

Book Review

Patient Dignity

Poems by Bashabi Fraser, Paintings by Vibha Pankaj
 Edinburgh: Scotland Street Press, 2021.
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Patient Dignity (2021), Bashabi Fraser's eighth volume of poems, may be counted among the early responses to the pandemic-experience. Dedicated to the medical "staff working on the frontline, risking their lives to save ours at NHS and in Care Homes", the thirty-two odd pandemic-related poems in this collection complemented by paintings by Vibha Pankaj, which Fraser describes as "meditative introspection and vibrant expressiveness" (5), bring together pre-Covid-19 experiences, the interface with the pandemic-inflicted sense of incapacity and loss, and more importantly, an optimistic hope that these experiences shall facilitate future negotiations with the Truth of human values, sustainable ecology and respect for human and non-human inhabitants of the Earth. Patient Dignity, of paramount value among healthcare personnel, was thrown a challenge by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has fragmented and even destroyed human life and confined the survivors within limited spaces, forcing upon the human community a new understanding of existence, making human beings grapple with an unexpected experience. There is a promise of light at the end of the journey through darkness which many shall fail to complete, when calm and peace shall prevail, and when fearful matters will be made bearable by those medical personnel whose continuous perseverance has reinforced the value of patient dignity.

Two Introductions, by the poet, Bashabi Fraser, and by the painter, Vibha Pankaj, complementing each other, reflect their collaborative artistry. The long poem which comprises Part One, the Foreword titled "Post-truth era", begins with a passing reference to the paradigm of *amrita-manthan* in Hindu mythology and carries the reader swiftly through tumult, awe, fear, isolation and despair towards hope and promise, panning across the entirety of human knowledge and experience in re-emphasizing the cycle of upheaval-and-distillation for extracting Truth.

The twenty-eight poems comprising Part Two, "Reflections," are introduced by an untitled song which celebrates love and freedom. Inspired by the sudden lockdown-enforced long-march of migrant workers and their dependents across India, the sequence of poems also traces the destruction of nature and loss of habitat, making animals migrants, too, as a result of the fearful havoc unleashed by human beings. Memories of 1665 in Eyam seem to come alive in 2019 in Wuhan, across time and space. Whereas Eyam could contain an epidemic, Wuhan failed to do so. "A Conflagration", dedicated to Rupsha, Fraser's daughter, one of the foremost researchers on the Covid-19 virus, celebrates a scientific approach to the crisis in order to bring hopes of survival and revival. Migrant health workers, who were considered a nuisance threatening the economy, become the lifeline in the pandemic times emphasizing the love shared by humans, in patient dignity. The dozen stanzas of "Remember" have the anaphora, "Remember this time will pass", which emphasizes the meaningfulness of the lesson learnt when the bustle of life returns.



The poet moves to more serious global concerns in “Health and Wealth”. The ruthless exploitation of the lesser nations by the superpowers bent on warfare in safe-zones away from their own countries, complemented by undeterred extraction of natural resources in weaker countries and a conscious marginalization of humanitarian activities has proven that human civilization has been miserably unprepared to cope with the pandemic. “Silence the Guns” has three stanzas which ask questions beginning with “Can we ...”, inviting the global community to shun warfare and destruction in order to regain the lost peace which prevailed over the earth and its inhabitants by focusing on health and education.

Moving from experience to innocence, the poet addresses a monologue, “I miss you”, to her little grandson, Louis, each of the dozen stanzas of which begins with the same line but with different adjectives which, taken together, create a collage of the multifarious activities of the toddler in which the poet participates with appropriate reciprocation. The poem ends with a Bengali lullaby bridging Scotland and Bengal. “In our wee garden”, is a monologue addressed to her husband, Neil Fraser, in reply to his observation that their garden is a prison yard for self-isolated persons taking health-rejuvenating walks to combat the pandemic. She invites him to look closer at their own lovely garden, a host for prettily bright local flowers and resident birds with their fragrance and songs to complete the bliss of enjoying the sun and breeze, focusing on the other side of the pandemic when one takes a closer look at things which are usually taken for granted.

