

To a World Where Borders Wane
THE POETIC EXUBERANCE AND BASHABI FRASER'S
THE HOMING BIRD

Saptarshi Mallick

Guest Faculty, Dept. of English,, St. Xavier's College, Bardwan (W.B.)

(saptarshieng@gmail.com)

Abstract:

Through an expression of her/his own worldview and ideology, the poet is able to voice the 'universal, human experience' (Parthasarathy 11) interrogating the hypothesis of 'marginality' 'to discover or posit a literary cultural tradition to which the Indian English poetry could be said to belong' (Paniker 12, 13). The English language is 'a potent vehicle of progressive thought and passion' for writers to voice their creative aspirations (Bose 515) through a creative homogeneity involving a cultural comprehension between the East and the West towards a ubiquitous magnitude by exploring the secrets of existence and discovering "the principle of unity in nature not through the help of meditation or abstract logic, but by boldly crossing barriers of diversity and peeping behind the screen" ("The Meeting" 379). Rabindranath Tagore had emphasized that the true and perfect relationship in life and society is based on love which facilitates 'freedom through cultivating a mutual sympathy' as the principle 'to solve the problem of mutual relationship' and 'liberate ourselves from the fetters of self and from all those passions that tend to be exclusive' ("Freedom" 628). This essay reads Bashabi Fraser's *The Homing Bird* as 'a harmonious blending of voice, gesture and movement, words and action, in which [Fraser's] generosity of conduct is expressed' ("Creative Unity" 495). This essay explores Fraser's 'dynamic character of the living truth'

which provided her the 'enormous strength' (Nehru xiii) through the canvas of her fourteen poems to judiciously address the necessity of adhering to the integrating spirit of human unity, mutual-understanding, love and respect in this world, interrogating at once the divisive forces of society as "truth...has no dimension; it is One. Wherever our heart touches the One, in the small or the big, it finds the touch of the infinite" ("Creative Unity" 495).

KEYWORDS: *Memories, Partition, Togetherness, Humanism, Internationalism*

Our attitude is determined by our surroundings or temperament which facilitate the development of an association through the cultivation of unity through understanding and association, if not by the use of conquest or power ('Creative Unity' 511). This exuberance inspires the poet to keep alight the lamp of the human mind as its part in the illumination of the world (*The Centre* 1). It is through this realm of freedom that the poet not only voices great human truths but also chronicles the verses of victory (*Angel* 20) as knowledge is freedom leading towards the creation of Art, 'for man's civilization is built upon his surplus' (*Personality* 8). This power 'confers unity and significance on all the joy and sorrow and circumstance of life' by threading into a single harmonious whole the various forms of the self through which an individual can experience the unity within the universe – the realisation of the 'Jibandebata'

(*Of Myself* 7) which enshrines that all Life and Being is a comprehensive whole and such a realisation of this basic unity ushers a state of ‘tatra ko mohah, kah sokah, ekatvam anupasyatah’ (Chatterji 20). For this realisation, Life and Society can reach to the highest realms of freedom if they actively endeavour ‘to solve the problem of mutual relationship’ (“Freedom” 628). Therefore the poet being the ‘world-worker’ is able to ‘transcend the limits of mortality’ (*The Religion* 55) towards an existence where all the people are coordinated by the ‘vision’ of the poet to be ‘receptive as well as creative’ towards an ‘inspiring atmosphere of creative activity’ (*The Centre* 2) through which ‘a harmonious blending of voice, gesture and movement, words and action, in which [the poet’s] generosity of conduct is expressed’ (“Creative Unity” 495). Through an expression of her/his own worldview and ideology, the poet is able to voice ‘universal, human experience’ (Parthasarathy 11) interrogating the hypothesis of ‘marginality’ (Paniker 12) which has often been used to describe Indian poetry written in the English language as

English is no longer the language of colonial rulers; it is a language of modern India in which words and expressions have recognized national rather than imported significances and references, attending to local realities, traditions and ways of feeling (King 3).

Therefore through their Indian poetry written in the English language the poets aim ‘to discover or posit a literary cultural tradition to which the Indian English poetry could be said to belong’ (Paniker 13). Macaulay’s *Minute On Education* (1835) aimed towards creating ‘good English scholars’ out of the natives, the English language proved to be ‘one of the most enduring legacies of colonialism’ enhancing its glow over the course of a long tutelage and political

independence actually refurbished linguistic dependence [revealing] the language of foreign mastery as the only real *lingua franca* amidst a babble of communal and regional isms (Patke 244, 245).

