

P C K Prem's *Rainbow at sixty*: an Overview

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Rainbow at Sixty by P C K Prem constitutes a rainbow of his experiences that he underwent in his life. It appears the book was begun and presumably completed in 2006, when Prem was celebrating his 60th birth-day. However, it was published in 2008. It is a collection of sixty poems speaking about sixty years of the poet's experiences, each unique in itself. The poet embarks upon an independent approach to Indian Poetry in English. He is very honest and true to his feelings. Spontaneously does he outpour his true and honest feelings in poetic numbers. Indian ethos is never missing, it is sustained throughout. Each poem is a spectrum of his experiences universal in tone and treatment.

In *Rainbows*, the poet describes metaphorically how man is spreading feet on to sky just as the wings of rustling rainbows. He is out to disfigure truths and unveil a myth untold. He is out to limit and broaden a life un-lived and unsung. Man has immense potential for he has been able to squeeze the horizon and create a sky of his own. The poet has strong belief in man and his power. He is a humanist. How beautifully does he describe the declaration of a war for mapping the sky!

“And there rises a figure
With a conch in the mouth
Declaring a fiendish war unending
Trying to find pedigree in the sky unmapped.” (Prem, *Rainbow at Sixty*, 1)

However, the poet regrets that man in an effort to distend legs on to the planet or spreading feet on to the sky shows his ugly face like that of crows and conducts himself accordingly:

“And crows trip about and laugh
Sitting on the throne
Poisoning the nectar in drops
That falls in drizzle
To silence churning in life”(Ibid.)

Man to make his future resolutely secure builds an ethos with tongues of lust. Men and crows are alike. To quote the poet,

“And men in the masks of crows
Snatch the throne from foxes cunning
To tell a renewed story
Of Bali and Vibhishana

With not a shred of doubt
Or deception.”(2)

In *Walls*, the poet describes how a fragile man stands like the tall barren cliffs and is in search of an identity before he dies and is buried. His names are reduced to foot-notes or coloured blank posters pasted on debris of walls. A man without a history is bundled up in rusted trunks. He is forgotten in the jungle of rainbows or amid windy rains.

Puppies is a pictorial presentation of Babus in India. It seems to be based on the very personal experience of the poet. Babus are no better than puppies who do not think of dangers. They sit and blink and drag lethargically pencils on the papers. How true the poet is here! He further says that Babus are as insensitive as robots and they are further compared to buffaloes. He says:

“Creating robots who stare like men
Similar to buffaloes in ponds
Throwing black mud around
With a splash of strong tails and sticks.”(4)

There is an inner contradiction between Babus and men and so is it between the real self and the projected self of man. Man is ‘pathetically pushing mucky bodies/ Half distorted and punctured/ Spines often changing to rubber’.(Ibid.)

In *Defeat*, the sunrise has been beautifully presented through personification:

“The sun rises on a sad note
Driven to perilous edge
Parking a red ball quietly
On broken window panes
Gleaming a little intriguingly
With probing eyes fitfully.”(5)

When the sun rises, it engulfs all silently and spreads ‘yellow vast sheets in tiny cotton flakes’(Ibid.). Its rays dispel iniquity and antagonism. The imagery of a long wooden chariot carrying heavy baggage of grains reminds of the prosperity that the sun brings with itself.

Blue is a beautiful poem describing how things change their shapes in course of time. It is a change not for better but for worse. The poet begins with the instance of road. The bitumen road is prepared to die like a man in the deep sea of miseries. It is with deep fissures giving the impression of wounds. It is crushed by scrawled wheels and honks. It is further described how ‘nirvan’ is neglected and Markandey's confront conspiracy. It is something to be thought of seriously:

“And ‘nirvana’ is put on fire
Of earthly wishes and desires
Appearing strong and eternal

And Markandey's of the millennium
Confront conspiracies and perdition”(8)

Men of Barren Hills is a commentary on the contemporary life and situations. Prem has used very appropriate similes, metaphors and allusions to assert his point of view. The way he has presented modern men, it appears that men and barren hills are synonymous. The poet says:

“Struggle of a man to catch words
And lazy crooked feelings
With heart beatings without meaning.”(Ibid.)

It is a world where men live sterilized life among the skinless marble statue and gods have kept their eyes closed. It is a damned life, men fighting for existence with folded hands. The poet says sarcastically here how man indulges in purifying mortals by becoming insensitive to human values:

“And a few ablutions to purify mortals
In a bloody whirlpool
Of temples and religious yajnas
Without foundations.”(Ibid.)

