

APPROACHING ABHAY K'S *THE SEDUCTION OF DELHI*: A STUDY OF MAJOR THEMES

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Abstract

Abhay K's collection of poems The Seduction of Delhi is an engaging and interesting book of poems on Delhi wrapped in a slim body. The book is nothing less than a journey of a city through centuries. Abhay pays homage to this legendary city in the genre that is unique to its history. As a passive lover of Delhi, he watches its ruins helplessly witnessing the dirt, darkness and duplicity of this city of emperors, poets, invaders and merchants. In this paper, I attempt to study the major themes and literary devices of the book in order to understand his stance on the cityscape of the city he so deeply loves and admires.

Keywords: Delhi, Abhay, palimpsest, paradox, juxtaposition.

Rarely do we find books of poetry written on cities. There can be histories, memoirs, travelogues but rarely poetry. Abhay K manages to pen down poems on the Palimpsest city Delhi in a collection that is at once engaging and interesting. *The Seduction of Delhi* (TSD) is the fifth collection of poetry by him. It carries a preface by Pavan K Varma and Ranjit Hoskote. Varma says that the book is “a journey of cities through centuries”. What is remarkable about the book is that Abhay pays homage to this legendary city in the genre that is unique to its history, i.e., poetry. All the poems are an outcome of his personal experience. He tells in the foreword that these poems were penned by him during his stay in Delhi from 1997-2005 when his “curiosity about mausoleums, tombs and ruins was stirred”. Abhay joined the Indian Foreign service in 2003 and before parting for Kathmandu he put together TSD.

Abhay Kumar (born 1980) (literary name Abhay K) is an Indian poet-diplomat and poet. In 2011, he also received the Gov 2.0 award on behalf of the Public Diplomacy Division, Ministry of External Affairs. He received the SAARC Literary Award for his contribution to contemporary South Asian Poetry in 2013 and was also nominated for the Pushcart Prize. He has been featured as a celebrity Indian author in Forbes India 100 Celebrity writers list and has been honoured with Asia-Pacific Excellence Award in 2014. He has published six collections of poems. His *Earth Anthem* has been translated into 30 languages.

One of the major themes of the TSD is the narrator's passive acceptance and admiration of what Delhi has come to be. "He appears to be a passive lover of Delhi watching its ruin helplessly and witnessing the "dirt, darkness and duplicity" of this city of "poets, emperors and merchants"." (Dogra 139) There is no doubt that Abhay is an ardent lover of Delhi. Varma rightly says in the preface of the book that "I applaud Abhay for falling prey to its seductions with such literary elegance and poise. Delhi needs its own balladeers. In Abhay K., it has found one."

The book is also marked by contemporaneity that dovetails into the traditional. The book has three sections focusing on: places, people and reflection on Delhi. Each section evokes a mixed feeling of nostalgia, loss, admiration and awe. In total there are thirty poems on monuments, edifices, popular places and common items that colour the fabric of Delhi including the modern Indian Coffee House, Rabindra Bhawan, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Connaught Place, Delhi University, Parikrama and Siri together with Lal Qila, Qutub Minar, Jantar-Mantar, Alai Minar, Purana-Qila, Shermandal, The Iron Pillar of Delhi, Ugrasen ki Bauli, Lodhi Garden, Sheesh Gumbad, Safdarjung Tomb, Humayun's Tomb, Tughlaqabad etc. The poems interweave the past and present effortlessly. Contradictory emotions like love, concern, passion, glory and irony, melancholy, irony all are touched upon in one sweep. The city has endured and survived many attacks and still retains its dignity and charm.

Umpteen monuments, mosques and tombs
Remnants of ancient cities,
Some still breathing, some crumbling into dust.

As Vinita Nangia says, "Delhi, in her myriad forms and shapes and smells, a city that seduces with her heaving sensuality and mystique. And through it, all the poet-diplomat walks recording his response to the milieu, coloured by his sense of history. The thoughts and history are lightly offered, without falling prey to heavy polemics or historical discourses. The poems with their staccato rhythm and stream of consciousness reflect the poet's thoughts as he meanders through history and the city, much like the River Yamuna that flows past, observing, recording, moving on...To the Delhiite who becomes immune to the history around as he traverses through the rigor of everyday life and the traffic mayhem of roads, the book affords a chance to look around afresh - and discover charms hitherto unnoticed."