But employing this *lingua franca* the Indian English diasporic poets have successfully established the ‘Indian experience irrespective of the language in which they write’ – achieving Indianness (Paniker 15) for creative expression both at the home and the world - ‘capable of expressing the totality of Indian experience’ (Paranjape 6). The English language was not ‘a medium of merely utilitarian communication’ but ‘a potent vehicle of progressive thought and passion’ for writers to voice their creative aspirations (Bose 515) through a creative homogeneity involving a cultural comprehension between the East and the West towards a ubiquitous magnitude by exploring the secrets of existence and discovering the principle of unity in nature not through the help of meditation or abstract logic, but by boldly crossing barriers of diversity and peeping behind the screen (“The Meeting” 379).

As a result the English language cannot be dismissed as an alien language because the native intellectual will try to make European culture his own. He will not be content to get to know Rabelais and Diderot, Shakespeare and Edgar Allan Poe; he will bind them to his intelligence as close as possible (Fanon 176)

rather ‘the creative choice of language must be respected and one should judge by results rather than by dismal prophecies of what the results must fail to be’ (Rajan 93). Writing is an activism for a writer; it is the only possible way by which she/he can express her/his political standpoint, ideology, worldview, dreams and visions; leading towards a harmonious fusion of ideas

(“Surviving In My World”) in ‘a thinking, understanding world of creative participation’ (*Letters* 66). Through their creative writing the poets continue the art of discovering the mystical humanity. As communication of life can only be possible through a living agency therefore writers through their art of writing communicate and nurture the growth, development and progress of a culture which grows, moves and multiplies in life (*The Centre* 21) as *yat kincha yadidam sarvam prana ejati nihsritam* (*The Religion* 54). To ensure an efficient communication of life through a cultural evolution within ‘a social environment that blended the traditional with the modern, the Eastern with the Western’ (“Rabindranath Tagore’s” 26), women writers being enthralled by their ‘inspirational eleventh muse’ (*Lakshmi* 49) successfully continue the tradition of *écriture féminine through a room and a voice of their own. Through their art of writing, they have been able to walk through the imposed barriers of barbed wires towards ‘a wider field of their talents’, breaking at once ‘the relative segregation of the women as a sex, relaxes the restrictions that otherwise narrow women’s functions’* (*Guha* 267) *by interrogating the ‘servile submission to custom and practice without regard to their tendency for good or evil’* (*Banerjea* 118) *towards a world characterized by disenthralment, egalitarianism and erudition where the woman writer cannot be contained, smothered, confined or silenced from gyrating the world with her perception embodied through her writings* (*Letters* 61). *Being indoctrinated in the principle of*

No, no, don’t be afraid, you are bound to win, this door will surely open –

I know the chains that bind you will break again and again (*Swades* 35)

Professor Bashabi Fraser’s poetry is the source of ‘light where the sun sets’, ‘an offering of love and devotion’ (*Letters* 93, 101). The technique of writing poetry comes with ‘creation’ which is the primacy of knowledge (Fraser, “Introduction” 24) and Fraser’s poetry authenticates her formidable creativity and apt awareness as a ‘progressive writer’ (Hasan xiii) of the Indian diaspora exploring the ‘cultural roots and commitment to the enduring earth’ and unravel the fathomless depths pertinent within the ‘micropolitics of everyday living in an urban environment’ (*Dilemma* np). Her poetry is characterized by the ‘immediate joy of [her] own soul’ and ‘is saved from all doubts and fears’ to state vividly the affairs of day as ‘the consciousness of the real seeks the corroboration with the touch of the real’ outside the poet (*The Religion* 21). Professor Bashabi Fraser’s poetry makes you feel at India as well as at Scotland as if home is where the heart is, Bashabi Fraser is most definitely at home in both her worlds, peopled as they are by loved ones – both Scottish and India (Chatterjee 10). Her poetry contributes towards the creation of a space of togetherness, unity, association and understanding.

