finally arrives at the much debated answer.

If I'm fire

I must light...

If I'm wind,

I must blow in the direction

my heart takes me into...

If I'm rain, I must pour

to quench thirst of millions like me...

If I'm sky, I must stretch my wings

and fly...

to be Nothing, I must be "All"

and to be All, I must be "Nothing" at last...!

Resolution comes after a long debate, but it does assuredly come. The last part 'Conversations with a friend' is a resolve to see it through. The *Mithun* union is depicted beautifully in the last lines...

What difference does it make,

whether you can look into my eyes or not...,

when I'm sunken into your pores like daylight?

And the earth you lay on, in self-defeat,

despite all your valor..

borrowing my heart,

to throb inside you...!

At the cost of repeating myself I must say it again with renewed vigor that Kalpna's poetry is a saga of struggle – between two parts of the dual principle of male-female creation as one. It is the first ever attempt in English to understand, debate and resolve this issue in poetry.

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Award winning Poet, Critic and Author of over forty books in Urdu, English, Hindi and Punjabi.