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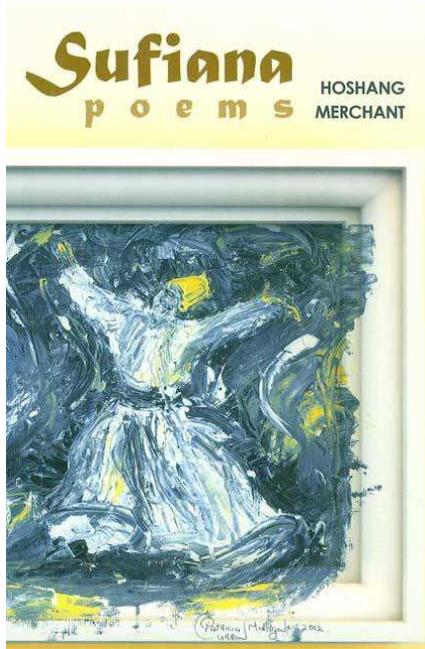
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Book Review

A Poet's Voyage to Sainthood: Hoshang Merchant's *Sufiana: Poems*



Hoshang Merchant. *Sufiana: Poems*.

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Review by

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Sex and Spirituality have no boundaries, so have been the articulations of the subjects in literature. The poetic of sexuality moves from being reflective of bodily sensuality to terrestrial pleasure and transcends itself in metaphysics. Hoshang Merchant's *Sufiana: Poems* (2013) takes such a perspective towards "sexual pleasure" and endangers the intersections of the sexual and the spiritual. Experimenting with numerous traditions in composing poems—may it be Spanish troubadour, Indian mysticism, the subversive ghazals, prose tradition or Sufi style as in *Bellagio Blues* (2004)—he has finally settled his heart upon Sufi renditions of the homoerotic cult. As that of the wandering dervishes of Konya and Tabriz, he has set himself into a journey of *fana*—annihilation in the worldly companions. And at the same time, his desire for using an exceptional imagery reigns supreme in all his poems in the book. The language of sexuality gets portrayed through the musical notes and the vivid colours in the canvas of the poems and ghazals in *Sufiana: Poems*.

Depiction of sexuality has remained a central theme in most of the literary writings in India. With the Victorian values crossing the geographical boundaries with the colonial modern, the influence of the dictates becomes strong enough to bring in the active role of the binary opposites—heterosexuality and homosexuality. The influential portrayal of sexuality in the native literature has made it to lose the openness of the

Indian philosophical minds. Hoshang Merchant true to his publicly projected image of a Parsi homosexual leads the portrayal of a sexual cult vis-à-vis experimenting with traditions and traditional symbols and images. The sexual mythology operating massively serves the literary canon in recovering what has been lost and what seems to have been endangered. Merchant who claims to be a “Parsi by religion, Christian by education, Hindu by culture and Sufi by persuasion” (*Yaraana*, 1999) alludes to the sacred way of living practiced in Indian societies which develops young ones into a homo-social group while taking them into an adult upbringing to adjust in a system of hetero-social cohabitation:

Today the boys
are at their Sunday bath
I watch them strip to the waist
And plunge heedless, headfirst
into the pond, newly born
Their wet limbs ripple
in the morning sun
As their loincloths fall
in coils to the floor
Beads of water fall like rainbows on stone
And the snake in paradise
is aroused once more: Jai Shankar!
Jai Jai Bhole Nath! (“Bathers at River Bhagsu Nag, Dharamsala,” pp. 80-81)

Written in Sufi style, the poems—fifty-four in number—invoke religious yet sexual imagery such as Bhagsu Nag, Krishna and Radha and present voyage of life that begins with birth and ends in death. In his poem “Homage to Derek Walcott” he ropes in a vision of historical events that have made Indian society fertile. Beginning with Vasco Da Gama to the Arabs, the exodus of the European Christians to the Persians, all have enriched Indian tradition, culture, language and religion of the society. Other poems in the collection such as “Iran”, “Bombay” and “Bathers at River Bhagsun Nag, Dharamsala” invoke a nostalgia for such a centripetal journey—a journey that is self purgatory transcending physical desire into a spiritual one. With Sufi ideology of the Muslim mystic Mansur al Hallaj (858-922 AD)—‘An’l Haq’ (I am creative truth), Merchant makes his poetry a means rather than an end, a means to be united with the desiring absence in self. A homoerotic love depicted in the poetry is essentially portrayed in his Being. Hence being gay is Being itself, in all acts, as would Sartre talk about Genet. *Sufiana: Poems* however transforms this sense of Being and implants the mystic and the spiritual to its essence. The “Yunus” of the early period comes back only as the image of a “lover” but it is in actuality the transcended self that comes to its making. Hence in writing and transcending physical love does Merchant purge the self and in writing does the attainment of sainthood begin. The canon of Rumi and Ghalib is re-evoked and simultaneously it experiments with the “absence” of being to fill in the gap in the homo-social cult with the image of ‘sea.’ The poems in *Sufiana* is a pleasure to read that would make the readers undertake a journey of life through a voyage of sea, sea being an

imagery inculcating union; union of lover and beloved, union of birth and death, union of cultures and union of languages, thereby transcending one to get united with the other and hence almighty.

Bearing an essence of pastoral elegy the book witnesses Merchant's search for memory—memory wet with pangs of separation from Iran (the land of Parsi origin) and from Bombay (land of his birth), both of which he has lost. Carrying the tradition of the poets, rueing for the lost homeland, the poems in *Sufiana* make Merchant, Buddha as well as Dalai Lama stand in the same queue and who live in memory. The goal of Merchant's life is reflective in his poems when he writes:

My lovers say I'm looking for a poem
My students say I'm looking for god
But I'm neither looking for lover nor poem nor god
But for Death which is all of these (p. 49).

His journey towards death is his desire to set himself free from home but this memory remains with him and does not make him home-free. He projects his personal loss and longing for security of intimacy through the familial images of his mother, father, grandfather and at the end his beloved sister Whabiz—all of whom he eternalizes in his poems dedicated individually to them. Through Sufi mysticism he transcends his feeling of separation and becomes one with his sister.

Sufiana: Poems (2013) is yet another glorious contribution of Hoshang Merchant to the world of Indian English Poetry. The sense of individuality in Merchant arises out of his self-consciousness of highest order which *Sufiana* achieves. Images of Dalai Lama, Rumi, Ghalib, Derek Walcott and Makrand occur invariably in the collection of poems who have all sung of the history of their own race. It would be of a great incitement to go through a voyage of change, of the racial or the familial that moves in a gyre and makes a return in its order of cyclical movement.

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