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Title: A Man outside History

Poet: Naseer Ahmad Nasir

Translated by: Dr.Bina Biswas

Foreword by: Gulzar

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Reviewed by:

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“At times, I’ve been sown and ploughed into the land
And reaped
I am the seed of the earth
The core of the universe.”
~The Night is Older than Life~

In poetry, there is a joy that needs to be spread. Urdu poetry, in particular, is a treasure that has to be fully discovered and relished, mainly by our English-oriented intelligentsia, and the right way to communicate this treasure is through the enterprise of translation. Deep pulsating poetry, like meaningful fiction, carries forward the truth of life in a way that a mere statement of fact cannot, and this is what is reflected in the book of poems “A Man outside History”.

This is a meticulous and scholarly effort, a verbal ‘transmigration’ from Urdu into English by Dr. Bina Biswas. The publication shows her fascination with the ‘mindscape poetry’ of Naseer Ahmad Nasir.

Naseer Ahmad Nasir was born in April, 1954, in a village near Gujrat, and received the primary education there. After staying at different places and cities, now he is permanently settled in Rawalpindi. The bond of the poet with his family and friends is reflected in many poems which are direct or indirect Apostrophes in which the movement starts from the evanescent to the everlasting themes.

Nasir is the bona fide poet, ‘the core of the universe’, the one who knows every ecstatic secret of life and knits it into a poem, the one who saw poetry in childhood while drinking water from the rustic tap, and heard its notes in the echoes of the songs of the sky. Nasir’s muse was his surrounding, he was taught by the natural sources more than anything else. As he says:

“Aristotle and Neruda still had
Not awakened in me;
There was grandpa and only I”.

Poetry, the entire span of it, has been a natural companion to him, from his grandpa to his grandson. Being a born Aristotelian, every incident, every suffering soul, every joy of the world

is versified for him. What can testify more to this fact than these words:

“A poem is a wonderland,
A blue lake,
It is the heron’s squeal tripping on the rocks.
Poem is a waterfall,
Symphony of four seasons,
It is the song of dazzling rains,
And, the hunch of the rainbow is a poem.”

So here is the book of unique poetry aglow with the pains absorbed by a deeply churned soul, the poetic rumination of a brooding mind, sieved observations and logical insights of a keen intellect. This is a compilation of 111 selected poems with a smooth and compulsive flow in the characteristic vastness of Naseer Ahmad Nasir. The beauty of the poems is intact in Bina Biswas’ translations.

The book is studded with rich themes bearing the essential human vision. They are poems of life, of soul, of dreams, of truth, of an eternal quest, presented in exquisite imagery embroidered on the canvas of imagination that has the expanse of eternity. This is the fact that carries us to the concept of Time and Timelessness in Nasir’s poetry. He says:

“I can see the distances getting engulfed
In the ever-growing wish;
They have to return from finish to the source, and
The denial of time.
Focusing on one point is
The eye of the past, present and future.
In the cone of the quintessential light
All three time zones are coming to sight!

Nasir writes in a foreword to one of his volumes:

“Poetry has its own symbolic, metaphoric, thoughtful and cultural system; it sculpts character...what a unique world of mysteries and covert secrets, and of feelings which connect to the individual, society and the external and the internal layers of the universe simultaneously. In the waves of past, present and future, poetry voyages out in many directions and to define it according to some predefined set of values, or to find out its juncture in the fluid time stream, is impossible.”

One can feel the reverberations of T.S.Eliot’s concept of Time in his poem *Burnt Norton*, as he says,

“Time present and Time past
 Are both perhaps present in time future
 And Time future contained in time past.”

Time is a curious abstraction in Nasir’s vision, making the poems vast in expanse and broader in conception and vision. An individual life is like a wave in the ocean of time. According to the concept of Time by Bergson, Nasir lives not solely by clocks and calendars of the mundane reality but also by centuries and eons. Therein lies the profundity of themes and vastness of vision. His poems are the intuitive revelations as well as the happenings of the heart, not confined thematically to one place, nation or culture. Who can miss the echo of the present pain in the lines:

“We will turn the sun into a football and stars into balls, and
 Play together.
 But you don’t touch it, for God’s sake-
 Don’t lift it from under this heap of rubbish
 For this hidden toy could be a bomb.”
 ~“When Death appears in a Dustbin”~

His ink spills for joys and bleeds for pains, always carrying the childhood, the boyhood, the present moment of the indelible past:

“Can we forget the roads that we had
 Made by walking on them and the
 Trees that we planted?”
 ~The Night is older than Life~

Mindful of the fact, Naseer Ahmad Nasir himself remarks in his article: “The Euclid of Infinite Directions”: “Upon the surface of feelings, poetry is half reality, a dim reflection of the real, and in some state-a Paradox, for who can write the whole truth, and who can share the whole pain!” Writing about the multiple themes of quest, dreams, desires, aversion towards the nuclear warfare and the pain for the lost generation, he is the incarnation of an alive consciousness in the contemporary world. In the poem, “Third World” instead of hunger, suffering, literal wounding and the like, the metaphorical depiction of human misery states a clear picture of the third world. The desolation is woven in the words as well as in the eyes:

“Here the span of a night
 Is longer than life
 Here the dream is unknown to the eyes
 ...
 Here breathing is a sharp saw that

Keeps on cutting through the ribcage.” This is the monody on those whom history does not acknowledge. History-which is the script written about the splendors of princes and glories of kings but as the title of the book suggests, he hums a song on his lips about a man outside this

history, a man who is spotted on all the dim corners of life, the world might ignore him, history might forget to write about his odyssey, it moves on, but he is not missed by the quick poetic eyes claiming “I always spot him.”