Rabindranath Tagore emphasized that the true and perfect relationship in life and society is based on love which facilitates ‘freedom through cultivating a mutual sympathy’ as the liberating principle actively endeavours ‘to solve the problem of mutual relationship’ and ‘liberate ourselves from the fetters of self and from all those passions that tend to be exclusive’ (“Freedom” 628). Like music, Bashabi Fraser’s *The Homing Bird* is ‘a harmonious blending of voice, gesture and movement, words and action, in which [Fraser’s] generosity of conduct is expressed’ (“Creative Unity” 495). In her collection, Fraser has explored ‘the dynamic

character of the living truth' which provided her the 'enormous strength' (Nehru xiii) through the canvas of her fourteen poems to judiciously address the necessity of adhering to the integrating spirit of human unity, mutual-understanding, love and respect in this world, interrogating at once the divisive forces of society as truth...has no dimension; it is One. Wherever our heart touches the One, in the small or the big, it finds the touch of the infinite ("Creative Unity" 495).

With a deep insight into Partition and its miseries through the experiences of her scholar parents, *The Homing Bird* addresses the abysmal issues of a history charred by violence, pain, loss, '(un)-belonging' ("The Crossing" 16), memory and nostalgia of a 'displaced multitude' (Ibid. 17) due to the senseless imposition of the 'lines of interpretation' (*The Homing* 20). Fraser, like the Female Muse of Creativity, has emphasized love, togetherness, fellow-feeling and cosmopolitanism interrogating the existence of 'shadow lines' (*Tartan* 51) which partition nations, communities, lives and common histories. The reader here can easily decipher that as a transnational writer Fraser has been successful in weaving the cultures of the East and the West towards a creative ideal authenticating her formidable creativity and apt awareness as a 'progressive writer' (Hasan xiii) who connects and associates cultures. As writing is an activism for a writer to express her/his political standpoint, ideology, worldview, dreams, visions and ideas through a harmonious fusion with imagination ("Surviving"), *The Homing Bird* not only decodes and interrogates the act of the 'one-man commission, cutting / a nation with a knife-edged pen / In the privacy of his room' (*The Homing* 6), but also reverberates with the resonant spirit of liberty, multiculturalism and togetherness; as poetry is the other tongue that

casts the languages of humanity (Fraser, Introduction 24) beyond barriers. In the introductory poem, "The Homing Bird" the poet is in dialogue with Kolkata and Edinburgh, 'Kolkata do you miss me?', 'But have you accepted me, Edinburgh?' (*The Homing* 5, 12). Through a graphic description of 'the second city of Empire' and the 'City of Literature' (Ibid. 9, 13), Fraser has euphonically conjured a poignant narrative between the two cultures, two histories. Through memories of the Raj, partition and her childhood in Part I of this poem she creates a nostalgic aura for the 'city of contrasting histories' (Ibid. 10), while in Part II she as one of 'post-midnight children' (Ibid. 11) with a global spirit embraced Edinburgh, the 'intimate city' (Ibid. 12) with an 'urban inspiration' (Ibid. 13) as an 'embodiment of strength' (Ibid.) for voicing her

thoughts in celebratory confetti

Over this city, to merge with its cloud canopy

And dissolve with its rare sunlight,

Suffusing my lines with the skyline of Edinburgh (Ibid. 14).

In 'Anchoring Aesthetics' the poet recreates personal 'reminiscences of a distant life' through the 'warm friendship' of the Bengali Cultural Association, to whom the poem is dedicated, who interconnected 'through the dancing rhythms of time' a nostalgic quintessence that anchored and replenished the poet in her life (Ibid. 15).

In the poems 'This Border' and 'Walled-In: Walled-Out' we observe the poet firmly interrogating the segregating spirit (Ibid. 18) ushered in due to the implementation of 'strange lines' (Ibid. 16) which construct 'one shared past with two histories' (Ibid.) and spaces to cocoon oneself against 'the territory of his enemy' (Ibid. 18). The anger against such an 'irrational

division' (*Bengal Partition 4*) metamorphoses into a prophetic sermon when the poet urges humanity to 'remove walls from minds / Discovering bonds in human kind' (*The Homing 19*) for a life of 'friendship and families' (Ibid. 16). The poet's spirit of debriefing continues in 'This Difference' and 'In my India'. In the former she nostalgically champions amicable memories of association over differences which are 'carefully architecture[d]' (Ibid. 20) among humanity 'enflaming friction' (Ibid.), competition, neglecting nature's integral continuity; in the latter she recollects sublime times of her parents in India when education sharpened reason to prosper with 'the Spirit of Rabindranath / In tune with Gandhiji's tolerance' (Ibid. 25, 26), but laments on the total loss of all values of federation. The poet's exegesis of such a loss and artfully demands 'Give me back *my* India!' (Ibid. 26). Between these poems there is 'India Calls' lauding the 'multi-ethnic vast nation/An unparalleled diversity' (Ibid. 22) where the old and the new exist together echoing the spirit of *vasudaibha kutumbakum* towards a progressive future through 'a land reform movement / About better distribution, / About social service, about destroying / Corruption by dreaming idealists' (Ibid. 26).