The polyphonic quality of the collection is another major theme of the book. Many voices build up to create a unique poetic tour through the bylanes of Delhi. The second part of the book titled "Portraits" has seventeen poems on famous people like Ghalib, Dara Shikoh, and Zauq together with ubiquitous things and modern inhabitants that are dear and unique to Delhi's social landscape like Neem, Jamuns, Maids, Flower Girls, Auto Rickshaws and Security Guards. (Dogra 140). It's a novel method of narration of his poetic thoughts. "Abhay K. has indeed adopted a novel method of narration of his poetic thoughts—instead of expressing his musings about his subjects in the first person, the poet allows his subjects to

tell their stories themselves to the listeners. That is the reason George Szirtes, winner, T.S. Eliot Prize for Poetry, perceives Abhay K's poems as poems where "transformations are gentle and humane: the history is deep and lightly worn. This is a beautiful way to be introduced to a great city". (Srivastava). There is ample usage of personification of the city's edifices. He objectively perceives the world around himself and in the process and takes recourse to self-annihilation by merging with the poetic object. Throughout the book, he uses the pronouns "I" and "my" personifying the places and giving them a unique voice.

Juxtaposition appears to be an overt literary device. An anonymous modern-day migrant is juxtaposed with famous people of the past, the former ignorant of the latter. The poet startles by juxtaposing Bureaucrats with Security Guards; Ghalib with Zauq and Aurangzeb with Dara Shikoh. It is interesting to note that it is the hardship faced by Ghalib and not his poetry that fascinates Abhay. Ghalib's literary quest overshadowed many like Zauq. The tragedy of the poet, Zauq, regarded by many as the favourite of the last Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar, but who resigns himself to being judged as second best after Ghalib.

Cynosure of the last Mughal
the lion's rival,
the poet-laureate of Delhi-
time is the greatest judge
it has judged Ghalib, the best.
I accept it-
turning in my grave.

The paradox of what the city has become is hard to miss. The second part triumphantly captures "Delhi's paradoxical world". This is the world of poverty, wealth, power, ruins and poetry. Just as the flower girl gathers herself after being pulled by a cab driver, Delhi gathers itself to rise from its ashes like a phoenix. Abhay is vehement in insidiously stressing the phoenix-like quality of the poems is. The poem "Delhi, as I am" captures the paradox of the city of invaders, poets and rapists. The poem is replete with irony. He sarcastically calls Delhi the city of "Satya, Shanti, Nyaya" and undercuts it by overall impetus.

but the Truth is-
rapists roam my streets in peace
and my women perpetually seek justice
in one of the city courts.

The poet's ability to find poetry in the prosaic is also remarkable. Take for instance the poem "Jamuns":

Gems of black ellipsis

litter pavements;
astringent flavoured,
every monsoon, painting
Delhi tongues-
purple.

Even poet like Jayanta Mahapatra couldn't resist the profundity of the poems like "Yamuna" where the river performs the messianic role of the redeemer by taking the sins of the city upon itself. (Dogra 140)

Withdrawn and sulky
I flow past Delhi,
like dark silver
caressing the city shores,
draining darkness
from Delhi's Soul.

Jayanta Mahapatra also says in the blurb of the book that, "The poems in the three thematic lines, viz., Places, Portraits and Reflections, dovetail into one another to make Seduction of Delhi a remarkable, exciting book. Qualities of love, tenderness and compassion set Abhay K's work apart from much of the general run of current poetics. . . Abhay K's poems speak from the heart in language that doesn't compromise." Also is worth remembering that Daryagang - the largest publishing hub in the world - derives its name from river Yamuna that once flowed through Shahjahanabad during the Mughal period.

The indifference of the modern-day inhabitants to the legendary past of the city is another major theme that runs throughout the anthology. Even Dara Shikoh bemoans the indifference of the modern inhabitants of this majestic city:

I see masters of Delhi
have named streets
after murderous Aurangzeb
but Dara Shikoh
the people's prince,
no one remembers, no one cares.

