

Tracing the journey of a Poet as Immigrant

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IN OUR BEAUTIFUL BONES: POEMS

By Zilka Joseph Mayapple Press, 2021, pp. 101, \$ 19.95

*The sharp edge
of my blue passport
rips the yellow envelope,
nudges my hand.
Dust still sits
in its creases.
It remembers the old country,
knows its days
are numbered,*

*and like a cat in a cage,
all eyes,
lets itself be taken
to undisclosed destinations.*

The idea of migration and the internal / external struggle that a migrant undergoes has been looked at through various lens and forms of writing. Migration can be a forced one or can be construed as a voluntary one forced by economic circumstances or for seeking a better quality of life. Either way the shift is not just in terms of geographical locations but also in the way one has come to perceive the world and one's surroundings.

...Then a dam of white

*light broke, the wall of water
shattering its cargo, and me
inside it like a seed*

*giving itself up to water
and to wind.*

Migration can be a temporary one but what happens in the case of an immigrant? Emigration has to be looked at through an entirely different lens as one understands it is not a temporary relocation from one's place of birth/growing spaces. It is rather a permanent one and with that knowledge in mind, to what extent does an individual look back/move forward and the negotiations that one has to do with the new space that one occupies in the 'host' country. The idea of assimilation is a tricky one and it is these tricky spaces that one comes across in this fabulous collection of poems, *In Our Beautiful Bones*.

*... Wildfire panic
flaring at the thought of crossing
this threshold, and immigration officers
who'll grill me with questions. How*

*will I answer through this haze,
this heaviness, this pain
I have never felt before.
Is this what people call jetlag?
Homesickness? I fall into half*

*the sky is full of still-life
airplanes, suspended
at different levels, hanging
in cobalt air. I cry at the beauty.
But I think of Dante's Purgatorio—
the tiered stages, the tortured souls
circling the spirals,
and our aircraft glides
down, down, down.*

Writer Edwidge Danticat has spoken about the idea of migrant memory which includes not only the remembrances of the homeland but also what one has personally experienced and been through. In immigrant literature, one theme that has been a common thread binding all the works has been the search for an identity. The idea of what constitutes identity and to what extent it is malleable finds a voice in this book. Identity cannot be seen as something fixed, rather it is influenced by the interactions of not just people one comes in contact with but is also influenced by the environment in which it tries to survive.

*...and suddenly, you saw me—three
pairs of honey-gold eyes met mine.
As if in a Broadway musical, and*

*right on cue, your soft mouths
dropped open. But there was
no sound. I was in a silent
film. Where your mother
notices me and shoots
a strange glance at me, grabs*

*your hands, whips you
around like little puppets, pulls
you through the doors*

*of the store. You disappear in a flash.
What just happened?...*

*Heading home,
my hands shaking
on the wheel, I tell
myself forget it, forget it—
it was only surprise
that scared them*

It is not just the environment, but the social factors that are also important to look at to trace the variability of identities as one moves through time.

*My father lives on that side of the world
where winter is a moth-eaten
wool sweater worn from November to January.
Rubbing his chest while watching TV,
he watches the blizzard rage on the news.*

*“Stay away from the snow,”
he warns me on the phone.*

One cannot overlook the idea of ethnicity when discussing immigrant literature; a sense of groupness that provides comfort and that one holds on to traces of not just a familiar environment which helps one navigate through uncharted waters of the world but it also creates a buffer zone against a world that attempts to wipe away one's differences and tries to assimilate one into its fold; where anyone is allowed to be a part of it as long as the rules are followed and as long as those entering the fold remain in their designated positions.

*...a herb afraid of itself. And garnish
you often may be, made into chutney,*

*marinade, masala,
stamped foreign, just a picture*

*in someone's cookbook, but in my kitchen
your fingers touch every dish.*

The idea of a melting pot remains ingrained where the immigrants are expected to not hold on to their ethnicities or seek to have a dialogue on these lines. Nor break the boundaries or try to bring in their sense of selves or for that matter traces of their homeland. The fear that arises from the 'other' and the reactions that arise continues well into the contemporary times.

*Tell me, whose food then
exploded with our flavors?*

*With the fruit of our soil, our
ancestors' blood? And when
we fry our fragrant masalas
we get complaints, curses?*

The book draws attention to the idea of linguistic markers and how that helps create a wall between the ones who consider ownership of a particular language and create a chasm between the 'natural' speakers of that language and those who have been naturalized.

