

Vindication of the Mortal Given: A Cursory Look at Dilipnaik's Gift of Smoke

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Abstract

This write-up has discerned in DilipNaik's third collection of poetry, **A Gift of Smoke** a firm vindication of the mortal given. The volume has vindicated the mortal given primarily on the basis of the aesthetics of body and many felicities of mortal life including love. With its thrust on the aesthetics of body, love and transient human life, this versified narrative has emerged to be a critique of the prevalent philosophical notion about carnal life- prevalent in the Oriental world, as something called maya or illusion. This critical reading demonstrates how the poetry of Naik deconstructs such an age-old idea through a poetic repertoire the underlying conviction of which shares to some extent the view point associated with the cliché *carpe diem*. Underneath the collection's surface celebrations of varying aspects of transitory life, there is discernible in the persona a starved soul passing death-in-life being apparently accursed with irredeemable depravity and damnation. The write-up has brought to light not only deep anguishes of such a disquietingly starved soul of the persona, but also his fervent prayer to the bodied beloved for his sacrament through her gracious incarnation in flesh and blood at his doorstep. In short, this unique collection, **A Gift of Smoke**, has remained a bold counter narrative to the ideals of nirvana.]

KEYWORDS: Nirvana, *carpe diem*, sacrament, transience, maya, illusion, damnation, body & soul

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Why give up the given
to find nothing. -----DilipNaik

I'm free from the illusion of permanence.
It's the moment I hunt for. . . . ----- DilipNaik

A Gift of Smoke is the third collection of poetry in English by Dilip Naik, an Indian English poet. Published by the Authors Press, New Delhi, in the third quarter of the current year, it has showcased altogether sixty-six poems in its poetic space comprising one hundred pages. Its price tag bears the figure two hundred fifty in terms of Indian rupees. Quintessentially love poems, a great majority of them appear to have been cast in the mould of prayers and hymns. The speaker of these poems has taken a position which is by and large, the position of a worshipper. The deity he worships is none other than his evanescent "bodied beloved." In terms of love, the worshipper's tends to be a starved soul, which prays fervently to the deity of love for her gracious re-visiting to its arbour by incarnating in flesh and blood. The condemned soul sees its sacrament only in its physical cohabitation with the "bodied beloved." With their thrust predominately on the aesthetics of body, the songs of the volume have come up as a firm vindication of the mortal given. Coming heavily on the age-old Oriental notion of mortal body as maya (illusion) in general and of the Buddhist one in particular, the verses here celebrate "the musical flame of the flesh"

(Naik, 2018, 62). They reverberate with the nostalgic notes of “the music of our mortal meeting” (2018, 16). The age-old philosophical bid to renounce transient body in favour of something permanent and everlasting has in fact, suffered a serious jolt here from the hands of the poet. In the poem titled “A Significant Counterfeit,” for example, the speaker proclaims,

I'm free from the illusion of permanence.
It's the moment I hunt for,
as long as I can afford
the exchange value of this mirror of pleasure
which shows, at one remove, what it's like
when the body gifts itself in the freedom of desire (84).

Liberating himself from “the illusion of permanence,” the narrator has focused on the transient moment. It is a moment devoted not towards the redemption of the so called immortal soul “in the freedom” from “desire.” It is rather a moment devoted entirely to the mortal body to immerse fully and revel “itself in the freedom of desire.” Body and desire have not been to the narrator the root cause of suffering alone, as Buddha has realised. The “significant counterfeit,” which the poem speaks about, is conspicuously referred to the mortal body, or the mortal given. It is the arena on which the soul finds its sacrament not through “cessation,” and “extinction” of desire but through its (desire's) unrepressed release and exhilarating fulfilment. The underlying hedonistic perception is discernible in the very opening poem of the volume, titled “Thirst.” Its introductory slot sets as much the tone as the argument of the poems to follow. Halfway the poem, in an ironic undertone, the speaker is heard reciting the preaching of the Indian sages.

Contemplate the cycle of seasons, says the monk.
How everything changes.
How empty is the film of forms.
How the light passes (2018, 13).

Against the underlying message not to stick very long to the illusory, passing things, the speaker moves in the opposite direction defying the message. The very next lines are telling about his admission of his courtship with the contrary thing. He says
And yet I cling to you
vapours of rainbow that you are (2018, 13).

The ladylove's momentary appearance in the form of “vapours of rainbow” has remained beyond doubt, more fascinating to the persona. The second poem “Post-Nirvana” is more explicit and virulent in its subversive approach to the Buddhist renunciatory premise on body and ultimate goal of nirvana (salvation). The affirmation of the body-centric earthly life against “nirvana” is more forcefully pronounced here in this poem. The aspersion is unambiguous in the following last two stanzas of the poem.

The unbearable is something.
Why give up the given
to find nothing.

Yes, all this is dukkha.
But wasn't it Sariputta's mother who retorted –
“Go back, O Bhikkhu,
I want life, not nirvana”? (14).

