

KUNWAR NARAIN, NO OTHER WORLD: SELECTED POEMS, TRANSLATED BY APURVA NARAIN

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Review by **Shanta Acharya**

Kunwar Narain (1927-) is among India's most highly-regarded living poets. He writes in Hindi, estimated to be the fourth language in the world as spoken by the largest numbers of native speakers. A selection of his poems, *No Other World*, translated into English by his son, Apurva, was originally published by Rupa in 2008; a slightly abridged edition was released by Arc Publications, UK, in 2010.

Quoting Walter Benjamin, Apurva Narain gives us an insight into his process: "A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully." (p.19) Robert Frost reminds us that "Poetry is what gets lost in translation." Yet every translator's challenge is to create an echo of the original—a translation of that which is lost in translation! We are also told "A poem is never finished, only abandoned," (Paul Valéry). So too is a translation. Father and son know this all too well. For Kunwar Narain, "The remaining poem/ is not written with words, /Drawing the full existence like a full stop/ it is left anywhere..." (The Remaining Poem) Apurva Narain takes "comfort in the thought that a translation has to be left as it is at some stage for it to appear at all—much as a poem or life has to be—incomplete and unfinished, and in hope." (p 23)

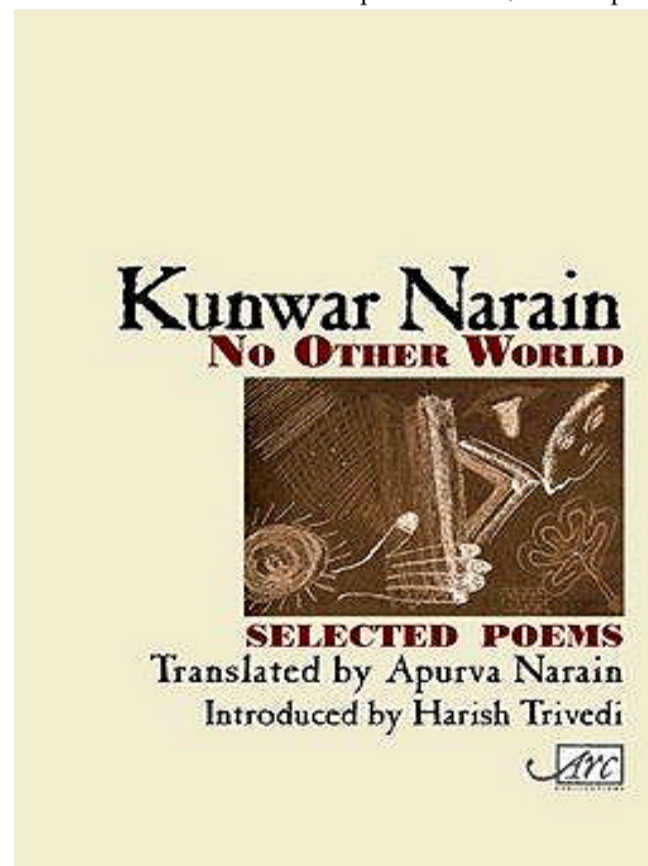
The translator tells us he has been faithful to his instincts hoping that some of the poet's personal creative journey may have shaped those instincts, and that tracing his evolution as a poet, is among the best ways of journeying creatively, "of taking in vistas, strumming along with poetic craft, and covering distances that no other journey could." (p.18) The reader too makes such a journey bearing in mind the poet's injunction: "From these asides of my poem/ build your own sky, / take my restless words/ and give to this tattered bias of an art's remnant/ a new body of beauty..." (Medium)

Narain's literary oeuvre spans poetry, short story, epic, criticism, essay, translation as well as writings on cinema, music, arts and culture. The translations here are from his five published poetry collections spanning five decades. Narain publishes selectively, after considered intervals. He has the reputation of being a 'true intellectual' among poets, thanks to his extensive reading and encyclopaedic knowledge; yet the burden of his learning sits lightly—both on the man and his writings. Firmly rooted in the Indian literary and philosophical traditions, his sensibility is cosmopolitan. This 'internationalism' is as evident in Tagore (1861-1941) as among the younger generation of poets writing today. Indian poets typically are influenced by at least three traditions—that of the literature of their mother tongue, classical Indian poetry, and the avant-garde ideas and works of modern European writers and thinkers. Yet when reading Narain one comes across a distinctly modern sensibility.

Perhaps, it has something to do with his education and background. Born on 19 September 1927, Narain came from a business family; initially he studied Science in college, which may have enhanced his overall spirit of enquiry. He then switched to English Literature, and got a Masters from Lucknow University in 1951. Uninterested in the family business, in 1955 he went travelling in Eastern Europe, Russia and China, and met with poets like Nazim

Hikmet, Antoni Słonimskie and Pablo Neruda during the trip. Influences on him have been pretty eclectic, eastern and western, ranging from the Upanishads and the Indian epics to Kabir and Amir Khusro, Buddhism and Marxism to history and mythology, Cavafy and Kafka to Ghalib and Gandhi." (p.15) The French symbolists, especially Stéphane Mallarmé, and poets like Jorge-Luis Borges also influenced him deeply.

