



BOOK REVIEW

Much Longing, Some Fulfilment

A Handful of Sun and Other Poems

by
Padma Sachdev

Translated [from Dogri into English] by Shivanath,
Dr Karan Singh, Surinder Singh, Iqbal Masud, Mrinal Pande, Arlene Zide.
Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2000. Pages 112, Price Rs. 75

Review : OHarish Trivedi

Padma Sachdev, poet and novelist in Dogri who also writes in Hindi, is one of our more widely recognised contemporary literary figures. On top of her unmistakable literary talent, she is affable and sociable, warm and witty, loud and clear in her unrestrained laughter, and lively and spontaneous to the extent of being an irrepressible interjector in literary seminars and lectures. She is clearly her own woman (more so for constantly and publicly swearing her devotion to her even more devoted husband, the musician Surinder Singh, to whom incidentally this book is dedicated) — and a redoubtable one at that. Her prominence clearly goes beyond the few people who use Dogri, the language in which she writes most of her creative work. Her use of Dogri reflects the triumph of the force of her personality in what remains largely a man's world. Indeed, in this first volume of her poems in English translation, Dr Karan Singh in his *Foreword* goes so far as to make her out to be a representative figure of her — and his — doughty community: 'Padma Sachdev reflects the essential characteristics of the Dogra woman, full of joy and laughter, but also quick to take offence and fight vehemently for her ideals.'

A Handful of Sun and Other Poems contains 64 of Padma Sachdev's poems rendered into English by a whole battery of distinguished translators (named above), of whom the chief is Shivanath, who seems to have effected an effortless alignment of his own sensibility with that of the poet. Even in English translation, the poems thus retain an easy flow and straightforward accessibility, and that 'typical earthy flavour' which the blurb rightly ascribes to the poet. Earthy, however, does not mean only the candidly and unabashedly realistic, in Padma Sachdev's case; it seems to refer equally to the elemental context in which her humanity is situated. The sun is prominent in her poetry (as the title of the book signals) and the moon hardly less so (as in the reproachfully meditative poem

Smoke) with the stars, darkness, trees and birds hardly ever out of sight. Even a kite that is flown high in the sky, like 'some female/ Whose string was in the hands of some unknown man' is finally seen to have 'Fallen to the earth, it has become/One with the earth.' A poem titled *The Scent of the Earth* concludes:

*A hand reached out
Of a freshly dug grave
I thought nothing
Of the claw.
It was the scent of the earth
That conquered me.*

Of the six sections into which the book is divided, the first and the last are titled, respectively, *Poems of Longing* and *Poems of Fulfilment*, with the former considerably longer than the latter. One of the recurrent motifs here is the undying one of *shringara* or love, especially *vipralambha*



Padmaji being honoured with Padmashree by President of India

or in separation, and it is often treated with a tinge of erotic mysticality in a mode hallowed in Indian tradition and influentially revived in modern times by Rabindranath Tagore. The several *abhisarika* poems here fall in this category, as for example, *Where are You, Tryst. and Evening Shadows*, as well as the more numerous poems on the nature and the experience of love.

To quote from *When you Love Me* :

*When you love me
Some picture of Raas-leela
Hung on the wall opposite
Will come alive again
And slowly
Gopies and Kanhya
Will step forward
And stand in front
Right in the courtyard
And stories of your leela will be
Enacted within me*

This seems another variation on an undying theme, but the newness of the variation is marked by the modern reference to the picture hanging on the wall. For readers who may find all this a trifle antiquated, we also have in contrast a vignette of dehumanized modern life in *Evening of London*:

*Evening of London
Has none of the melancholy of evening
No soul seems to be stirred with longing
At the time of the union of darkness with light.*

Such alienation from nature is not a monopoly of the West alone in Padma Sachdev's perception, for a more shocking instance of not only indifference to nature but a systematic depredation of nature closer at home is to be found in her poem *Pacemaker*:

*Man has inserted
Pacemakers into hills
Shored them up
With metal rods
Holding up hotels.*

A striking modern image such as this to depict external reality is fully matched in effect by a very different image used to suggest what goes on within us:

To quote from *Surrender* :