A scene is created here to assert the sterility of modern men:

“A scene opens up, men change
Into treeless rocky hills
And tall deodars are infertile
To give birth to clouds.”(9)

How funny it is that man is searching for roots in rock! The poet says:

“Searching roots in rocks of granite
Or under the wreckage of walls.”(Ibid.)

The essence of life has dried up, nay, it has evaporated not in the sky to form clouds, but in the desert:

“Life’s juices are soaked or evaporated
In the vast desert
Where trees dissolve and disappear
In the deep gorges of rocks
Making words harsh and bitter
And rains do not fall on time
As clouds are faithless; may be barren.”(Ibid.)

This world is full of towering egos. The poet uses the word, egos with the spelling e-g-o-s. This is deliberate. ‘Egos’ signifies that Man is a bundle of ego. On the one hand,

there are towering egos and on the other, the workers whose eyes are wet to see the denuded forests somehow find a foothold of life. The eternity is long lost.

Man is making all efforts for fertility in life. He is visiting shrines, shaking bells, folding hands for divinity in life, but of no use. Out of frustration he is pulling out swords to wound prayers and gods.

The poet further says that men are 'like words of consonants without vowels'(10). They search for identity and name but the 'ink stops replying'(Ibid.).

Man has become absolutely barren and he is unable to make a deep study of things. This reminds one of Eliot who says that man is in search of information only and that knowledge is beyond his reach.

Men of Barren Hills is very rich in imagery. The analysis is deep and complex. It seems to be a representative poem of Prem.

Call is a poem inviting us for action. Life promises lots of joy, colours and flowers, rainbows and rays. However, man sits like a Buddha in deep meditation forgetting that life will generate extreme joy and happiness. The poet makes this statement sarcastically. The discussion of Buddha charges the poem with Indian ethos.

Silence is a poem commenting on the corrupted clerks in India who have got magnetic fingers for coins. They expect tingling coins for the fulfilment of a rich crop of passions. Eventually, their conduct lands them into prison for 'a life long penance and sermons/ And an endless meditation'(13).

In *Life*, the poet speaks of disharmony between body and soul. Man is in dilemma worried sometimes like an ascetic and sometimes like a lunatic and ironically enough, he is in search of home.

A Long Journey deals with the journey of life and death. The journey ends in graveyard among agonizing cries and tears. Tall Deodar trees observe all these quietly and billows bow to say prayers. The description is picturesque. The poet also talks of rebirth. The journey of life is never over as it begins with each ending.

Sickness says how the mind of man is sick and its diagnosis is difficult. Man is still behaving as homo sapiens, seeking pristine glory in gory blood cuddling events. Giving a gloomy picture of the world of man, the poet says,

"Where men are burnt alive
Or nailed to death
And women's breasts severed
To squeeze milk without waste of time."(22)

Father is an excellent commentary on communal disharmony which exists in our society. Three decades ago, things were different. The society had neither witnessed the fall of Babri Masjid nor the rise of a temple. The poet says that 'the fall of Babri Masjid was an event/ Of great destruction in creation/And a birth of another thought'(31). The situation has worsened and Rama, Rahim or Jesus are mute spectators and they would be happier killing all than to live with men. This is the time of mutual distrust and disharmony.

Struggle is a poem contemplative in nature. It speaks about the struggle of a man 'in an invisible paradise' (35). The struggle is life-time and to become like God is impossible on this planet. Life is

“A nightmare and a blind running
 Into a mirage of cobras
 And snakes like smoldering embers.”(Ibid)

A vast, never-ending desert is spread before man and the earthly things are embracing death. Man is forced not to live a religious life, rather to live a life of ‘eat, drink and be merry.’

Even the upbringing is in question. The poet refers to the Indian myth. Prajapati had a daughter, Saraswati with whom he wanted to have an unholy relationship. Saraswati, however, escaped the sexual assault by transforming herself into a mare.

“And to think of father is disgusting
 Prajapati desired a daughter
 He paired with her in passionate moments
 And united in unholy alliance
 And thus committed a transgression
 By releasing dangerous fiery seed.”(Ibid)

This seed is terrible and destructive, however considered as sacred and celestial. Such an unholy thing makes oblation challenging.

The birth on the earth is destined and it lives with an unquenched thirst. The journey is long and tortuous. Elegance and paradise are the words beyond imagination in this vicious age.