Unlike Buddha and his disciples, the protagonist here in Naik's versified narrative on the aesthetics of body and felicities of life, has emerged an ardent singer of life. Here in Naik, he is more an advocate of life and its amenities such as beauty and love than of the counter escapist philosophy which is based on transient ground.

Notwithstanding the fact, the poems do resonate with unmistakable notes of glorification of mortal living and the corporeal frame of being, but they seem to have issued from a "gagged soul" irredeemably caught in an intense and implosive burning of lifetime duration and efficacy. The burning has been fuelled not by an overflowing well of love but by an empty one. Of course, they have been kindled with, to quote the poet, "a raw funeral fuel – the body" (2018, 62). The words and lines of these songs are embers smouldering intermittently in the aftermath of an overwhelmingly dazzling moment of epiphany. The speaker has had the rare opportunity in the moment of having a stint of the sensuous apprehension of the bodied beloved. The songs here are, much like those of the earlier two volumes of Naik, a verbal memorial erected in the memory that miraculous haunting moment of epiphany. The following lines of the poet Yehuda Amichai which have formed the epigraph to the volume under review, are testimonial to the fact. The lines read

"My God, the soul
you gave me
is smoke –
from never-ending burnings
of memories of love" (5).

The very title, **A Gift of Smoke**, undoubtedly does point to its lineage to these lines of Amichai. Despite their profoundly melancholic overtone, the poems have come up as immortal lustrous gifts from a love-smitten "gagged soul" bearing extremely touching "memories of love." The twirling coils of smoke have indeed turned to be fragrant emissions from a burning incense-like soul soaked with love. As such, poetry seldom blooms in the luxuriant garden of life. It often blooms rather in the graveyard of life. It is not the riches but the losses of life what fertilise poetry. In his second collection of poetry, **By Inference**, Naik has aptly observed "In the history of the poet's toil/memory is always a gift of loss" (2014, 107). The smoky space of the collection, **A Gift of Smoke**, is a silky and silver canvas of memory. The spectrum of love it reflects has a definite fatalistic contour to it. Love with Naik has never remained an exercise of human will. Destiny has a decisive say in it. In the divine dispensation of love, the lover can be either a blessed beneficiary or a damned soul depending on the decree of the arbitrary unseen. In the poetry of Naik, the lover has always emerged to be the cursed one. The glimpse of the precarious position into which his lover has been more often than not enforced is found in the lines below from his poem "Your Gift."

It's not in my power
to find. I'm only the search.
I haven't willed the why of my choice.
Helpless as the grass is green.

I look for the face my eyes were meant to hold
as a gift from the unseen to the seen (2018, 50).

Placed into such an unfortunate position without any choice, the speaker often wonders over such unjust impositions on his life. He is heard lamenting over his fate in the last couplet of the poem.

Why am I the one who looks for
what I can't find on my own? (50).

The portrait of the ill-fate of the speaker is more prominent and evocative in the poem "Dream." The opening stanza reads
 That's what you're meant for.
 Not for sharing a predictable duvet
 side by side in habitual togetherness.
 Only as a resource of dream,
 down the years unhousing
 my soul in my body (72).

Because the narrator is deprived of a "habitual togetherness" with his ladylove, she has remained "a resource of dream/down the years." Her haunting memory has unplugged his "soul" from his "body." She has always and invariably loomed large on the horizon of his sky and turned the very cause and condition not of his "dream" alone but of his desire as well. She has always wandered unavailably on the other side of the borders of appeasement. Ungraspably present in the form of a rainbow and non-existent but visibly present as a mirage in the desert, the beloved has signified 'something indestructible' to the lover. In an eponymous poem, Naik has adroitly spelt out this dichotomous state of the beloved. He has written with reference to the beloved

You are the centre
 of the last and everlasting feeling –
 the emptiness of form (2018, 71).

The last and everlasting feeling, the centre of which lies in the beloved, is undoubtedly untrammelled hope and unending desire. English, neo-classical poet, Alexander Pope has aptly observed in his poem "An Essay on Man" "Hopes springs eternal in the human breast" (110). And it needs no explanation that hope, or even for that matter, desire, doesn't have any form. It is the very symbol of "the emptiness of form." True, the beloved has now given up her bodily form and dispersed into "the emptiness of form." But she hasn't ceased to be meaningless to the lover. On the contrary, she has turned the very metaphoricality of meaning. In the same poem "Something Indestructible," he is heard saying

Something indestructible –
 you signify
 even if you don't exist (71).

She has taken the turn of what Derrida calls "the central signified" or "the transcendental signified," in literal sense, though (Derrida, 2001, 197). Like God and Truth, the primordial protagonists of the grand narratives of theology and metaphysics, the beloved here has appeared an iconic "central signified" only to be prayed to and contemplated upon by the depraved speaker for sanction of her redemptive grace. Like God, "the transcendental signified," the beloved has posed as something inscrutable, irreducible, indeterminate, and therefore, out and out enigmatic and incomprehensible. Again, like God, the invisible omnipresent, the beloved has appeared as expansive, as boundless, as overarching and encompassing a presence as "space." She appears as unique as God Himself. This uniqueness of the beloved is very much hinted in the following couplet from the same poem.