This panoramic vision comes across in his writing. Narain's poems allude to a wide range of topics—they can move from Kafka's Prague where "a presence/ can be more present/ in its absence" (In Kafka's Prague) to Krakow Zoo where having lost his consort an elephant with his wet eyes "looks/ like a poet,/ from his probing trunk a scientist, /from his forehead a thinker, /from his ears a saint" (In Krakow Zoo). We encounter Alexander the Great who abandoned his conquest of India; but the poet



reminds us: "Had I been Alexander/ it is possible that I would have killed all thirteen that night/ who incited those that were turning back. We/ had just about found the limit/ Alexander had reached." (To That Mound) His themes cover Ayodhya, a city he knew well having spent some of his childhood there, and then to experience the Hindu-Muslim riots in 1992, a harsh reminder of the reality of India today: "O Rama/ Life is a bitter fact/ and you are an epic. / You cannot win over/ the unthinking/ that now has not ten or twenty/ but a million heads and hands; / and who knows with whom your ally/ Vibhisana too now stands." (Ayodhya, 1992) In "Nalanda and Bakhtiyar," the barbarous conqueror, who destroyed the world-famous Buddhist centre of learning, Nalanda, in the 12th century, meets with his nemesis: "Shut in the dark room of his guilt, with shame, / a victor's dreams break down his strength, give way."

Reading Narain we gain perspective on human emotions displayed over the course of history. In "Ibn Batutah," he notes: "All this is not today's/ history but/ of very long ago, / of primitive savages, / whose witness I am not."

This technique of using historical events to reflect on current affairs is deployed with great effect, a kind of an objective correlative. The poem's ending also serves as a sharp comment: "Sultan, / permit me to leave, / it is the hour for my prayer." The open-ended quality, the irony, cannot be missed. In "Falcon," he adopts that all-seeing, God's eye-view as a falcon does: "A hyphen between land and sky. / Life from a valorous view." Mediating between opposites—earth and sky, life and death—may seem characteristically Indian. And Narain does come across as a thinker, holding on to opposites, like a scientist able to see both sides of the question. In "Chakravayuh," he affirms: "... life has many sides/ and time's eternal siege/ sides with none."

Living in a country of paradox and contradiction, Narain cannot help addressing such matters. He does not say nothing can be done about it, instead he quietly asserts: "I have to embark on a journey. / I have to go to work." The reader is left to discover the meaning. In a world born of a terrible beauty, Narain gently reminds us— "when seen, will look pieced together/ like a map of India." He also refers to "an internal intent" that looked "like an old philosopher's face." (A Map) His poems have 'a certain poised vulnerability', an awareness that is "at once detached and attached, its doors opening up for the reader and poet alike, outwards and inwards." (pg 15)

In "On Both Sides Of The Line," he is confronted with the limitation of perceiving both sides, of being reduced to seeing the world as "split into two clear halves." Trying to see things not linearly but more as a circle, more complete, thus giving his "time-space sense/ more meaning, that is, / it let him give more to others/ and get more from others," except that "Others thought he was incomplete." He does not lay the blame of misperception, of partial observation, with 'others'. No, he refers to his own limitation, "because of him/ all else looked complete."

Thus, he looks to Nature as an ideal—nature's give and take is the give and take Narain aspires to. "If I return this time/ I will return better." He wishes to return "more caring for all/ I will return more complete." (If I Return This Time) In the section, "Trees," Narain reminds us of nature's generosity: "Whenever that grand old tree comes to mind/ the Upanishads come to mind: / comes to mind a clean, simple life-style; / in its ever-calm shade, a strange/ generous quality that gave/ coolness in summer/ warmth in winter." Trees, flowers, rivers, rays, butterflies, elephants, all figure in his poems as a part of creation's spectrum. "I do not imitate nature, I am nature," he says, "we live in two worlds: one that each creates, one created by all together...my world may or may not differ from ours." (pg 16)

What characterises Narain's poetry is the delicate balance between thought and language, content and structure; his words give meaning to ideas. "It is under total creative pressures and from inner imperatives that the special language of a particular poem is generated." (p.16)

Between fact and fact there is a language
that parts us
between you and me an unbroken silence
that joins us:
apart from the world, there is a vision

WARRIORS AFTER WAR

Indian and Pakistani retired military leaders reflect on relations between the two countries, past, present and future

