Book Review

The Ontological Wall


Bishnupada Ray

In Jaydeep Sarangi’s latest book of poems *The Wall and Other Poems*, one can sense the dilemma the poet faces between two credos: the credo of a liberal artist and the credo of a committed artist. The credo of the liberal artist is universalism, in the mould of western liberal humanism, which the committed artist discards as pseudo humanist, pseudo liberal and pseudo universalist aesthetic; a rejection common among third world artists. On the contrary, the liberal artist can claim that to be committed is to embrace a regional, political, sectarian and parochial aesthetic. In short, the dilemma for the artist is to remain apolitical (liberal) or to become political (committed). Sarangi’s title for the book, as he himself makes clear in the title poem “The Wall”, is borrowed from the famous Frost poem ‘Mending Wall’ that at once brings back the age-old debate of putting up a wall and thereby limiting oneself within bounds, or to do away with a wall and thereby delimiting oneself without bounds. The debate, as we can well see, is augmented and given a new dimension by the third world or postcolonial artist who is committed to break the wall of normative western aesthetic (of the oppressor) in favour of a more ethical humanism (of the oppressed). Sarangi aptly places the blame of erecting the wall on the colonial or neocolonial oppressor (‘Eagles’) and then goes to the reversal of history in defying the wall, through the mixing of cultures or multiculturism.
Years back I got a paper. Eagles had their party
To build the wall
Between the minds, rivers and mountains. …
Time ran a full circle
Clouds dispersed. It rained.
Our souls were heavy with memory
Had one story.
Life had a new course. Perspectives became global
Neighbourhood friendly. (‘The Wall’)

The western aesthetic, though liberal in concept, is deeply political, that is to say, it creates the western norms of humanism at the cost of the Other. On the contrary, ‘committed’ sounds like parochial but in the long run it makes the truly revolutionary and liberatory aesthetic. In Sarangi’s poetry the wall is a border and also a ‘Lakshmanrekha’, and his poetry becomes a border crossing in various senses. He makes a move in the psychoanalytic field, from conscious to unconscious, from the knowable to the unknowable, from the repressor to the repressed.

Dark night kindles the chamber of thoughts
I never know where I roam.
A full day drags me back
Possibly, a shadow in the back
The other half of a lighted discourse. (‘Stories Beyond the Wall’)

The dividing line between the master and slave, between the dominator and the dominated still persists like patriarchy, as Sarangi takes up a feminist tone of border crossing in his poem ‘Lakshmanrekha’.

Her vessel has water from native links
Red soil and dry leaves of Sal and Mahuya.
A male shadow follows her
Like a dominant caste.
There are limits around her neck
So many nails to cross
So many walls to dig holes
Before borders extended up to child caring and child rearing.
(‘Lakshmanrekha’)

But the most mysterious wall is the ontological wall that one faces within the being. Sarangi’s poetry is about solipsistic dialogues happening in the soul, in his search for the true self, elusive and illusory like a “Mysterious Mistress” and part of some confused psychological need of the poet. The experience of the wall is a vale of soul making, a veil to be lifted and a wail
of despair, in his passage from chaos to creation. This creation depends on a sense of wholeness and fullness, like the sacred well of life. That may well be the ultimate vision that one will gather in this collection of poems.

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