'Fog on Hill Cart Road' and 'Fog on M8' are sequel poems as 'Cricket – Eastern Style' and 'Cricket in Sussex'. In the former pair we explore an uncanny, chilling sensation through the imagery of the fog – on one hand it is 'slurping round / The shadowy bends / Its black humour' (Ibid. 27) while on the other hand it is a 'cold smoke- / Slithering tongues / From a demonic / Cauldron' (Ibid. 28). In the latter pair of poems we explore a graphic depiction of an Indian roadside cricket which are played by 'the batsmen / Of the future' (Ibid. 31) and watch with much awe and vigour, along with an

English cricket signifying the game and its intercontinental importance beyond the English boundaries. 'The Midnight Calls' attests to memory and association being timeless, psychological and it can never be curbed, disconnected by imaginary walls. This poignant poem emphasizes the truth that people residing in 'one half of the reeling globe' (Ibid. 30) far away from home remain connected to their roots, fearing the 'midnight and small hour calls' (Ibid.) bringing in the sad message of a near associate who has departed.

The concluding poem of the monograph 'Home' bears a note of internationalism above and beyond barriers along with personal overtones. Irrespective of one's far residing space, 'home' remains a space of warmth and nostalgic memories. Artistically decorated with vibrant images from the world of flora and fauna, this poem not only enthralls the heart of the readers, but also provides solace to a mind away from home, as was the effect of the nightingale's song upon Keats. While most of the poems in this collection embark on the ideas and associated painful, nostalgic memories of Partition and implementation of borders leading to the creation of the 'other' through the formation of separate nation states, the concluding section of this concluding poem emphasizes the necessity among human beings to encompass the spirit of togetherness, which has been epitomized through the poet's mother when she 'welcomes other guests thorough/Her open door' (Ibid. 33). The poet's mother like Mother Nature warmly embraces every child nurturing her/him without any discordance and division for a progressive future of humanity. Besides recollecting a personal memory of her mother's life to which the poet was an eye witness, the concluding sentence of the poem designates the poet's despondency on the spirit of togetherness ceasing

to exist amongst humanity after her mother's earthly departure.

The Homing Bird is a concurrent study of two cultures, nostalgia, memories for a long desired 'home'/'space' bereft of dissension. Employing simple words bearing powerful expressions Bashabi Fraser, the cosmopolitan poet, has created an aura guided by her vision, ardent conviction and foresight. The poet has successfully created a Dantesque odyssey for the reader to explore a solace after experiencing Partition, and in the concluding section by unraveling her mother's gesture similar to Christ the Redeemer of Rio de Janeiro. Her mother becomes the Female Messiah whose was a life of inspiration on the principles of unity and fellowship. Bashabi Fraser's *The Homing Bird* becomes the signifier of the pervading spirit of nostalgia, memories and an odyssey as poetry is the dawn-of-grace of man's first expression...full of pure mystery...still the beauty of the mystery is by no means of dawn alone; even at the dusk of life's completion the radiant hints of the pure mystery of eternal life announce its deeper beauty (*Of Myself* 19).

Works Cited:

Banerjea, Rev. Krishna Mohan. "A Prize Essay on Native Female Education." *Inscribing Identity: Essays from Nineteenth Century Bengal*. Ed. Krishna Sen. Kolkata: K. P. Bagchi and Company, 2009. 116 – 124. Print.

Bose, Amalendu. "Bengali Writing in English in the Nineteenth Century." *The History of Bengal (1757 – 1905)*. 2nd ed. Ed. Narendra Krishna Sinha. Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1996. 514 – 528. Print.

Chatterjee, Debjani. Introduction. *With Best Wishes from Edinburgh*. Kolkata: Writers Workshop, 2001. 9 – 10. Print.

Chatterji, Suniti Kumar. *Rabindranath Tagore: Three Lectures delivered before the*

Marathwada University in October 1963. Maharashtra: Marathwada University, 1965. Print.

Dasgupta, Sanjukta. *Dilemma: A Second Book of Poems*. Kolkata: Anustup, 2002. Print.

