BOOK REVIEW

Opening up *Night Windows* : Chronicles of a lonely theatre dreamer

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[Chakrabarty, Bitan- *Avinetar Journal* (Bangla): A collection of Bangla prose, Shambhabi, Kolkata, 2017]

"Great art is the outward expression of an inner life in the artist, and this inner life will result in his personal vision of the world. No amount of skillful invention can replace the essential element of imagination. One of the weaknesses of much abstract painting is the attempt to substitute the inventions of the human intellect for a private imaginative conception……The inner life of a human being is a vast and varied realm and does not concern itself alone with stimulating arrangements of color, form and design……The term life used in art is something not to be held in contempt, for it implies all of existence and the province of art is to react to it and not to shun it."

-Edward Hopper (Statement, 1953)

Is the painter who "*evoked urban loneliness and disappointment with beautiful clarity*" reborn as Bitan Chakraborty, is the question that comes to the mind when one reads his *Avinetar Journal*. Otherwise, how could the author so beautifully articulate the pains and pangs, the trials and tribulations, of a theatre worker in a group theatre of Kolkata? In a situation where the state and the society is still not conducive to artists, it is but a brave act to pursue what the heart says. It is an uncontrolled stream of emotion and passion that leads one to group theatre-a desire to express the inner self, to learn something new and to dream of a changed world. And then suddenly riding high on adrenaline you face an anti climax, much like the dramaturgic structure, and all your belief, trust and love is shattered. The journey becomes ridden with conflicts and questions, whose answers are known but not desired to be believed and the thinking artist is left haplessly

wondering about in the dark alleys rebounding against the walls. Is that the inevitable future of an artist?

Chakraborty takes off from his days of learning theatre in *Jangam*, a Kolkata based theatre group under the tutelage of Supriti Mukhopadhayay. It was while rehearsing the songs of the play *Muktodhara*, by Rabindranath Tagore, with a senior songster, Samirda, that he re discovered the wider theatrical sense embedded in the lyrics. He realized that a song has to be understood first before it is performed. Unfortunately the dynamics of a group theatre, with all its collective characteristics, with its director reigning supreme, could not retain the person and left the author bleeding amidst a learning phase which he was thoroughly enjoying. Thus came the first shock from the system!

As the author trained himself under a rather mundane system, pretty conventional though in a group theatre, he was one fine morning exposed to the Nandigram killings of 2007 in West Bengal and it opened his reading of the Tagore text into a wider socio-political context. The struggle of the farmers to retain their land & profession, agriculture, to be more precise in Nandigram against the state's oppression to impose industrialization opened up a whole new element of relevance of *Muktodhara*. This was a beginning of a series of conflicts inside his thinking mind-between emotion and alienation on stage, between change in guard and change in situation and so on……..

The inevitable question which is raised inside every theatre artist is 'why do I do Theatre?'So many people have analyzed but there seems to be no explicable answer to this. Way back Sambhu Mitra so simply, yet so emphatically stated, 'because I love it', a pronunciation which is easy to hear or read but most difficult to utter. The author is at his wit's end to fathom why theatres, nurtured with so much of love, do not sustain or meet an inevitable rapture? He analyzes qualities, degree of dedication in a theatre person that is so integral to its aesthetics. He doubts the dedication of those who make it apparent. Standing in a crucial juncture of his life, he wonders how he will sustain if he dedicates himself to theatre? He is disturbed by the supremacy of money which is so vital for sustenance and the fact that it demands time to be earned, time which will be etched out of theatre. Aesthetic issues bother him the most-the question of the real self and the character, the contrast and conflict between them, he puts himself under the scanner and doubts on his own sensitivity. He imagines, hallucinates and reinforces his memories of art,

acting to be more precise. In the process he debates within and learns to appreciate beauty, the likes of static silence in a pair of eyes. His brain hosts a storm where ideas and questions are churning in lightening speed, he wants to know all secrets of what is right and what is wrong in arts and aesthetics. Time and again the author reinforces his school life readings and lessons. He tests time and attitudes with his readings especially Tagore and Smarajit Chakraborty and a host of contemporary authors. The doubts that come to his mind are encompassive of the issues raised by philosophers and aestheticians, the likes of Aristotle, Emanuel Kant and Walter Benjamin.

After a sensitive and thought provoking narration of the melancholy of an artist, a space where he is extremely lonely, debating and discoursing the conflicts all by himself, the author beautifully transcends to a dyadic dimension using the metaphor of two birds to explain human relationship, between opposite sexes, love, its development through activities & proliferation of psyche and then the separation and its aftereffects which lead to another realm of realization.

The account thus far may give an impression that the book is a record of negativity, sadness all round but that is thrice the truth. Amidst all the negative experiences has emerged a realization, so very useful for a budding artist. How many have been able to open up so candidly, the feelings are so universal that any body with similar sensibilities would relate and feel at home. The style of writing is so inert, passive, almost like dialogues which are spoken aside, that the readers get enough time to reflect and form their own opinion.

Life is a spectrum of contrasting colours and feelings, of blacks & whites, of light and darkness, and the art of opposites is a necessary mechanism which refines the sensibilities of an artist to arrive at a realization, so aptly demonstrated by Chakraborty throughout the little palm sized paperback monograph. In his own words:

> "The nest day the lover bird touches the feet of his teacher and says, no Gosain Thakur, water has not gone inside the colours , the colours have frozen into stones. It has not been distributed, so it has gained in weight. I have hoisted my sails inside and therefore will not have to go around rebounding on the shores." (p. 59)

The readers find themselves pretty much positioned in a voyeuristic set up like in Hopper's *Night Window* as Chakraborty elucidates on Kolkata group theatre aesthetics. At the same time he also

presents his psychological & intellectual marginality & terminality, like Hopper draws a picture of his own sense of isolation besides the lady across the window.

Necessary questions, wonderful shared realizations, grotesque yet impressionist-*Ovinetar Journal* is a must read for any thinking, self introspecting artist.