And yet you are
 as nothing can be (71).

In order to embrace and unite with this unique, overspreading but ungraspable presence, the craving heart now burns intermittently and emits lots of "smoke." The disquiet heart seeks to merge with the beloved completely in the manner smoke gets

merged in the sky without any remnant left behind. The following words from none other than the same poem corroborate this ardent desire of the speaker.

Taking space as your metaphor
the heart smokes to the sky
like a smouldering pile of garbage
in the corner of a drizzling evening (71).

In the last stanza she is described as “a figurative wish/of a lifetime given to fear?” The very fact that the ladylove represents “a figurative wish/of a lifetime” cancels out the non-existent dimension of her being. She is there and therefore, she arouses desire in the lover. This logic highlighting such causal effect is distinct in the following lines.

The need for you –
why does it exist
if you don't?

As a figurative wish coextensive with one's lifetime, she has turned the epicentre of desire and “the locus/of the prayer.” Desire for the luminous bodied beloved which has been construed as “duhkha” (sorrow) since the very inception of Oriental intellectual thoughts, is in the eyes of the protagonist here never a liability on the soul. It is rather a gift. The poem “The Idea” refutes this philosophical premise by counting it rather as “a gift.” It says

Your desire is a gift.
You wander in this world looking
for a symmetry (88).

This gift is given to the humans not for its extinction but for its consummation. Its consummation is reached only in its confluence with a symmetrical body. The locus of the symmetry lies in “the body,” which in the opinion of the poet is “a raw funeral fuel” (62). It is this “raw funeral fuel – the body” what the Buddhist monks were most afraid of. They renounced the body by renouncing its offspring, desire. In an utter disregard for the body and its attendant gift, the desire, they set upon the path of the “nothing” for attainment of the much hyped nirvana. But infused as he is with an inordinate desire for the “mortal meeting” with the body, and an ardent advocate of the mortal given as he avowedly is, it is no wonder, Naik's persona is virulently aversive of the being's cessation from body and extermination from desire. He rather wants to live in the moment and like Tennyson's untiring protagonist, Ulysses, “drink/Life to the lees” (44). Such preference of the so called profane, is well pronounced in the following opening lines of the poem “Your Body.”

What the Buddhist monk renounced,
you chose, absolutely.

A passer-by detained for a while,
a raw funeral fuel – the body (62).

The choice he makes thus, clearly involves a perceptual conflict and one of value as well, - a conflict with the Buddhist philosophy on mortal life. What the monks counted as trash and transitory is construed here as absolutely important by the speaker of the poem. It is the same trait of transience which appeared illusory and distracting to the monks, appears the cause and condition of a meaningful existence on this earth to the speaker. It is this very attribute of transience what, according to the poet, lends importance to the mortal life and makes it so endearing and worth living. The fear of losing arouses anxiety, for it is the permanent and plenitude presence what breeds boredom, ennui and unexciting complacency. It is this undying presence what

turns an asset to a liability. The dichotomy between mortal body and immortal soul and the involved corresponding indices of value are implicit in the following lines of the poem.

For the soul will always be there,
always the same.
And what can't be lost
isn't worth the claim (62).

The underlying rationale in these lines is the perishable is the only precious thing but not the sickeningly permanent ones. That is the reason why the hedonistic protagonist in Naik's song is in mad pursuit of the chimera like but intoxicating body. He further writes in the same poem addressing the persona

You loved the bodied beloved,
his marmoreal fever,
his sculpted transience (62).

This logic is further reaffirmed in the last stanza of the poem. Naik writes fortifying the underlying argument

You chose the musical flame of the flesh –
the metonymy of a moment,
the fragrance of farewell in the intensity of oneness,
for you knew
that beauty is a gift
of impermanence (62).

John Keats has made an important point in his observation "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/ are sweeter" (1059). Accordingly, the available beloved is sweet and soothing but the absent one is far more sweet and far more soothing. We in fact, realise the value and importance of a thing only in the moments of its missing. Presence is pleasing but absence is maddening. "Poetry," asserts Naik in a Facebook posting, "stands between me and my madness." As a matter of fact, poetry, and for that matter, the entire gamut of aesthetic art at large, more often than not, lies embedded on the bedstead of an analogous haunting moment of intensely maddening experience. As regards, **A Gift of Smoke**, it is indeed a still picture of "that beauty. . . of impermanence" resonant with "the musical flame of the flesh." It is projected on "the metonymy of a moment," in "the fragrance of farewell in the intensity of oneness." It is a film made in immortal idioms to preserve those fleeting and evanescent felicities of mortal life in the archive of time. The film will be played over and over again by the posterity to muse on the secret tidings of heart and map out in its abysmal reaches the cerebral miles of an astoundingly mellowed mind.

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