

Akhil Katyal, *How Many Countries does the Indus Cross*, (The (Great) Indian Poetry Collective, 2019), Price: Rs. 350, Pages 67.

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A Political Residue

The political residue embedded in the consciousness of the people who are divided by the political lines nonetheless share an undivided common history find a voice in the poems of Akhil Katyal. The poems, in Akhil Katyal's *How Many Countries does the Indus Cross*, are infused with the politics of bygone days of the Indian subcontinent which unfailingly defines our present-day politics and dictates the lives of the people. With an engaging title, the poet critiques absurdly painted borders of the surfaced nations on the map of the Indian subcontinent in the twentieth century. Every country that Indus passes through has been witnessing an ongoing unrest. These countries have been engulfed in territorial conflicts, regions in the course of Indus have witnessed suffering and fought a politicised dispute over the water of Indus. In spite of all, as poet shows, irrevocable Indus, ironical as it seems, overruns the divided lands unifying the people in their experiences. Katyal's poems, interspersed with a thematic plethora, engage the readers with the stylistic appeal.

As we begin, we find that the poet has already set the tone for the rest of the poems by invoking two late poets, Agha Shahid Ali and Fahmida Riaz, at the beginning of the book. What agonised Agha Shahid Ali had once written:

“One must wear jewelled ice in dry plains
to will the distant mountains to glass.
The city from where no news can come
is now so visible in its curfewed nights
that the worst is precise....”

Akhil Katyal picks up the mantle from Shahid. He divides the book into three sections:

- I. To Will the Distant Mountains to Glass
- II. To Will the Distant Mountains to Glass
- III. To Will the Distant Mountains to Glass

With a singular emphasis on each of the words in the entire line, he unfolds an assorted essence of these words. For the first section of the book emphasises on the ‘Distant’, the second section highlights the ‘Will’, while all the poems in the third section are on and dedicated to Kashmir. In each of the poems in the first section the idea of the ‘Distant’ emerges unparallel to each other. Unvaryingly united by the theme of ‘Distant’ the poems touch upon the ‘afar’ with diverse subjects. While in the second section ‘Will’ dominates the poems. Poems located in cities and cities located in poems, the poems on spaces are dictated by the political and cultural life of the cities. The poems in this section exhibit the ‘personal’ affected by the political. Some of the poems address homosexuality, attacking the institutional injustice done to the queer community. The last section of the book ‘Mountains to Glass’ is dedicated to Kashmir and the people of Kashmir. The poems in this section revolve around the suffering and loss in the conflict-torn Kashmir.

As discussed above that the common subject in the poems of Katyal is politics, and in this collection, we find poems loaded with contemporary political subjects. In the first poem ‘To the Soldier of Siachen’ Katyal builds on the anti-war rhetoric addressing the soldier with an appeal to return to the homeland. Interestingly, the poem critiques the prevalent nationalist war propaganda which thrives on the war for its sustenance. Katyal writes:

“Come back
 the snow is treacherous
 come back
 they are making you fight a treacherous war
 you were not born in snow
 you do not know snow, come back
 I do not want you to fight that war in our name
 I want you to rest, I want you to be able to feel your fingers
 I want the snow in your veins to give way
 for you to be able to breathe, to melt
 into a corner, to sleep.”

The poet, assuming a larger collective position of common citizens, addresses the soldier to abandoned the war which is compulsively fed to him as a national duty. By presenting a collectivised voice of the people who essentially consider war as a political instrument whenever used devastates and victimises the common people. The existing political tension between India, Pakistan and China compels human positioning in the Siachen glacier region. However, in the inhumane climatic condition of the Siachen glacier uprooted personnel is posted to guard the people of the plains of India. This is turned into a politically weaponised narrative by various political agencies to sway and mobilise people's support in a democratic setup. Against the weaponised narrative, Katyal's poem puts up a counter-discourse. The symbolic emphasis on the snow in the poem dominates the concept of alienation. The territorial unfamiliarity introduced in the following stanza opens up a conversation on the tactical colonial hangover, as he writes:

“Go Home
go home to Madurai, go home
to Vellore, Satara, Mysore
do not stay in the snow
go home to Ranchi, that war
is not for you to fight, that war
is not for us to give to you to fight
let not our name be ice....”

With the symbolic significance in an apparent continuation, the poet highlights a commonly used tactical strategy by the British colonisers where the soldiers from the different cultural background were enlisted and deployed to a geo-culturally different landscape. It enables them to carry out the orders without hesitation as in an alienated space the soldiers found assimilation with the natives difficult. The same tactical strategies are employed with a similar objective, in the poem we find that the soldiers either belong to the peninsular belt of India or central India.

Uniquely crafted structure allows making a poetic document of human loss and suffering in the Kashmir valley. With the meticulous diction, he draws what everyday life in conflict-torn Kashmir is for her people. In 'Identity Card' Katyal encapsulates death poetically in the form of a document, registering the death of an eleven-year-old boy Nasir in Kashmir. The linguistic diversity and style of the poem express a humane point of view in the form which displays insensitivity towards the loss of human life and yet the poem legitimises the creative

expression. Within the unusual documented style Katyal seamlessly poeticised the narrative with the interplay of words and infused emotively filtered words replacing the dry administrative diction. The poet throws light on the process of writing, as at the end of the poem the poet has put a note, which leads the readers to understand the creative labour. In fact, in his process of writing some of the poems, he refers to news items which he considers to be of his interest and then poetises the subject.

The act of reclaiming appears to be ironically usual when the question of art is put on the table. To claim the roots of art and cultural sprouting out of the land has prevailed forever. But after the partition, the position of the artists changed yet the countries claimed and reclaimed them to be of their origin. In his ‘He Was Born in 1948, So He’s’ he posits before us a conflated dilemma and transcendental effect of the art which is not controlled by any boundaries. He writes:

“Straight up Pakistani, not some
pre-Partition guy we can claim
as our own. Now the trouble is,
how do I wipe clean all those
evenings, growing up, when
drunk on his voice, we heard
“Afreen Afreen” losing all our
cares, not knowing Nusrat
was theirs.”

The poem “When Shammi Kapoor Slides Down the Snow” throws light on the cinematic representation of Kashmir in Hindi film industry. In this poem Katyal points out how Kashmir over the years has been misrepresented in Hindi films, deceiving the audience as well as Kashmiris with a deluded portrayal of what is shown as Kashmir on the screen. Reflecting on the idea of Kashmir in general politics which also operates in the domains of public life Katyal writes:

“So we’ve always got it wrong- granduncle or
grandnephew - and we’ve been like this for long
always Kashmir without Kashmiris, all for a song.”

And in another sardonic poem “The Incredible India J&K Tourism Video” he pummelled at operative methods of the State media machinery. Describing the role of editors in creating and maintain an image he writes:

“I suppose the most crucial role here is the editor’s:
so damn difficult to keep the dead out. To keep
the green of the hills, the blue of the lake, the
white of the snow, and still, to keep the red out.”

What makes his poetic collection remarkable is his unusual creative treatment to personal yet fragile political subjects. As discussed earlier many of his poems refer to the newspaper articles, out of these newspaper articles he churns out poetry. Katyal’s ability to see the unwritten underlying emotion in those articles and successfully holding on to the emotion only to later record it in poetic form. And through poetry, he voices resistance against jingoist fervour which emerges as a dominant matter in politics and gives voice to the Kashmir conflict like his fellow Kashmiri and non-Kashmiri writers.