

Tapan Kumar Bandyopadhyay's *Glimpses of Ordinance* (Writer's Workshop India, 2009. 74 pages). ISBN: 978-81-81457-845-7 – a Book Review

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When a new poet emerges we should offer the poet praise. We should also explore the poet's intentions. Tapan Kumar Bandyopadhyay's collection *Glimpses of Ordinance* (2009) was published as part of the Writer's Workshop of Calcutta, India. The poet has six other poetry collections to his credit (five of which are in Bengali). The collection is quirky, but it deserves comment as it experiments with a postmodern approach toward poetry. Few contemporary poets today are truly classifiable as postmodern.

Postmodern poetry, unlike modernism, does not seek to start from a "center," nor does it try to return to a center. This creates in postmodern poetry a sense that language itself is off-center, out of balance, or out of whack. A postmodern poet will delight in being able to keep the reader guessing, as the symbiotic relationship (linguistically) between the "sign" and "signified" are deliberately kept far apart. The result is that meaning within the context of any given poem is not settled. I would consider Bandyopadhyay's poetry postmodern as every poem in his collection destabilizes the meaning of the poem itself. For some readers this will create an unsettling feeling as they read his poems, while for other readers playing the guessing-game of what each poem means will be rewarding.

The poet Bandyopadhyay has remarked that he does not generally revise a poem once he believes it is finished; this approach to his art, I would argue, adds to the postmodern effect of his writing. Thus, he writes from the initial energy of what he feels, sees, thinks, and grasps at the moment that he is enraptured in the exercise of writing the poem; this makes the poet closer to the art form produced on the page, even if it widens the distance between conventional meaning and the use of language.

Glimpses of Ordinance gives us mostly short poems that are quick, alert, and interrogate the meaning of experience. As a whole, the poems confront the question of how the mind carves experience into categories—these could be inner adventure, disappointment felt in response to the actions of others, or the restlessness of waiting on the responsiveness of others. Bandyopadhyay's poems challenge us to ask how much we can really ever gain entrance into the mind of another. How can we come to know the subjectivity of the "Other?" In the poem, "The Path," this topic is explored.

I

Just can't share the inner world...

Not even with my mother:

Why?

I don't know...

Outside the compartment, I can allot a portion for earthly beings...

The language of the poem (the diction) is unusual, as it moves in one instance from an expected use of word choice to an unexpected one. When we hear that the poet can't give all of himself away to anyone, even his mother, we come close to approaching the psychological barriers that exist within the scope of a parent-child relationship. But then when we come to other word choices in the poem, such as "compartment," "allot," "portion," and "earthly beings," the diction shifts to a stranger, more distant and less intimate tone. We move in one quick instance in the poem from a confessional mode to the wall or barrier the poet erects between himself and the reader. This leaves the reader wondering why.

One possible answer is the use of a postmodern technique to destabilize language by using diction in unpredictable and non-typical ways. But overall, "The Path" demonstrates how we are constantly creating barriers or "compartments" to "allot" the parts of the self we wish to give away to others versus the parts of the self that we hide or refuse to share. Thus, there is always a part of the self that never gets revealed for the simple fact that it cannot be *authentically* communicated to others. This inability to explain who he is leaves the poet both outside of himself and also locked completely within his own mind. This adds to the postmodern effect of Bandyopadhyay's writing. This theme is repeated in the poem, "Battle."

It's a matter of regret—you are not known to me
Breakfast, lunch dinner etc. though all with you
Still you don't know me.
In spite of all of these I salute thee
Still you keep yourself silent
Should I embrace Saturn?

Bandyopadhyay's poems are also filled with questions. A common technique he uses is to present the reader with a question or a series of questions, but in a way that indicates that the poet is asking these questions of himself too. This establishes the *feeling* within the poetry that the poet and the reader are both working to get at the root of why experience, communication, and language are oftentimes insufficient to describe the everyday pangs and the minor annoyances of life. Still, the poet searches occasionally for some small sense of transformation to carry him outside the space of life's annoyances. We see this in "No response," where he writes,

No response as yet
Shall I opt for pilgrimage?
Or
Become a tree.
The sun continues to do its own work.
Don't keep me waiting long.

