

Debriefing Social Conditioning and Subjugation: A Review of Sanjukta Dasgupta's *Lakshmi Unbound*

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The technique of writing poetry comes with 'creation' which is the primacy of knowledge (Fraser 24) and Sanjukta Dasgupta's fifth collection of poems, *Lakshmi Unbound*, dedicated to Ivaana (Ubuntu), her five-month old granddaughter (Dasgupta, *Lakshmi Unbound* 5) authenticates her formidable creativity and apt awareness as a 'progressive writer' (Hasan xiii), to address several burning issues inherent within the fathomless depths of the society, continuing to compartmentalize and coerce women as 'the second sex'. As writing is an activism for a writer to express her/his political standpoint, ideology, worldview, dreams, visions and ideas through a harmonious fusion with imagination (Dasgupta, "Surviving In My World"), *Lakshmi Unbound* not only decodes and interrogates various stereotypes and social conditioning women are subjected to in their lives, but also reverberates the resonant spirit of liberty and cosmopolitanism essential for imagination, inventiveness, creativity and individuality; as poetry is the other tongue that shadows the languages of humanity beyond the gendered considerations (Fraser 24).

That the poems in this collection resonates the spirit of disenfranchisement is well evidenced through the title of the book which echoes Shelley's "Prometheus Unbound" where he observed that it would have been unfeasible for him to placate the oppressor with the champion of humankind (Dasgupta, *Lakshmi Unbound* 6). In spite of following the Romantic tradition, Dasgupta's individual talent juxtaposes liberty and self-determination through her poetic aura in the context of sexual politics. Inspired by "Shakespeare's Sister" and the female 'Muse of Creativity' Dasgupta has voiced her ideology, worldview through her delicately woven poetic fabric in order to unfasten the spaces of the antediluvian mind towards women's liberation after ages of oppression, infernal brutishness and interrogates the stereotypes which a girl child is intricately associated with since her birth. The poems addressing the issues of gender sensitization like, "Lakshmi Unbound", "Mrinal's First Letter", "Chandalika", "Chitrangada", "Festival of Lights", "Girl Child", "I killed her My Lord", "Rape", "Sindoor", "Talaq", "Fear" and "Perspective", draws our attention to the poet's consciousness towards abominable incidents of the society and expresses her anger against the atrocities women are subjected to. The opening poem, "Lakshmi Unbound" epigraphed with Woolf and Tagore, critiques the patriarchal coercion as well as signifies the 'silence' unvoiced in the unfathomable hearts of women, and aims to break it for a dynamic, poignant and adventurous existence of

women in the society (Dasgupta, *Breaking the Silence* iv). This interrogation through other poems, specifically characterized with a note of fierce confrontation against the patriarchal politics are authenticated through expressions like, “I don’t want to be Lakshmi/ I am *Alakshmi*/ Trap me if you can” (Dasgupta, *Lakshmi Unbound* 13), “As she scripted her resignation letter” (16), “For the sun also did rise for her” (19), “nor yet/ The object of common pity to be brushed aside” (21), “Smiling, sure and undefeated” (38), “I stabbed him, stabbed, stabbed, stabbed” (40), “dare to desire/ His severed head at her feet” (43), “a sign of slavery” (44), “spit out with confidence” and “Then she disconnected the line” (69, 71). In these excerpts of the poems there is vindication which is a necessity to recognize women as human beings and treat them with respect and dignity, Dasgupta seems to echo Tagore’s observation where he says, “when male creatures indulge in their fighting propensity to kill one another Nature connives at it, because comparatively speaking, females are needful to her purpose, while males are barely necessary” (Tagore, *Personality* 154).

