

MANHOOD, GRASSHOOD AND BIRDHOOD

By Aju Mukhopadhyay

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Reviewed by Nathalie Buckland, Nimbin, Australia

Aju Mukhopadhyay is a renowned writer, esteemed both in his native India and abroad. I first encountered his work in the book 'Poetic Connections; Poems from Australia and India', in which some of my poetry also appears. Having now read his latest publication, '*Manhood, Grasshood and Birdhood*', and done considerable reading on the internet I am even more impressed by the breadth and depth of this writer's range and talent. His published work includes essays, biographies, feature articles and fiction, as well as poetry of various genres. He writes both in Bangla and English.

Aju's love of his country is a strong theme, beginning with:

Mother India has snow capped Himalayan crown

She sits with her feet on sea washed by the three;

Bay of Bengal, Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea

(India the Mother p.12)

But what humans are doing to this precious land clearly distresses, indeed angers him;
On our pristine sea shore, on some peace-abode
is made nuclear factory or missile testing site
defying the people's legitimate right;
for we have taken the development road.

(What a Great Republican Shore are we Basking in! p.21)

Good use is made of rhyme and partial rhyme, rhythm and partial rhythm. This is not a solid structural framework, but varies with the content and the movement of each poem.

Aju does not solely concentrate on India, but roams across the world and sometimes far into the past with his poems. Topics include Geronimo, ancient Greece and the battle of Salamis.

*Past is like voiceless echo of the sound
present in our mind and sense
perceptible in its essence.*

*Present is a ghost of the past
for ever with us, guiding.*

(The Past p.33)

Here both alliteration and assonance add emphasis to the simile.

Section two of this book is headed 'Subjective', and has a different tone. I love the lyrical beginning lines of 'Rowing Still' p.44:

*rowing towards the ochre gloaming
or in the night with full moon floating
are events of the dreamy past
which do not remain, do not last*

This part of the book is more meditative.

Suddenly I stopped

Inspired by a questioning thought;

am I walking or I'm walking me?

Aju concludes that he came back to 'the diurnal fact'

bewildered!

(Do I walk or I Walk Me? p.49)

Section three, 'Dwelling With Nature', contains as expected some delightful nature poetry, though amongst it are many reminders of the ongoing destruction wrought by Man;

heart of the forest is lost to the age of plantation

as it is elsewhere lost to the mining spree.

(The Fall of a Habitat, p.55)

By this stage of the book I seem to have fallen into Aju's world, to have absorbed small doses of Indian culture, philosophy, way of life and the natural environment. I feel moved by all the instances he writes about of destruction, of impending disaster, of the lack of awareness shown not only by businessmen, developers and politicians, but by the great majority of the population. This is not specific to any one country of course; it is universal, and as such I relate strongly to his words. Surely this is a vital role for poetry to play in all cultures.

It was almost with a sense of relief that I turned to the last section of the book, 'Birdhood, Birds' Lifestyles'. I had already dipped in and seen numerous delightful black and white photos accompanied by short poems.

I know Aju is a haiku poet, among so many other roles, and expected these poems to be at least haiku-like. I have been writing and publishing haiku for years myself so am familiar with the genre.

However rather to my pleasure I found that these were entirely different. Clearly a result of long and intense observation, each is highly descriptive, and several are anthropomorphic. There is very little rhyme, but both simile and metaphor are freely used.

It is hard to pick a favourite, but perhaps the stork;

Openbill Storks p.69

apple snails in jheel

invite openbill storks

in thousands to make symphony-

white flowers on trees

wings in blue sky.

Just a few words give me such a vivid picture of this bird, surely very much like the storks I see here in Australia.

I finished the book '*Manhood, Grasshood and Birdhood*' with a sense of wonder. Aju is a poet and a conservationist. For a while he took me right away from Australia and not only into his world – of which I feel deplorably ignorant – but on a universal journey. This he has achieved in a language not that of his birth, but learnt later as 'Indian English'. I was able to get some feel of India, that complex, beautiful and mysterious country. I share his pain at the dangers that beset us all.

I will finish this review with Aju's own words from '*The Grasshood*' p.63;

man lives and lives

dying to himself many times

until one day to realize

that grass like earth

and wind and space

and water and fire

and breath

is superior

to man

naturally.

'Manhood, Grasshood and Birdhood' is available, outside India, by contacting the publisher by email and requesting price including postage to Australia.
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