Homeward Bound: Poems from Australia and India, ed. by Jaydeep Sarangi and Rob Harle (Cyberwit.net, 2015)

The art of thinking anything about home can evoke a personal philosophy that is fully matured and delicate. This is clearly evident in the fourth book of an Australian-Indian poetry series published by Cyberwit. It also reflects the literary ties that Australia and India are developing. The concept of home is the thrust forward throughout the book, with multiple artistic delineations related to the present dwelling place, ancestral place, spiritual set-up, place with bitter sweet memories, one’s native place or country, place of refuge, or the concept of home of the displaced ones.

Eight Indian and eight Australian poets contribute four poems each. From these, there are five poems with the title ‘Home’. Each has its own concept. For example, indigenous writer Ali Cobby Eckermann, in one poem, expresses doubt if our children today look under rocks and whether they would find home in ‘dry river’; ‘dead birds’ beach fenced’; and ‘dead fish on shore.’ (18). Poet Bashabi Fraser talks of home with reference to pet animals forming a part of the family and being taken care of by mother and at the same time accounts for the wild and stray birds and animals returning home. Bibhu Padhi suggests that home is where we are today. We welcome strangers as relations and our home perched among our children’s grudging smiles. B.O. Allen gives a sensually delicious thought of home and breathes with flowing cool breezes on hot days: ‘flavours thoughts’ (37). He seems to develop divinity and become a lover of nature by enjoying the company of birds, trees and herbs. Home is earth’s luxury, a settling in the small room of her life. Nathaniel Buckland offers a concept of home that abounds the trees that murmur and groan remembering their long ago forests surrounded by the procreation of creatures. Vinita Agrawal beautifully says that home has no walls, no rooms, no furniture and no thresholds. It is built in the eyes ‘erected by naked and hungry hearts’ (118).

In addition, five poems specifically give readers the associated rhetorical themes on the concept of home. In ‘Homeward Bound’, Rogers speaks of tide-washed pebbles shores as a memory. Confusing navigation of the temporal with ‘intimations of immorality’ (15) brings a sense that makes him ‘homeward bound emotionally’ (15). B.O. Allen’s ‘Leaving Home’ talks of the poet’s beautiful country. She remembers the sound of birds, which are dry and ancient but bear a friendly voice of freedom. In ‘Home Coming’, Gopal Lahiri speaks of how things negotiate; past, present and future exist all at once, turning layers of the time plane that occur in unison in his homecoming. Flowerbeds and fountains, old staircase drops, gossips and stories, empty rooms and the courtyard fill with layers of memories. Hamish Danks Brown, in ‘Home is Herewith the Both of Us’, focuses on how he and his partner have dwelt in delight wherever they are; moving on somewhere has never made them stay close. In ‘Meditations on Home’, Sunil Sharma speaks of free-mindedness as a socialist, which is in fact difficult to maintain.
The poets have also attributed differently to earthly and human concepts like times or seasons, events, objects and experiences. For example, in ‘A Funeral Song’, Eckermann speaks of her turn as a singer in the funeral which happens to be a unique experience for her. In her poem ‘Summer’, she reflects on a summer storm that transforms and gathers birds in feather country dancing to the music of wood giving a natural sense of home. Her ‘Time’ speaks of how people have been watching home rituals being observed for generations and how old people perish making the family wait for the arrival of new voices.

The poems of Bashabi Fraser, such as ‘Our Bird Table’, ‘The Midnight Calls’, and ‘The Family Photograph’, reflect on the reminiscences of home in different ways. The spirit of ‘Time’ is found echoing in ‘The Family Photograph’, reminding the poet of the past and future of their family. Bibhu Padhi’s ‘The Green Light’ speaks of his miraculous feelings as every little thing seems to have been transformed by the light into the lucidity of April, full of joy and dreams, whereas ‘The Garden’ artistically reveals his hope that birds would come in order to continue the unfulfilled activities. His poem ‘Father’s Voices’ gives a sense of very natural Indian family ambience with the importance of father as father’s voice is often harsher but still bears an undertone of humbleness and love. Gopal Lahiri’s ‘Surreal Canvas’ wishes to pass from one world to another, leaving things behind as they look like surreal pictures on canvas, and his wary eyes and hunched shoulders still search for a sweet home. ‘Solitary Confinement’ gives the idea of the charm of novelty in search of a new home, whereas in ‘Tiny Raindrops’ he remembers how the raindrops shower holding arms under an arjun tree, blowing conch shells, trees filled with birds and the fading light over the wooden shape. L.J. Shore’s ‘Elephants’, ‘Ghost Figs’, and ‘Rainforest Retreat’, Buckland’s ‘New Moon’, and ‘Green’, Vinita Agrawal’s ‘Bare of Shade’ and ‘Summer We Called Home’ illustrate the experiences of the poets with different natural set-ups both in reality and imagination.

The poets Sunil Sharma and Usha Kishore reflect on their sense of reaction with unique socio-cultural and spiritual crisis. Sharma, in his four-part poem under the title ‘Meditations on Home’, says that earlier he had a socialist and free-spirited self which became futile with the identity crisis that developed as a consequence of the so-called post-modern society where change and unrest is a common feature. Similarly, Usha, in her poems ‘New City’, ‘Musings over Kerala’, ‘Writing India’ and ‘Distance’, gives a diasporic outlook of home where she becomes a distant voice. In this way, there are poems reflecting human nature, as in Roger’s ‘Beyond Simplicity: A Home Portrait’ that says how home has momentary peace: ‘long cast rhythmic interchanges progressing time’s generational march through memory’s arch’. In ‘Memory’s challenge’, he speaks of how the house remembers a passerby, and floors recall ‘footfalls and memory’.

In the final section, the poem by Jaydeep Sarangi entitled ‘Home of Poems’ makes a poem a home and this home concept leads to the formation of art of Gandhara that brings about
nostalgia of perfection in thought and action. This is followed by ‘Had Things Been Different’, a poem by Rob Harle that marks the end of the book. This poem creates a captivating thought of home by a poetic visualisation of feelings of the warmth of home under the ‘mighty steel-gray bridge’ (121) where there are elements to ‘mesmerize’ (121) with the sense of home instantly amidst the hue and cry of so called daily chores.

The collection of poems is a blend of creativity and vivid picturisation of different homes and/or community cultures. There are changes in thoughts and imaginations embedded with the changing time and situations in India as well as Australia. In poems about both the nations, a reader might notice a reflection of sensitivity of choice of subject matter and subtlety of revelation of moods and modalities on a tapestry of free subjective choice. As is common, the concept of home has been consolidated as a place of rest as usual – but a reader can also notice that human thoughts and actions relating to home have been expressed through diverse reflections of culture, tradition and events that constitute elements of sweetness and bitterness, loss and gain, birth and death and still aspire to stretch up on to the other arches of life.

Pratap Kumar Dash