*A wave seized
A part of my memory
Another returned it
With grains of sand.*

Some of the strongest poems here are those in which Padma Sachdev plays to her native strength in evoking aspects of Dogra life. *These Palaces, Are They Yours?* seems to have become her signature poem in Dogri ever since it was written at the age of 16. Its direct populist idiom retains its appeal in English translation:

*These high walls touch the skies
The palace opulent with riches and treasures
These bricks, their vibrant crimson seems so pleasant
But brings back to us the memory of our blood
This is where rivers of sweat flowed from our bodies
This is where our shoulders unloaded the rafters
Those who stood in the sun and raised these walls
Are these, the palaces, yours?
These palaces, are they yours?*

Quieter in tone but no less effective in its emotive rhetoric is the poem *These Days*, in which Padma Sachdev describes with simple poignancy the outwardly busy yet inwardly empty life of the left-behind wife of a Dogra soldier:

*I have gone to sit beside the fire again
My body smoulders, my eyes burn with the smoke
What was that song which I tried to remember
Evening comes and knocks at my door again
Night comes in again like a thief
Today or tomorrow I shall write
My song
He'll come tomorrow, surely tomorrow
Counting tomorrows I am tired
I don't know when he'll come home on leave.*

Writings in the Indian languages upon being translated into English are expected to win a wider circle of readership and greater acclaim, and this volume is bound to do so for Padma Sachdev, too. But if it falls somewhat short of the expectations both of the original poet and her new anglophone readers, that will be because, though handsomely produced and reasonably priced, it is grossly under-revised and under-edited. On almost every page

Two Poems or Two Translations ?

Don't Close Me in

*Don't close me in
Amidst the dark
And sorrow's stifling pervasive smell
In the corners
Among the cobwebs
I see hanging
Man and his children
I do not stretch out my hands
For fear of touching them.
Let me wander among the streets
Lose my self among crowded lanes
I seek paths
Where shadows rush along
Each in isolated, eager search
Don't close me in
For I am a person
Not a soul.*

Human Being and Spirit

*Don't shut me up here and go.
It's too dark here.
There is the stink of sadness here.
Man with his family seems
Hanging with cobwebs in the corners.
I am afraid to touch them.
Lest their heads should get into my hands
Let me wander in the lanes.
Let me be lost in flowers.
Let me explore roads
Where several shadows
Run in a direction
Severally,
Do not shut me up
I am a human being
Not a spirit.*

there are glaring misprints and/or simple errors of usage and construction, which go clearly beyond the latitude of the creatively permissible, even in the Indian use of English. Indeed, it seemed to me to be a positive disservice to Padma Sachdev not to correct some of these errors silently, when quoting from this book. For example, in the last quotation above, the first line is printed in the book as 'I have gone to sit beside the fire side again,' with that jarring and inept repetition of 'side.' The second line has 'my eyes, burn with smoking' where the comma is incorrect and unnecessary and 'smoking' suggests a *bidi*-induced self-affliction; while the third line has 'that song while I tried to remember' where 'while' is apparently a misprint for 'which.'

Clearly, just one (more?) round of attentive copy-editing and of proofing would have made this a substantially better volume. Poets often worry themselves sick till they get the last syllable and cadence right, and some translators perhaps do so as well, to the best of their widely varying abilities. But then, copy-editors, publishers and printers take over, and sometimes their lack of professionalism too is a major factor in ensuring that there is many a slip between the poet's cup and the reader's lip.

Poetic justice, even in the sense of justice to poets, remains an elusive commodity.

In an amusing — and highly instructive! — instance of absent-mindedness and editorial inattention the above two texts are printed separately under two different titles in this volume, on p. 5 and p. 24 respectively (see box). A closer reading would reveal, however, that these are in fact two translations of the same poem, by the same translator, Shivanath, and even though a consistent if unwitting difference in phrasing marks the two versions ('soul' in one and 'spirit' in the other, for example), there is only one substantial difference between them, when the 'crowded lanes' of the first version turn inexplicably into 'flowers' in the second version. Altogether, these versions provide rich materials for a rare comparative study of two texts which may aptly be described as non-identical twins conceived of the same seed; they are also a striking example of the process by which the same original text may replicate itself in divergent forms in translation. As the upanishadic god says, *ekoham bahu syam*: I am one, I wish to be many. □

Harish Trivedi is a Professor in the Department of English, Delhi University.