– trans. *Swades: Rabindranath Tagore's Patriotic Songs*. Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2013. Print.

– "Surviving In My World: Growing of Dalit in Bengal." YouTube, 30 November 2015. British Council, www.youtube.com/watch?v=_NQuevxbcpY. Accessed 26 October 2017.

– *Lakshmi Unbound*. Kolkata: Chitrangi, 2017. Print.

– "Rabindranath Tagore's Daughters and the 'New Woman.'" *The Statesman Festival'17* (2017): 24 – 31. Print.

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. United Kingdom: Penguin, 1970. Print.

Fraser, Bashabi. *With Best Wishes from Edinburgh*. Kolkata: Writers Workshop, 2001. Print.

– *Tartan and Turban*. Edinburgh: Luath Press Limited, 2004. Print.

– Introduction. *Bengal Partition Stories: An Unclosed Chapter*. Ed. Bashabi Fraser. U.K.: Anthem Press, 2006. 1 – 57. Print.

– Introduction. *Images of Life: Creative and Other Forms of Writing*. Ed. Saptarshi Mallick. Kolkata: The Book World, 2014. 17 – 32. Print.

– *Letters to My Mother and Other Mothers*. Edinburgh: Luath Press Limited, 2015. Print.

– "The Crossing and the Conflict Zone: the Sense of (Un-) Belonging in Bengal Partition Stories." *Partition Literature: An Open Praxis*. Ed. Srideep Mukherjee and Manan Kumar Mandal. Kolkata: Netaji Subhas Open University, 2016. 16 – 21. Print.

— *The Homing Bird*. Great Britain: Indigo Dreams Publishing, 2017. Print.

Guha, Ramachandra. Ed. *Makers of Modern India*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2012. Print.

Hasan, Mushirul. Foreword. *Bengal Partition Stories: An Unclosed Chapter*. Ed. Bashabi Fraser. London: Anthem Press, 2006. xiii – xvii. Print.

King, Bruce. *Modern Indian Poetry in English*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987. Print.

Mallick, Saptarshi. “The Artist’s Joyful Extension: Reading Sanjukta Dasgupta’s *Dilemma: A Second Book of Poems*.” 2017. TS.

— Rev. of *The Homing Bird*, by Bashabi Fraser. *Asiatic: An International Journal of Asian Literatures, Cultures and Englishes* 11. 2, December 2017: 129 – 132. Web. 20 Mar. 2018.

— “Celebrating Reminiscence and Endearment: The Poetic Oeuvre of Bashabi Fraser.” 2018. TS.

Nehru, Jawaharlal. Introduction. *Rabindranath Tagore 1861 – 1961: A Centenary Volume*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1961. xiii – xvi. Print.

Paniker, K. Ayyappa. Introduction. *Modern Indian Poetry in English*. Ed. K. Ayyappa Paniker. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1991. 11 – 19. Print.

Paranjape, Makarand. Introduction. *Indian Poetry in English*. Ed. Makarand Paranjape. India: Macmillan Publishers, 2009. 1 – 27. Print.

Parthasarathy, R. Introduction. *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets*. Ed. R. Parthasarathy. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002. 1 – 11. Print.

Patke, Rajeev S. “Poetry Since Independence.” *An Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English*. Ed. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003. 243 – 275. Print.

Rajan, Balachandra. “Remarks on Identity and Nationality.” *Literature East and West* 9. 2 (1965): 91 – 94. Print.

Tagore, Rabindranath. *Angel of Surplus: Some Essays and Addresses on Aesthetics*. Ed. Sisirkumar Ghose. Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1978. Print.

— “Creative Unity.” *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*. Ed. Sisir Kumar Das. Vol. 2. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996. 493 – 569. Print.

— “The Meeting of the East and the West.” *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*. Ed. Sisir Kumar Ghosh. Vol. 3. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996. 376 – 379. Print.

— *The Centre of Indian Culture*. New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2003. Print.

— *The Religion of Man*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd., 2005. Print.

— “Freedom.” *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*. Ed. Nityapriya Ghosh. Vol. 4. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2007. 627 – 628. Print.

— *Personality*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd., 2007. Print.

— *Of Myself*. Trans. Devadatta Joardar and Joe Winter. Kolkata: Visva-Bharati Publishing Department, 2009. Print.

(Dedication: I dedicate this essay to Dr Nizara Hazarika, Associate Professor of English, Sonapur College, Assam for her enthusiastic inspiration.)