This demands the essential realisation among all, that women are human beings and need not be stigmatized as “lakshmi” or “alaskshmi”, rather be respected and honoured as individuals. The poet’s vehement anger as noticed here shakes the reader through the use of conspicuous images like “His head lay on the floor/ Eyes wide open/ In stark disbelief” as women continue to be assaulted at home and in the world (Dasgupta, *Lakshmi Unbound* 43). An important feature of Dasgupta’s poetry is that she has enterprisingly endeavoured with Tagore’s characters like Mrinal, Chandalika, Chitrangada and Gora, authenticating her love for the Bard and she reinstates the power (feminine) inherent in Tagore’s characters (women). Poems like “Refugees”, “Second Coming”, “A New Dawn”, “Festive Season”, “Festival of Lights”, “Let’s Go”, “Staircase”, “Ode to Silence”, “Ode to Sound”, “Hope”, “Poet’s Song”, “Poem Within” reflect the poet’s perspectives towards life and philosophy. These poems explore the portals beyond the accessible frontiers to trace the tranquil communication bereft of self-blazoning (7) which “become penitent whimpers/ The discerning radiant rays/ Of a thousand suns/ Scorch and illuminate in one fell sweep/ Of a lighting strike” (34). These visionary poems address issues, like the gruesome effects of partition, racism, unfulfilling pledges continuing to “droop and drop” our hearts with “silent tear drops” (56). The treatment of political issues in “A Tale of a Sleeping Village”, the aftermath of partition corroborated by “Ishwar and Allah”, “to divide further” (28), the importance of a “discovery, recovery and a healing beyond human words” (32) affects and enable us to decipher the poet’s creative efficiency to convey the message of togetherness to her readers in a systematic style and intelligible manner. “Silence”

like “Sound” conveyed through a creative vein is equally affecting and creates discordance in a sensitive heart as sound and silence bridge life and oblivion (56-58). The ideology of free existence without any kind of inhibitions has been intelligently nurtured by Dasgupta in “Bovine Experts”, like “A New Dawn” where she as one of “the unacknowledged legislators of the world” (Shelley 46) expresses her views critiquing the authoritarian interference, upon one’s basic rights, justified in the name of religion which has been socially constructed, imposed to ever coerce human beings.

As a panacea to the pervading crisis, the poet, like Virginia Woolf and Rabindranath Tagore seem to hark the “The Eleventh Muse” through her song for the birth of an “androgynous creative spirit” (49) guiding to a euphonic existence where “women will have what has so long been denied them – leisure, and money and a room to themselves” (Woolf, “Women and Fiction” 73) in order to liberate the Eastern “Lakshmi” and the Western “Angel of the House” (Woolf, *The Death of the Moth* 238), empowering them to be the liberator, zealous spokeswomen and emissaries of social metamorphosis and creative participation in this world by being “the Renaissance seeker of wisdom” as “she had to reach out and pluck/ The fruit that would take her/ Beyond this Paradise, from/ This eternal spring-like summer/ Of her comfort zone, to challenge/ The horizon” (Fraser, *Letters to My Mother* 65).

As we peruse this book of poems, we explore that besides addressing the burning issues and philosophies of life, there are some poems which in a Dantesque manner solace the affected heart of the reader. The poet, after evoking the sins committed by society (patriarchy) upon innocent lives, tends to forgive and forget the mistakes and looks forward to a progressive life of a harmonious co-existence where there would be no repetition of such barbarism and conditioning upon life. Poems like, “Hope”, “Poet’s Song”, “Poem Within”, “Laughter”, “Translation” not only bear a positive note but they also enshrine the overtones of togetherness and cosmopolitanism which is the call for the day. The poet hopes the future to be a “triumphant turning point” (Dasgupta, *Lakshmi Unbound* 59) with humanity journeying towards a new era reaping the progress derived from the spirit of internationalism through a harmonious assimilation of cultures signifying the ideologies of ‘now’ and ‘then’ (60, 61) and in this cumulative journey poetry “like a speck of sparkling diamond” (63) will enlighten and continue to exist in all hearts as long as words survive guiding humanity towards a “carefree impulse” (75) of a fearless existence. An existence where all differences merge to be a global phenomenon, as echoed by the poet in the concluding poem “Translation”, symbolizing an integration of the historical and ideological context and content for inscribing a distinct magnitude towards a sublimated graceful orientation (Dasgupta, *Swades* 15). “Translation”

characterizes the energizing spirit of humanism, collaboration and cooperation as, “on the surface of our being we have the ever-changing phases of the individual self, but in the depth there dwells the Eternal Spirit of human unity beyond our direct knowledge” (Tagore, *The Religion of Man* 5). Therefore both the role of woman and man are necessary in a civilization to progress lest it loses balance and welcomes the forces of destruction, a series of catastrophes for an one-sided civilization (Tagore, *Personality* 157).

The poet has been successful in creating an accessible dialogue of socio-cultural questions in her *Lakshmi Unbound*, where through simple words bearing powerful expressions she has created an aura of self-determination guided by her vision, ardent conviction and foresight. At par, the cover of the book is a signifier of the pervading spirit of manumission which the poems embody and endorse i.e. “Be brave at heart, stand erect, don’t keep on cringing” (Dasgupta, *Swades* 64).

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