*...you can read about the Finns,
Swedes, Germans, Italians, Danes—
all immigrants (like us) who spoke*

*no common language, but
created a new vocabulary
to communicate.*

Immigrant writers of the contemporary times now directly question and enter into a dialogue with the culture and the society that they are now a part of instead of silently sliding into the roles that have been picked out for them. But one cannot dismiss the idea that the language a writer chooses to speak in can also help us as readers understand the social relations that the writer wishes to convey. The idea of inclusivity stands in a precarious space where immigrants are welcomed but are also expected to live by the standards and rules that have been created in the host country.

*We may have triple PhDs and win Pulitzers
even a Nobel or two*

*but
non-native speakers of English*

they call us in America

*how come you speak English they ask
how come you speak such good English*

*ah the British stayed for only 200 years you
know
took us to the cleaners
took us to church
where they*

*ate our bodies drank our blood
and they sang a song of love
allelu allelu alleluia*

*that's why we speak
such gooooooooood English
such pure English the Queen's
English no less*

Why I keep using the term host for the country one shifts to is because one tries to create a home far away from the one, one has left it for but the expectations and the need to hold on to a past slowly begins to slip away as the new place has its own set of rules and ideas about to what extent you can make a home for yourself here.

*...and sometimes even a very bright person,
will exclaim
see you how lucky you are
that your country was colonized
just as well just as well don't you think
they will say and then beam at you*

*don't you see (wide smile)
just imagine (imagine!)
now you are teaching
in our schools and college*

The assumed threat/fear that comes up is that 'they' do not want to assimilate or be a part of who *we* are rather *they* want to maintain their own culture and traditions. The fear that is fanned stems from this assumption of an eventual colonization by those who are entering their country resulting in their spaces getting shrunk in the process of accommodating the outsiders. Which leaves one with a pertinent question: where does one go to? Can living in one's designated space be a solution to a peaceful existence? If one feels a need to relocate to another space, does that entail giving up on the identity that one has carried with oneself for years? The effacing of the old self to meet the requirements of a new home?

...raising his voice he tells me he can't understand immigrants

*I say our accents are different can be confusing
tell him I'm an English teacher have been for 16 years
No kidding he says looks at me hard
swerves to miss a car*

*Don't they know they should speak English
if they want to live here
My father came from all the way from Russia
he knew English and even Polish he did he did*

These questions extend to the language that one has to necessarily learn in order to be a part of the new set up. The idea behind it is to not fragment the residents of a country along the lines of language that can possibly be disrupted by those who seek to settle down in the new country and bring with them with their versions of it. As one can see in these poems, English turns into that language which comes with its own set of problems. The brewing cultural threat gets spilled over via language politics and then moves on to other areas of life-giving rise to the idea of nativism; and attempts are made trying to smoothen the so called creases so that there is no threat to the existence of the citizens of a country.

*...I know my love will say
to me. Don't
rock the boat.
But my dear,
the boat
is being rocked.
The water
is being
troubled.
Over my food
there's
a storm
brewing.*

Bharati Mukherjee asks in her essay on immigrants, *Immigrant Writing: Changing the Contours of a National Literature*: But what of those immigrants who were profoundly rooted in their countries of origin, whose bond to the land was sealed in blood through generations? How do such immigrants, especially those destined to be writers, erase memory of the land from which they had emigrated without mental reservation or purpose of evasion? After all, writers are creatures of mental reservation and evasion.

And answering this question is a beautiful poem from the book titled *The Rice Fields* where the unending questions by the custom officers at the Detroit airport bring out the differences that will continue to remain but in the face of it, one hopes to hold on to one's idea of home and to carry within oneself the remnants of one's past selves.

*Pickles? they ask sniffing deeply
prodding a packet or two
say Sure ma'am you've got no jeera or chilies?
(now they've learned the Hindi word for cumin
so the new trick is to joke with us)*

*The red-gold cardboard boxes of sweets he can see
but not the rice sprouting beneath*

the young green shoots

*no our rice fields he will never see
we carry them wherever we go*

Semeen Ali has four books of poetry to her credit. Her works have featured in several national and international journals as well as anthologies. Her new anthology on women's writings will be published this year. Apart from reviewing books, she is also the Fiction and the Poetry editor for the literary journal *Muse India*.

This review published in the June 2022 issue of *The Book Review* from India, pages 35 to 37.