

BATTLEFIELD OR SACRED FIELD?

Foreword to Satish Verma's volume of poems , ANOTHER KURUKSHETRA (2009)

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For all versed in Indian culture and storytelling, Kurukshetra, the great battlefield of the Mahabharata, is synonymous with warfare, conflict and carnage – and yet also of an ultimately meaningful universe, since it is on the eve of that same battle that Krishna bestows on Arjuna the great philosophical gift that is the Bhagavad Gita; the Gita itself, in its very first sloka, describes Kurukshetra as a *dharmakshetra*, a ‘sacred field’. The past poems of Satish Verma have walked us through a world of darkness and disintegration, yet have aspired to the light through the poetic process itself. Here in this new collection, as the title warns us, the ambiance grows darker and the groping for redeeming hope will become more urgent. Kurukshetra is no mere name from a mythical past: it is here and now.

The poems delineate a universe of chaos, destruction, civil war and what the poet darkly names as ‘collective guilt’. It is not necessarily or solely an Indian universe: bathing ghats, marigolds, and a flute no doubt Krishna’s appear among the images, but intertextual reference to non-Indian Anglophone poets at the same time universalises the discourse. ‘Raven’ appears (as an adjective) recalling Edgar Allan Poe; the ‘million stars / ... gazing in astonishment / after the blast / of sky’ of the opening poem suggest William Blake’s ‘when the stars threw down their spears’ in ‘Tyger, Tyger’; and in ‘roses, roses all the way’ there is a direct quote from Robert Browning’s ‘The Patriot’.

In Satish Verma’s darkened world, the public sphere is reduced to conflict and killing, while the private and personal has been degraded into cynical exploitation. The official discourse that seeks to justify oppression is mere empty rhetoric, the ‘floral tribute of words’. Man and woman can interact only through bodily gestures that have lost all spiritual meaning: ‘a huge umbrella of hot kisses / dissolving the contaminated beads / of musk, like fever’. Age brings on not wisdom but despair: in the particularly bleak poem ‘Breaking From Past’ the speaker watches his own loveless homecoming: ‘One counts the annual rings of / old trunks ... / tasting one’s own decline’.

If there is any silver lining in the cloud-world of these poems, it is language that comes to the fore with a ray of hope. Shape and form, at least, are conferred on the ambient emptiness through Verma’s well-honed lines and his mastery of alliteration and assonance, as in richly inventive formulations like ‘words and whistles were surreal chaos’ or ‘the trampled sun-blind truths’. The capacity of human intellect and emotion to understand a world in implosion is perhaps the only weapon left for sanity: ‘trees and bone littered floating. / I start to understand the stalling darkness’.

There, in that line, we may locate the essence of Verma’s craft. The poet is the one who, without denying the darkness, lifts up his voice and starts to understand it. It is a difficult process that may take a lifetime. Satish Verma, meanwhile, offers us a torch to guide us on our pathway, a flare of defiant hope amid what might otherwise seem all-encompassing gloom. Kurukshetra is both battlefield and sacred field: from the violence of the twenty-first century, a new revelation may yet rise up.