

Book Review

J.P. Das (Trans.). Vinita Gupta Chaturvedi (Ed.). 2023. *In Our Own Voice: Poems by Odia Women Poets*. Black Eagle Books. Pp. 146.

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In Our Own Voice, published by Black Eagle Books brings together seventy-nine poems penned by twenty-four Odia women poets. The collection has been translated by Jagannath Prasad Das (b 26 April 1936), an eminent Odia poet, playwright, essayist and fiction writer. The book brings together poets who are recognised literary luminaries and have been recipients of various honours and prizes that are a testament to the impact of their craft. The poets comprise Manorama Mahapatra, who has been a recipient of the Sahitya Akademi award, the Best Poet Award recipient by Vishwa Odia Sammelan (2013), and Odisha Sahitya Akademi (2022); Mamata Dash, who received awards from the Odisha Sahitya Academy and the Bharatiya Bhasa Parishada National Award; and Yashodhara Das, who was awarded the Best Poet Award by Vishwa Odia Sammelan (2013) and Odisha Sahitya Akademi (2022). The collection also includes emerging voices such as Swapnajita Sankhua. Vinita Gupta Chaturvedi provides a crisp Introduction that frames the temporal as well as sociocultural context of these poems. The Introduction also elaborates on J. P. Das' translation as one that embodies the rich prosodic and rhetorical features of the original. The Introduction elaborates on the nuances of various stylistic devices and imagery that coalesce to weave a rich tapestry of women's responses to the contemporary moment. The verses beckon the reader through images derived from flora such as kashatandi, sunahari, gulmohar, louki vine, and kadamba; fauna such as the kumbhatua bird; and women from mythology such as Ahalya, Urmila, and Yashodhara.

The verse compilation curates a spectrum of mediations on aspirations, desires, hopes, and relationships, among others. Even as the collection of poems signals a self-reflexive speaker, the collection also comprises poems that evaluate the nation-state in terms of the well-being of citizens, the extent of democratic inclusivity, access to justice and rights, etc. The poems provide an insight into the rich interior landscape that extends beyond the mandated normative ideas of womanhood. The various contemplations of self and the world embodied in the collection reveal a rich mosaic of autonomous feminine selves to the reader. The speakers in the poems ask questions that compel the reader to reflect on his or her own assumptions. These questions destabilize the norm and serve to transcend the terms of desire that have traditionally framed women's lives. The tone of the speaker in Aparna Mohanty's "Untitled" critiques, through a series of questions, the terms that frame the meaning of being a "soul-mate," "partner," or "companion" (49). For "men," the speaker charges that these terms are "shackled" to "rank and status" (50). Giribala Mohanty's "Woman" also signals this shift. The speaker in her poem puts forth a counterpoint through questions about adherence to mandated desires. The speaker asks, for instance, "How can a woman have a heart that throbs?" (55). The poet examines a version of womanhood that is reflexive and expresses "yearnings" that transcend those that have been sanctioned ("Woman," 55). The tone and mood of these ruminations are, however, one of optimism. Amiyabala Muni's optimism is sounded in the "promise" that "tomorrow" holds (64). The speaker in Sarojini Sarangi's poem declares through an interplay of metaphor and simile that she "no longer" wishes to lose herself "like a shell" in the "ocean" of the beloved's eyes (67). The mood of rejuvenation through cleansing and renewal is signaled by the allusion to rain in the poem. For Pritidhara Samal, "Poetry" offers an avenue that has the ability to pull her out "from abysmal depth" and helps clarify her thoughts (103).

Besides these contemplations of the self, the collection also includes poems that engage with contemplations pertaining to a deeply iniquitous society. The speakers make a trenchant commentary on the extreme concentration of resources amongst a few and the deleterious effect of the same on the others left disempowered and dispossessed. In doing so, speakers in the poems enunciate a critique of the post-colonial Indian state. Pratiksha Jena uses the metaphor of a chess board to allude to the mechanisms that effect these inequities at the cost of the

deprived. Chirashree Indrasingh's poem "Farmer's Song" also resonates with this concern. The mood of festivity in the second stanza is followed in the third by a reference to farmer distress and suicide due to an inability to pay loans. Gayatribala Panda in "Country" laments that the country belongs to "those who have muscle, power, money" (121). The speaker recognizes the value of the poems in conveying the myriad struggles for resources and justice denied. The collection contains poems that appear to offer a remedy to the malaise. Sucheta Mishra's poem "Love" juxtaposes "love" with "history" (86). The resilience and power of love are presented as a veritable "miracle" in contrast to the powerful forces that have shaped history (86). Madhuri Panda also utilizes the juxtaposition between "love" and violence singled out through "grenade" (90). The latter is a response to her attempts to reframe meaning through linguistic control. The mere attempt, it seems, is perceived as subversive and engenders violent reprisals. In the final poem of the collection composed by Swapnajita Sankhua, the speaker recounts the decisive moment when she "started writing poems" following which she became a "rollicking river without fear of getting lost" (134). The metaphor employed by Sankhua in this illustration forges a connection between the poet and ideas of fluidity, change of course, and constant movement. Qualifying the river as "rollicking" clarifies the feeling of abandonment and freedom from restraint. The speakers of the poems in the collection *In Our Own Voice* relate the act of writing poetry to a moment of assertion of linguistic control. They value this moment as a liberating one, as the speaker seizes the narrative and initiates the reformulation of the terms of self in a meaningful manner.

The project of exploration of ideas of self and nation in the anthology *In Our Own Voice* is distinctly contemporary. It is a fascinating journey that offers an insight into the tradition of Odia poetry composed by women and also various themes that comprise their rumination in the current moment.