
A.N. Dwivedi’s collection is a dialogue of ideas and the exploration of modern condition of man. It is about some of the most prominent themes that preoccupy us on any side of the great divides. He shows us that divides make no sense, as for instance when the persona of the opening poem ‘a Journey to Yemen’ meets a man who flaunts Allah as some form of exclusive deity and pits him against the persona’s Ishwar. The persona answers: ‘Ishwar, Allah ‘n’ God are one / ’n’ the same’ (26).

Each of the forty poems occupies a place on a spectrum ranging from concrete to contemplative lyricism. A poem such as ‘Nuclear Holocaust’ truly packs a punch:

Today’s war will be the war of nerves,
of deadly gases ’n’ infections bacteria,
of stealthily spreading flus ’n’ fevers,
sending chill down the spines.
No protective umbrella can safeguard
a nation from the nuclear holocaust. (33)

The concrete poems are often prosaic narratives of autobiographical-sounding journeys, often linear but fragmentary. They stand in contrast to more cerebral and philosophical verses which attempt to quickly prod the issues such as freedom and tradition, intellect and one’s place in the world. The poem ‘My Religion is Humanity’ reads in part:

I’m a born Hindu,
a brahmin by rituals
a universalist in view.

Narrow-minded considerations
of caste, creed ’n’ community
are aer nothing to me. (34)

The contemplative poems often use the first person ‘I’ and the possessive ‘my’ while the concrete poems often turn to the second person ‘you’, the author’s play with distances and closeness, with separations and intimacies. I do not mean that the ‘I’ necessarily evokes closeness while the ‘you’ creates a distance. The dialectic of close/far, just as that of Self/Other, shifts within one and the same verse. There is a sense of Otherness in the Self as it finds itself in exile, in a foreign place such as Yemen in the poem ‘Going Abroad’:

Living in exile
is like putting a bird
in an iron cage.
The bird wants to fly
but its wings are clipped.
A foreign government imposes
its own rigid rules –
You can’t move even an inch

without 'Exit & Re-entry Visa'
'n' unsavoury security checks. (51)

Although this poem contains some typical metaphors, it still moves at the level of mundane
details of bureaucratic worlds that the exile has to manoeuvre. In contrast, another poem
called ‘An Exile’ reads the condition for the reader, rather than leaving her to draw
conclusions from the imagery as in the previous poem:

Living in a foreign land
for so many years
at a stretch
makes you an exile,
dreaming ever of your home 'n' hearth.

You breathe in strange air,
consume others' food 'n' water,
'n' learn another language,
'n' partly behave as they do –
as the situation compels you. (46)

There is, to me, a dialogue between these two types of poems, concrete and contemplative.
Dwivedi alternates between them and thus does not allow the reader to get stuck in any single
kind of thinking and writing the world. I am more drawn to the narrative poems which play
with the author’s autobiography, and possess some essayistic qualities, with sharply observed
details such as ‘you are asked to come bokara / But bokara never comes in Yemen / the clock
stops, the sun doesn’t run. / In the Gawaja office, conditions are no better.’ I am particularly
fond of the sequence of poems beginning with ‘Nativity Breeds Bewilderment,’ then
‘Pindans in Gaya,’ ‘A Pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya,’ and ‘A Visit to Bheda-Ghat.’ They display
more complex relationships with home affected both by the matters of heart and intellect in a
different way from the poems about exile to Yemen and the return to the native land.

It is the balance between the different kinds of poems – and in fact the changes that
take place within the persona (assuming it is one and the same) – that make the collection
work as a whole. In this reading, the poem called ‘Maintaining Balance’ seems to be a meta
gesture that reflects the structure of the collection itself as much as the world it attempts to
grasp:

The universe is kept in balance
thru contrarieties. Without this balance
the order will go haywire. (50)

Dwivedi does not let the reader rest in one place, time, thought or sentiment. He tries to
create a journey on several different levels, which seems to me a gesture that goes against any
fundamentalist call for fixity and rigidity. There is a sense of both spiritual and intellectual
freedom at play here, which is the way the ‘inclusiveness’ of world functions.

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