The poem, “Ocean Deity” is a miracle of conception and a marvel of translation. Quoting the example cited by Gulzarsahab who played an august role in the Foreword to this book,: “They say, translating poetry from one language to another is like the shifting of perfume from one bottle to the other. Hence some part of the perfume is bound to evaporate. Bina has not lost even that.” The reader will find the poem “Ocean Deity” a masterpiece in mythical symbolism for that very reason. Sometimes the depth is so dense that it gets difficult to decide who says what to whom in the poem but still the reader is left facing the reality dramatized on the cosmic stage, now whether the deity is Triton carrying the trident is tossing the sides in the life-long wistfulness, or it is Adam apostrophizing Eve for the long lost companionship over the centuries, or the Earth as Tellus has been addressed for coming back to its lost glimmer:

“But where are you?

My dreams wander in search of you since eons

All alone on centuries crest

Await your original form and radiant visage

Bestow me with that life-

The life I had discerped from my body

Turning it into an aquatic shroud

Far and beyond earthly time and space.”

Out of many elements that made this poem a wonder of thought and ink, the lexical choice, setting up the imagery, is remarkable:

“Black loadstones, star like glitzy stones

Islands and slopes

Pebbles, heaps of clay

Reduced to lifeless gravel

By the crashing waves.

Sea cucumber, fruits, flowers, plants

Weeds, mushrooms, undergrowth peeping out of

A rocky mound of shingles

Sea reptiles, Scylla

Curled sea shells, crabs, turtles

Fishes and seagulls

But where are you?

My dreams wander in search of you since eons...”

Technically speaking the poems are composed in Free verse form of poetry which has its own strictness of beat, accent and rhythm, the line-cut, the word choice. A good translation needs to be true to the original and able to stand on its own for a new audience. Bea Basso, the Italian translator says that the choice of a single word can determine the arc of an entire work. Dr. Bina

Biswas' diction and the lexical choice transcends the Cognitive function of the language keeping it as Expressive as possible.

Naseer Ahmad Nasir is a wizard of words, a trend setter poet versifies mostly in Prose Poetry and Free-verse along with having the refined hand in Ghazal and the other forms of poetry but in this volume: *A Man outside History*, he appears to be the poet of Nazm in a rather flamboyant strain. He experimented with form and diction successfully with balanced beta and meter, and received a highly gratifying result.

Nasir's poetry carries not only the contemporary spirit but it flows in Time, above Time and beyond time. For all its timelessness it "teases us out of thought as doth eternity, " in Keats' phrase. His poems are of variable length, carrying the gift of suggesting a world of feeling through images so exquisitely selected, his poetry is steeped in images.

The volume, *"A Man outside History"* is a metaphoric account of human life in its myriad subtle shades. These poems are the fine fusion of the deep vision, meaningful expression and the poetic construction. *"Whirly Death"* is one such poem that is essentially a human trait of the curious connection of life with death. The sudden consciousness of the fleeting time gets deeper as soon as the death tap is heard on the door of life, it makes one connected to the spin and web of life more than ever before, the man suddenly starts finishing the errands in haste, realizing the time which runs fast thinking about the flowers still untouched, songs unsung, many of the paths untravelled, so much life is left un-lived as he feels he is awakened by the death tap on the door.

Another poetic relation appears in the poem, *"The Path and the Mother"* placing the bond of a child in the fondling arms of the universal character of the mother on the path of life. It is an unvarnished relation of her unconditional self-surrender, sacrifices, and selfless devotion. The style is narrative, moving from the particular to the general, from the surface to the deeper levels. The mother whose porous being is like a sponge soaked in the delicate emotions of love, concern and affection is portrayed universally:

"The wheel of Time moves very fast.
It has exhausted itself by turning repeatedly-
the child that once trotted with me has also grown old
but my mother keeps on walking till now
carrying me in her arms
yet hidden death is hounding us!
since the beginning of eternal Time
only she knows
where the path winds up!"

The poem *"In the Dream Territory of a Woman"* is a brief relation to the oceanic depth of her dreams and desires; another poem *"The Journey Beckons Me"* revitalizes the Biblical beings of Adam and Eve in all the universality and timelessness to their unbreakable bond. *"Dreams Lost in Water"*, *"Spectrogram of a Pictorial Poem"*, *"Windows"*, *"Lighthouse"*, *"O December! Never Come Again"* and many more such poems are added in the volume to adorn and relate the themes of life, love, dreams and quest in life, offering a fine and memorable read.

Carl Sandburg rightly remarks defining poetry, that it is “the synthesis of hyacinths and biscuits...a series of explanations of life fading off into horizons too swift for explanation.” Reaching the deep structure of the poet’s mind comes within the reach of the reader when he feels the poems on the pulse of his own, and at this Howard Nemerov’s words come to mind. He says, “You never ask a poet what he means, you tell him.” It is strongly wished that the book will find the place in the readers’ hearts as a celebration of poetry along with a message of peace. We live in times when we need the healing, soothing power of poetry. It is hoped that this will allow a larger audience to explore the deeper folds of Urdu poetry with the feelings of all tenderness as this book is dedicated to

‘Friendship and poetry beyond borders’!!!