

Book Review

Author: Nabanita Kanungo
Book : A Map of Ruins
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Review by: Dr. Sapna Dogra *

A Map of Ruins is a collection of forty-one poems spread over mere seventy pages by Nabanita Kanungo, a Shillong based poet. This is her first book. It is an excellent first-rate poems strung together by themes of identity, roots, nostalgia, lost geographies of memory and jigsaws of loss. Memory is all she has, in fact, she dedicates this book to her grandparents “for the memory they survived.” Her love and belonging to her home town Shillong is apparent enough throughout. Her personal crisis dovetails into the larger social crisis.

The opening poem “I was Born” is marked by graphic violence and imagery and “meshes of horror”. She was “inscribed into the maps” at the time of the “Naga Uprising” amidst “rioters”.

I was born underneath the feet of a woman
who saw her son being hacked alive
before she was hanged naked to a palash tree,
and then burnt.

And if this isn’t unsettling enough she goes on to say:

I was born in this need to re-figure everything one has
On geography’s leathery skin, history’s long tongue.

There are two parallel emotions that runs throughout. She deals with “being born in the throes of being up-rooted” where one has to “Pack your goats and children and leave./ the coordinates have changed”, and her desire to come back to her “lost homeland”.

With “longing” as “her only belonging” she encodes all her fears and inner anguish in these poems. The poems are marked by a dichotomy of what is and what could have been had things taken a different turn. Locales spring to life in poems like “Myllem Now”, “Nongjri” and “Laitlum”. There is a desire to trace these places in forlorn maps of her mind and to be remembered and come back to them.

I want to come back to you again
On a rainless winter day
Burdened with wordlessness,
To be greeted by cows, stray dogs

And graffiti on a misfit wall,
Just for you to see me still cling on
To something bas desolate as love. (Laitlum)

The unabashed use of Khasi words like biskot, rynsan, kong, soh phlang, so hot, khtung, nei lieh, etc. adds to the musical sound of the poems. I love these poems and can read “Cyril’s Award” over and over again. I get goose bumps every time I read “Her Thighs Still Smell of Milk”.

She is also capable of immense humour. Take for instance the poem “Faces at the Gynaecologist’s”:

Nature’s bloody ways are accepted here,
Measuring, weighing being’s worth
In a candid file of prescriptions.

Similarly, in “The Missing Tooth” she beautifully draws a comparison between an uprooted native to a tooth. In mere six lines she captures the paradox of loss and the role of memory in negotiating with the loss:

There were reasons for which we had it painfully uprooted
And now the gap of the missing tooth
Is an embarrassing memory in the mouth.

But the tongue is a child,
Habitually searching for a world
Where it is not.

Or in “Grandfather” where she remembers him and his delightful ways:

But only you will ever have the digestion
That candidly farted in the company
Of the MLA one day and said,

“I have answered your questions.”

“Surma” is the best poem in this collection and shimmers with passion:

You shall be the all the poems I chance upon
My mildewed file of poetry,
Every ache I cultivate
In the plagued plains of our past,
Our battles and pacts with the sky.

....

A part of me, that’s still your daughter
Makes an impossible wish:
Surma, flow backwards one day

And undo all of this.

A Map of Ruins is a rich and thought provoking read. in the blurb Jayanta Mahapatra rightly says,
“A distinct universe is the setting for Nabanita Kanungo’s poetry, a universe of haunting melody that makes me return to it over and over again. A Map of Ruins is powered by a deep bitter-sweet nostalgia and quiet intelligence, which the poet uses dramatically to focus on what is lost and passing away. Time, love and farewell are those ruins which the world in which Nabanita Kanungo moves with consummate ease. These “ruins” unsettle me; they are more than I can handle. “

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