It is utter foolishness to search for salvation on the earth, yet this is the thing mostly desired. The poet writes:

“Here nothing is possible
 Found in hot ashes born out
 Of living tissues, flesh and skeletons
 Ready for immersion in holy Ganges
 Out of faith and skepticism
 But it remains a transient thought
 Of seeking liberation in meditation
 Under a Bodh Tree.”(36)

The poet finds the modern world disgusting and he does not want to be re-born as man. He says,

“I don’t wish to be born as man
 To be self-serving
 I can’t dream of turning into a machine
 With breaks, clutches and accelerators
 And petrol or diesel in the stomach
 I refuse to take birth next, after death.”(37)

Living in the modern times will lead to death with indigestion as one is forced to eat “grass, guns and ammunition/Coffins, pumps and inhale LPG”(Ibid) in place of fresh air.

People swear by the Bible, Koran or Gita and cheat human beings and Gods as well. The world is full of pseudo-saints, be he a priest or a guru or a baba or a white robed Father of the Church. They live brightly in animated lies and eat flesh and meat of dead and living/Pulsating mutton cooked in liquor and nectar/without distinction.”(Ibid)

One has to wait for rebirth as a man after going through eighty four lakh yonis. It is so difficult, but still this life is not a blessing. The poet says,

“It is tragedy of times
Where a real man awaits a birth
After passing through eighty four lakhs ‘Yonis’
But life is still not a blessing in disguise
I feel it is negation of all patronage.”(38)

Life on the earth is a long torturing epic of man. The situations do not allow him to live like man. Hence, he writes:

“And so I refuse to call myself a man
I am neither a beast nor a priest
But play as a lesbian in the open.”(39)

The use of lesbian in the above context is innovative and revolutionary. This is typical of Prem’s style.

The scenario laid before us is misty. The poet is forgotten and lost amidst falling comets, hurling of missiles and blistering bombs. His faith is shaken and so he says,

“Living is a nightmare
And humanity is a huge wastage
From democracy to socialism
To communism and anarchy
From a speck of man to a crowd unguided
All survive in the blood of men
Where skeletons and skulls look arranged
In patterns beautiful, and in frozen shapes
Of museum and galleries
Those speak of wonders and history.”(Ibid)

Today, man is connected with pollution, cancer, pains in joints etc. rather than with nature. He excavates, explores and flies high, but fails to understand spirituality.

The poet has wasted sixty years of life waiting for a new dawn but alas! This is a hope against hope.

“... I stand alone as a mina
With a bag of sixty years wasted

To wait for a dawn of new millennium
 With messages of a Third World War.”(42)
 People are in the pursuit of worldly things and the Ramayan is viewed differently.
 The poet says,

“Ramayan can’t be called an epic
 To tell God’s functions on earth
 But a simple grandma’s tale
 Reduced to a wife’s loud tantrums
 For a throne, land and much more.” (Ibid)

The poet does not like rhetoric and pretensions. People put on the masks of Gods and declare to be Nanak, Mahatma or Teresa. A life of peccadillo is always better than a life owning pretensions.

In such a situation, the poet wishes ‘to live life not as a man of dignity/And virtuous heart but a life of pleasures.’(Ibid)

This is the struggle of man on a planet of evil spirits. The poet shows his brilliance in the employment of imagery taken from different religious and social sources.

Quarrels is a beautiful analysis of men and women living in an age of uncertainty, extremism and mad race. Women do not participate in the pious job of child birth. They instead love to play cards, Tombola and participate in partying. Men are impotent and women are not better, they are worse. Prem has presented an unforgettable metaphor here, “Women in crowds are deserts/ Larger than Gobi and Sahara.”(73)

On the whole, *Rainbow at Sixty* sets out to explore the realities of life. The explorations are sometimes bitter and unpalatable.

The book is a brilliant mosaic work of a variety of similes, metaphors and allusions taken from different areas of life. Prem’s use of imagery is straight-forward, but unique and ingenious. Like Ted Hughes, he attempts to use animal imagery such as that of fox, crow, dog and buffalo, but he fails to achieve depth and complexity. Animal imagery is an important choice of the poet. Through animal imagery he highlights the animal attributes inherent in man.

Most of the poems are structured on an idea. The language is simple and precise. There is sustained interest in his poems.

R.A. Singh comments thus about Prem’s ability as a poet,

“P C K Prem is a competent poet and for him the English language and its nuances pose no problems. He manipulates them in his way and naturalizes idioms, syntax, poetic forms, metre and rhythm to Indian ethos. He attempts to find out poetic expression for multifarious social and individual contradictions affecting present-day life.”(Prem:Foreword)

Works Cited:

Prem, P C K, *Rainbow at Sixty*, Prakash Book Depot, Bareilly, 2008 (Subsequent references are marked parenthetically with the text.)

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