It is unclear (maybe left as deliberately ambiguous by the poet) whether the transformation that is sought after is spiritual or merely physical and earthly; in fact, there is only one poem in the entire collection that clearly is spiritual in content, "Creator." Given this, it seems much more likely that the answer is that the poet is searching within the confinements of the physical to find relief

from his self-conceptions. The poem, “Face,” demonstrates this as it describes a path of replacing the psychological (and maybe even the empirical) with a return to the basics, a return to the earth.

Though the Earth seems to be weary but
really it's not—it has its own beauty

The poet plays on words to indicate that life is not as dire as it might first seem. And yet, the word choice of “typhoon” does remind the reader of the harshness of the seasons and the climate of India. However, by coupling “typhoon” with “tycoon” the seriousness of the reminder is lost. The lines end with a sardonic question to an unknown girl, insinuating that without her “tycoon,” or a man with money, she might not survive this world. But, again because language is so entirely open to interpretation within the poem (as in all of Bandyopadhyay’s poems), this meaning is only one possible way to read the lines. The lines could just as easily indicate some unrequited love or the observation of helplessness in another human being. It is difficult to say. Because of the postmodern technique in Bandyopadhyay’s writing, it is impossible to arrive at a definite meaning.

Jostling, Jostling and Jostling is everywhere
Typhoon invites Tycoon.
Helpless girl,
Would you survive?

In “Appearance,” Bandyopadhyay reminds us that we are surrounded by that which we can turn into motivation to overcome the malaise of discontentment with life.

On your appearance,
Memory touches the path of fire

In “The friend,” there is even a move on the poet’s part to begin to find ways that nature intertwines itself with our subjective experiences.

Whenever I surrender to you
I feel free.
I pass days and nights with the sun and the moons.

The poem, “Today,” Bandyopadhyay asks the reader to meditate upon the gentleness of nature.

River flows
Bird sings
Time runs at its whims.
All seems to be at ease
But why are you restless?

One of Bandyopadhyay’s techniques is to disrupt the usual expectations of context (just as he disrupts our expectations of language) by making references and allusions to personal (autobiographical) scenarios (conversations, memories, scenes, accounts, and inter-personal dialogues) that the reader remains unprivileged to know or understand; the reader is given hints or “glimpses” at these personal allusions belonging to the poet’s experiences. An example of this is contained in the second half of the poem, “Today.”

Now, please tell me what you would have done

If you had been in my position.
 After a silence, I said with a sense of wonder,
 ‘Had you been in my position? Ever?’
 You shook your head in self-defense.

Another example of where Bandyopadhyay does not explain to the reader the context of the scenario is to be found in the poem “Keep it up.” The lines below indicate how context is disrupted by the poet recounting a conversation, but as readers we do not know anything about the conversation or learn any of the details of it. We are only given the aftereffects of the conversation that the poet recalls.

Time runs in its own fashion.
 Your reasons are not at all satisfactory.
 However,
 In this stage I don’t wish to en cash otherwise.
 All my solitude burns out
 Well, keep it up.

Here, we can Bandyopadhyay’s use of language is postmodern because it offers a play on words that is left unexplained by the context of the poem itself; this makes the significance of the poem completely open to the reader’s ability to make meaning out of the poem. Too, the mention of solitude keeps with Bandyopadhyay’s overall theme of creating a hide-and-seek game with the reader out of the poet’s subjective experiences.

Ultimately, it could be claimed that *Glimpses of Ordinance* is the poet’s attempt to vanish from himself; that is, to create unknown personae that erase the subjective. As Bandyopadhyay writes in “The Vanished man,” he asks us, “the participants” to look within to see that life like the theatrical, a “play,” a “stage,” and “pretense.” To get at what is real, we “have to start from the zero” or the place of what is not known. This is in a nutshell is what much of postmodern writing ask of us as readers, and it is a difficult call to answer. But after the fashion of postmodernism it is up to the reader to decide how such a pursuit is worthwhile.

Please drop the curtain,
 I am not ready:
 The character for whom I am compelled
 to appear has vanished from the scenario.
 No matter, I am competent enough.
 Only I have to start from the zero.
 Participants, please do come.
 Let us begin the rehearsal within
 the periphery of the closed stage.