

Book Review on Ayaz Rasool Nazki's *Songs of Light*

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Songs of Light by Ayaz Rasool Nazki

The dedication sets up the tone for this remarkable collection of poems on Kashmir: "When I sang the songs of light, they blinded all my eyes."

He speaks of a world beyond Kashmir, full of light and perhaps joy, "but our blinded and blindfolded eyes cannot see it" - a desolate mirror to Kashmir today, and the writer's burden as witness and raconteur of the state of his world.

Reading poetry is experiencing the world in other ways, from unusual angles, in a new tune. It is an experience that enriches the reader in unexpected ways. Through the poems in this collection, Nazki provides a hitherto unseen path into the heart of Kashmir. He reports the Kashmir conundrum to reflect its beauty and its gentle people, as well as the terrible spiral of violence that unfolds on a daily

basis, threatening to sweep away the tulips and laughter, the very land itself.

The poems in the first section are brief – staccato utterances followed by the white space of unspoken thoughts. It seems like a powerful picture to paint for the state of the paradise on earth.

Will it so happen (Page 19) joins the beauty of the land and its people seamlessly. "...the sun will rise as before /... the meadow will turn emerald green / ... that birds will chirp / butterflies dance /... and little children play hide and seek in the yard?"

In the poet's thoughts of his beloved Kashmir, nature's cycles embrace and include human activity.

I will sing light (Page 23) finds the poet in a sad, thoughtful frame, but the poem ends with a resounding assertion of faith. "I will sing light / in this dark night / and bear the consequences / of my dreams."

Birds occupy a central theme, birds with their unconditional and unfettered access to skies and lands beyond geographical borders, birds with their songs of hope, birds that usher the seasons of light and plenty into human impoverishments.

Vigil (Page 35) is heartbreaking in its simple narration of children beating the heat in the water. As children anywhere else in the world would do on a hot summer day.

Uptown Kashmir and *Downtown Kashmir* (Pages 46, 47) are an undisguised and direct noting of the respective parts of the valley and their differences, perhaps the outcome of a face to face interaction – the reader can only guess at the state of the poet’s mind.

I don't know (Page 63) stands apart in its fragrantly evocative description of the budding and flowering of a narcissus in the garden.

“If this is fidelity / If this is faith / If this is love /... / a few tiny bulges appear / on a weak slender stem / and that sets my heart racing /...”

The words flow in a natural rhythm, and the tone is, at once, full of wonder and jubilation.

Nostradamus (Page 67), on the other hand, is heavy with social and political context, drawing upon the Quranic story of Jacob and Joseph, his son, with the gift of prophecy, as well as other myths.

It is the poet’s masterful weaving of present context into popular lore that gives this poem its beauty and potency.

Nazki has a delicate touch – a gentle nudge to words, and they seem to slide into their positions on the page. There is no heavy lifting, no large sounds, almost no effort in creating the verisimilitude that puts this collection in a distinct class of its own.

Fareed Parbati’s pen (Page 79) is a tender *nazm* to the deceased Urdu poet known for his contribution to the Urdu *rubai* format.

Poets and writers live in shared homes through valleys of time and space – of literary traditions and social sensibilities of changing worlds. Indeed, this is how the building of literary tradition occurs, over centuries. Works of stalwarts inspire and challenge, and demand fresh words and voices, differentiated though they may be in style and format. The poems written for Agha Shahid Ali are evidence of that knowledge of a deeper connection within the tradition of Kashmiri poetry. *All day long* (Page 81) picks up the narrative-baton from Shahid Agha Ali with his own rich tapestry of Kashmir-inspired works. *Agha Shahid Ali* (Page 90) is a touching tribute to the poet who passed on before Nazki.

The third section, *Echoing Shamas Faqir*, invokes the spirit of the legendary 19th-century Sufi poet Shamas Faqir, whose work brings together the nuances of Sufi poetry in Persian, Urdu and Kashmiri.

In this section, therefore, Nazki brings to the fore his Sufi oeuvre and it could not be a better culmination of an outstanding volume of poetry.

Professor Nazki's collection is the work of a sophisticated and masterful poet, who is well versed with poetic traditions of Kashmir and also with contemporary social dynamics in the region – upstart, flammable and constantly on edge. Despite this, his work is rare in its silent subdued commentary that is sans rancor and anger. On the other hand, an ancient sadness (probably inherited from his poetic forefathers), and thoughtfulness permeate his poetry.

He switches with ease between painting poetically abstract images and literal descriptions that are impactful and immediately identifiable in the present. His poetic imagery focusing on birds and children speaks of his distress over the recent turn in the valley with school children forsaking education for participating in violent exchanges – could one imagine anything worse?

The poet and writer discharges his duty as witness and raconteur, but he also wounds his own soul in the process, and Nazki is obviously not spared. A superb collection and when produced with the consummate skill of Professor Anand Lal of Writers Workshop, the result could only be superlative.

Author's Bio

Professor Ayaz Rasool Nazki, who comes from a family of scholars and poets, was trained as a biological scientist and taught science all his professional life. He has written both poetry and prose in Kashmiri and Urdu, and has published a number of volumes of poetry in these languages.

Ayaz translated a selection of his father, the legendary poet-scholar Mir Ghulam Rasool Nazki's classic Kashmiri rubayiaat or quatrains, into English and published them as

Echo.

Songs of Light is his first collection of English poems. He has also written a novel, which is in the final stages of production.

Both in his poetry and prose, Ayaz essentially represents Kashmir, its ethos, its pain, its past, present and future. The poems in this volume also provide a glimpse into the mind of an artist totally wedded to his land and the consciousness that it represents.

Ayaz is presently serving as Regional Director at Indian Council for cultural Relations, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, in Srinagar, Kashmir.

Reviewer's Bio

Meenakshi Jauhari Chawla trained as a computer engineer but works now for an independent publishing house in New Delhi. Her fiction has been published in The Little Magazine and Sahitya Akademi's journal, Indian Literature. Her poems were part of a poetry volume entitled I, Me, Myself (Unisun, Bangalore, 2010) and the The Poetry Society (India) Journal (2010).

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