

# Sounds of silence

**SACHIDANANDA MOHANTY**

I had first encountered the poetry of Sanjukta Dasgupta more than two decades ago. Paul Love, the distinguished editor of *Kavya Bharati*, the iconic poetry journal published by the American college, Madurai, had asked me to review four collections of Indian English poetry by women poets. I was struck by the originality of the poetic voice and the effortless ease with which Dasgupta expressed herself in her collection. Indeed, she stood out among the four poets. I did not know her then. Over the years, I have come to know her better as an outstanding academic and a poet — a rare combination indeed!

In the present collection, which is dedicated to her five-month old granddaughter, Ivaana (Ubuntu), Dasgupta breaks fresh ground and offers us verses marked by feminist angst and ardour. The poems could be described as “political” in the best sense of the term. There is an overwhelming sense of concern for the girl child and the place of women in contemporary India. (Why must we have a girl child, she asks pointedly, and not just a child?)

Other equally powerful cameos of war, violence, racism and tyranny greet us. However, none of these assumes the tone of the all too familiar polemical and the didactic, the usual fate of “political” poetry. Instead, Dasgupta deploys a sensitive poetic voice and works out a delicately woven tapestry of poetic idiom and diction, ensuring permanence to the poetic artefacts.

The poems in totality represent the politics of hope — there is hope that the “liberated Lakshmis in the 21st century can bask in the pristine environment of complete social, intellectual and creative freedom”. After all, *Lakshmi Unbound* is a “freedom song”.

**In *Lakshmi Unbound*, Sanjukta Dasgupta shows that poetry is not just about the world of solipsism; it is not only about the personal muse. Poetry can teach us to deal with the world as well. Indeed, it is a means for psychic survival... A review**

Dasgupta composes poems that leave a trail of inter-textuality — Tagore, Shelley, Keats and TS Eliot, among others. The poems offer, uniformly, resistance and introspection. There is violence too, albeit of a creative one. Quoting Virginia Woolf, she says, “Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of woman writers”.

Many poems offer a radial *tour de force*. The persona in the title poem prefers to be an *Alakshmi* if that involves transgression of the gender barriers. “Don’t, don’t call me Lakshmi/I can’t ever be Lakshmi/ I want to fly kites/ I want to climb trees”. Madness and ‘badness’ are consciously embraced. *Mrinal’s first letter* is a deft reworking of both Tagore and Ibsen: Mrinal and Nora. Similarly, Tagore’s *Chandilika* in Dasgupta’s hands, is transformed into a beatific personality, thanks to the encounter with the Buddhist monk Ananda. The poem *Chitrangada* is a creative adaptation of Tagore’s play of the same name and tellingly underlines the need to be equal partners in peace

and war.

Likewise, *A Tale of a Sleeping Village*, the persona sees dreams turning tragically into nightmares. Instead of crops, the village grows “guns, bullets and bombs”. The poems *Refugees* and *Second Coming* are evocative of the dance of death and the reign of alien predators. There is hope nevertheless in peace, happiness and prosperity, “Not about bombs, guns and blasts/Not about limbs, fractures and body bags/Not about shattered minds/and horrible trauma”.

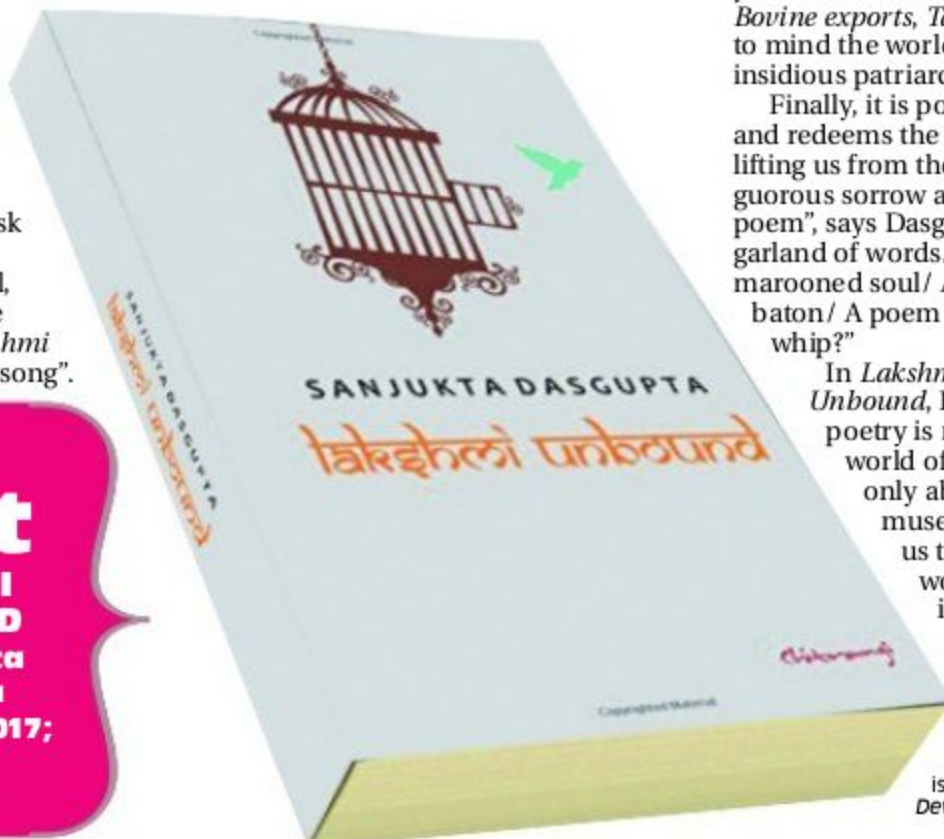
*Festival of Lights* juxtaposes both Kali and Lakshmi as welcome necessities: the energy of Kali and the benign grace of Lakshmi. Similarly, *Girl Child* and *I killed him my Lord*, based on newspaper/anecdotal accounts, reveal the predicament of women in contemporary India.

There are love poems too that are evocative of the “dew-drenched rose bud at midnight/lovelorn night strain nightlong/ To eye the radiant dawn”. Likewise, the poem, *Let’s go* is reminiscent of Eliot’s *The Love Poem of J Alfred Prufrock* — “Let us then go, you and I/out of the last days of this year/into a timeless basis”. Similarly, *Bovine exports*, *Talaq* and *Fear* bring to mind the world of vigilante and insidious patriarchy.

Finally, it is poetry that triumphs and redeems the human condition, lifting us from the world of languorous sorrow and pathos. “A poem”, says Dasgupta aptly, is “not a garland of words/A life jacket for the marooned soul/ A poem a crutch, a baton/ A poem a flower not a whip?”

In *Lakshmi Unbound*, Dasgupta shows that poetry is not just about the world of solipsism, it is not only about the personal muse. Poetry can teach us to deal with the world as well. Indeed, it is a means for psychic survival.

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Spot  
Light

LAKSHMI  
UNBOUND

By Sanjukta  
Dasgupta

Chitrangi, 2017;  
Rs 200