The transnational poet refers to the traditional Bengali notion that the UK is the land beyond seven seas and thirteen rivers in “We will meet again”, when reunion is emphasized, for more fundamental reasons to which the poet draws attention. “In Verona” is about how love overcomes barriers erected by the pandemic which has stalled the traditional practices of lovers. The typical Italian serenade transforms itself to cope with the ongoing situation. The poet fondly emphasizes her Bengali identity in “On Bengali New Year”, the four stanzas of which contrast the traditional rejoicing on Bengali New Year’s day with Tagore’s songs with the present unexpected condition when Kolkata-citizens try to stand by each other in assistance and solidarity, which is a hall mark of the metropolis like its iconic landmarks, the Maidan and Netaji’s horse-mounted statue at the five-point crossing in Shyambazar.

Poems eulogizing the natural world zoom from the distant stolid and still hills, via the woods with an undergrowth of bluebells with hopping blackbirds to the solitary blossomed cherry tree in her garden and pigeons at her kitchen door, since the world has now narrowed down to the confinement of the home. The music of nature could be brought back by those traditional notes—the *bhatiyali* and the tribal drum, besides the sounds of nature—which celebrated freedom in a natural environment. As she stands under the willow tree, the poet ponders over irreparable losses, yet she has the conviction that all these shall be repaired. In “Displacement” she points out that Nature, tormented by humans, now retaliates. Roles are reversed as humans who caged the natural, have now become caged by Nature. Dolphins return to the Hooghly after three decades, with factories closed, fishing stalled, and no river traffic.

In “Spectres of Partition: A reel replayed” Fraser begins with a cinematographic retrospection of Partition immigrants and moves forward to the present when thousands of miserable migrant-workers are seen trudging homeward, thereby connecting the two



experiences to uphold the trauma and sufferings of the migrant workforce as they return to be inhumanly denied entry to their own places and being compelled to stay in containment camps which bring back shared memories of the Partition. Power-brokers come by “Stealth” at the dead of night to wreck havoc on the villagers who are social underdogs. “How green was that valley” is about “shikaras” and the idyllic bliss of the lush green Kashmir valley. Its human geography has been altered by army boots marching over the strife-torn place.

Moving over to “The vast city green – in Edinburgh and Kolkata –”, Fraser describe show the pandemic has compelled a silence to descend upon both cities which is in contrast to the familiar age old scenes of iconic activity. The next poem is about an urban bird, the sparrow, found wherever she has lived—In the Himalayan foothills, in Kolkata and in Edinburgh. Its unstinted activity is a source of inspiration for the poet.

Staying at home enhances the poet’s observation of minutiae: how animals sustain each other as the small bright birds drop food from the bird-feeder for the garden mouse which quickly takes away the gains for storage in its burrow.

“Patient dignity: a Snail” offers the objective connotation of the title of this anthology, complementing the subjective one related to frontline medical professionals. A snail has its patient dignity, carrying its house on its back, alert for dangers with the antennae of its upper tentacles on which the eyes are situated: a perpetual migrant seeking food. “Reclamation”, dedicated to Alan Spence highlights news of wild animals spotted in formerly bustling urban spaces, deserted by humans as the pandemic compelled them into self-confinement. As humans receded into limited spaces, the wild came out celebrating freedom in a reversal of roles as the wild reclaimed its lost territory. At the end of darkness, cold, dismay and all depressing fears come missives of hope of the return of Truth. In “Moments of Truth and Hope” Fraser eulogizes Nature—playing the role of prophet, too, as she gracefully reminds the reader of the lesson taught by Nature, a lesson for which the payment was heavy, a lesson which emphasizes upon environmental sustenance, human values and peaceful co-existence.

Part Three, “Anticipation” of a return to normalcy, has two poems. One is for her father, the other for her grandchild. In one she expresses her gratitude to doctors who took care of her father’s health. In the other she anticipates a return to the rhythm of pre-pandemic life, this time enriched and humbled by the pandemic experience.

The poet has referred to a variety of sources from history, media reports, personal experiences and reading and she has, as a result, also dedicated some of the poems to persons from different walks of life, like Simon Armitage, Nesrine Malik, Antonio Guterres, Captain Thomas Moore, Alan Spence, Carla Sassi, Mario Relich, Dr. Anjanlal Dutta and Dr. Shibnath Mondal, as well as members of her family. Anaphora, stichic verse, blank verse and couplets besides composite and irregular forms of verse are the devices which are used to express the poet’s ecological and humanitarian concerns.

Bashabi Fraser’s eco poetry has referred to different displacements in this anthology on the personal as well as on the local/ national/ transnational/ global levels. The reflections on a global population around the pivotal outbreak of Covid-19 serve as a watershed with experiences of the past being linked to the new pandemic experience and an anticipation of the emergence of a new, possibly more humane, way of life.

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