Dara Shikoh, Emperor Shahjahan's eldest son's search in vain for his name through Delhi's streets is pathetic to the core. The poem remembers the generous and erudite scholar, this Sufism-inclined crown prince. He was tortured and publicly assassinated by his own "treacherous and murderous brother" and emperor to be Aurangzeb. But how he laments the fact that no one cares for him or remembers him, and instead chooses to honour his cruel and tyrant younger brother.

The epigrammatic nature of the poems is the most mesmerizing quality of the collection. The poems are well crafted, short and epigrammatic. The terse and taut structure of the poems is replete with philosophical glimpses. The average length of the poems is ten lines. The collection is also a stunning amalgamation of the poetic and the visual images. Most of the poems are accompanied by the beautiful artworks by Tarshito, a reputed Italian architect and artist, whom he met in Kathmandu and who also shared his love for Delhi. A unique interplay of verse and drawings sets the anthology apart. Also, ample use of alliterations adds to the poetic rhythm.

The last section of the book 'Reflection' consists of a single poem titled 'The Palimpsest City'. "This poem shimmers with its unique ability to metamorphose the transition of a city from Indraprastha to Delhi. The poet-critic-historian condenses the entire incomparable history of Delhi in mere seventy-five lines and encapsulates and admires the phoenix-like quality of this "palimpsest city". This poem is one of the best and most staunch examples of his wit and intelligence. Abhay finds himself aligned with Shahjahan who "could barely resist" Delhi's seduction". (Dogra 141)

Beloved of poets, emperors and merchants
I am the palimpsest city
Ascending from my ashes as the phoenix.

We also note a strain of loss that runs through most of his poems. Delhi has been reduced to an ugly spectacle of crass commercialization. The famous monuments of Delhi are off the radar of conservationists and civic authorities and have become abodes of "graffiti lovers, scribbling names of their beloved" who have no knowledge about the city's heritage and historical value. As he says in the poem 'Shermandal':

Once the pleasure pavilion of Shershah,
Humayun's Library,
now merely an abandoned abode
of graffiti lovers,
scribbling names of their beloveds
on my ancient walls
in hope of immortal love.

As a member of the elite bureaucracy, his sojourns took him to all parts of Delhi giving him an insider's view of an insider. Most of the poems are overflowing with Abhay's acute and objective observation for the changing social landscape of his "beloved" city. Delhi's panoramic, impressive and vibrant history is seen through vis a vis contemporaneity. "Past stands deathly silent gazing at the dirt and squalor of a modern-day metropolis. The poet successfully captures the ennui, angst and despair of people inhabiting this world. Delhi

helplessly witnesses the trickery and deceit that is offered to a modern-day immigrant who returns “Enlightened” after being “Jaundiced, exhausted, almost dead.” (Dogra 141)

Coming to the present time, the book successfully captures the ubiquitous auto rickshaw that is found “carrying the city on my wings”, or the present day bureaucrats who are “cornered in cramped cloisters, loaded with dusty files and subordinated with conduct rules, tamed with annual appraisals”; security guards who stand “day and night” guarding the “masters”; or the maid, “toiling day and night for a living”, and adding to the paradox of Delhi where just imagining a day without them is difficult and yet many of them remain “invisible silhouettes”. Together the tripartite division of the book summarises nearly a thousand years of history, glory, decadence, success and loss of Delhi. As Dogra says, “What Purana Qila does for people, Abhay’s book does for the readers. It is “a time machine/three millennia in thirty minutes”. (142).

Author/politician Pavan K Varma says in his Preface to the book that TSD “is written with the eye of a poetic observer but the passion of a participant. Abhay is transparently in love with the city, but his emotions never allow him to lose the objectivity of a poet for whom empathy is a means as much to pay tribute as to make the sharp, scalpel-like critique.” The city is not the typical city modernist literature with nothing but angst and ennui to define it. It is teeming with life and has managed to carry forward its past as an inextricable part of its historical legacy. To quote Jan Morris on his observation about Delhi that holds true even today “But Delhi? Delhi is not just a national capital, it is one of the political ultimates, one of the prime movers. It was born to power, war and glory...Delhi is a soldier’s town, a politician’s town, journalists’ and diplomats’ town...and lives by ambition, rivalry and opportunism.” (Abhay K, “How Delhi Compares with Other Capital Cities Through the Eyes of the World’s Finest Poets”)

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