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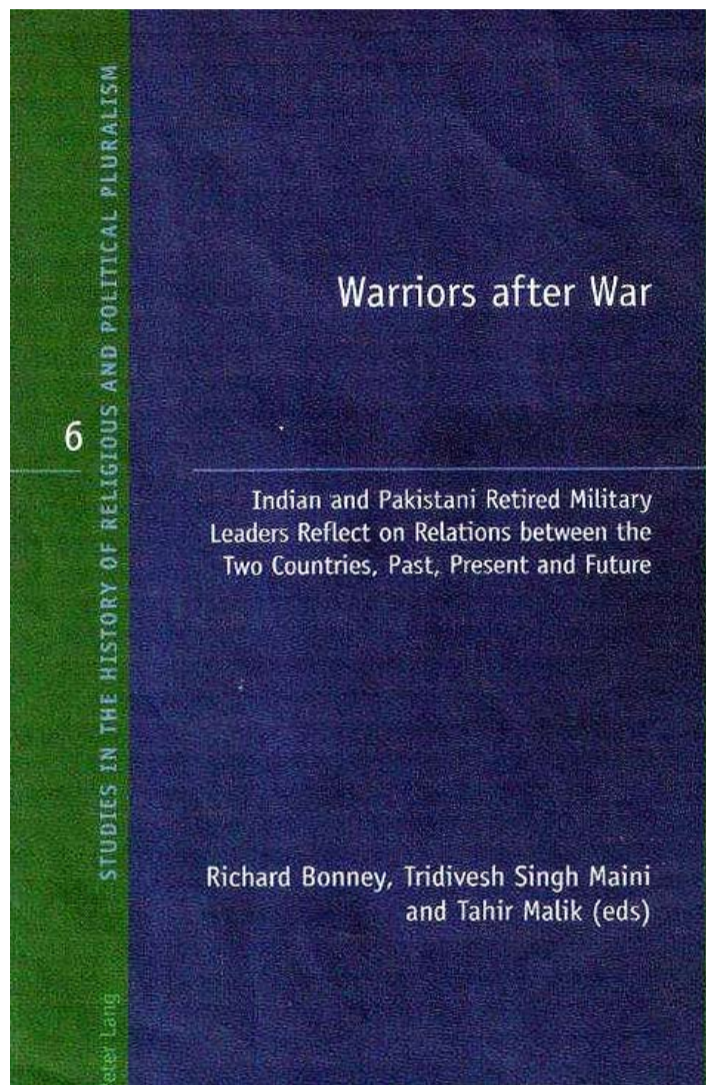
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Reviewed by Reginald Massey

The India–Pakistan problem cannot be easily explained and certainly cannot be easily resolved. The problem has deep roots and far reaching ramifications. There is the age-old Hindu-Muslim tussle with a gravitational pull of mutual distrust. However, we must not discard the facts of the ground reality. For centuries Hindus and Muslims have lived side by side, if not as loving brothers but at least as neighbours with a modicum of respect for each other. That was no mean achievement. Akbar, the greatest of the Mughals, initiated the accommodation.

Since I was born in Lahore and lived there during my early teens till 1947 I can cite several examples of heroism during the riots and carnage of the Partition. Muslims saved Hindus and Sikhs and Hindus and Sikhs saved Muslims. Ishtiaq Ahmed’s carefully researched book on the Partition of the Punjab (published recently by Rupa, New Delhi and soon to be brought out by OUP Pakistan) must be read in tandem with this work. Because without being aware of the *raison d’etre* of the partition of India the statements of opposing Indian and Pakistani generals who fought each other after mid-1947 carry no meaning. These men, it must be remembered, were brothers-in-arms often serving in the same British Indian regiments till the midnight hour of August 15, 1947.

During the first Kashmir War (late 1947) former brother-officers were pitched against each other in a kill or be-killed situation. One of the prized legacies of the British Raj, the Indian Army, had been tragically



ripped apart from top to bottom. Military historians have not as yet grasped this fact fully. However, the great Urdu writer Manto summed it up in his story *The Last Salute* when a Jat soldier of the Indian Army is shot in Kashmir by Pakistani snipers. The commander of the Pakistan company rushes out to see who his men had shot. He recognises the Jat who only a few months ago had served under him. The dying soldier too recognises his former captain and with a great effort raises his arm and with a trembling hand salutes him. It was his last salute. The Pakistani officer stood to attention and saluted the dying Indian soldier. Most probably this too was his last salute.

Richard Bonney’s wide ranging Introduction to this book has certainly provided useful information. However, it must be stressed that there was a fundamental difference between Nehru’s attitude towards the military and that of Jinnah. Nehru disliked men in uniform and believed that there was no difference between Indian and Pakistani generals. They were the same men, only wearing different uniforms. He memorably wrote to Bertrand Russell lamenting the rise of a military mentality in India. The Indian armed forces were firmly controlled and actually neglected during the tenure of Defence Minister Krishna Menon. Hence the humiliation in 1962 at the hands of the Chinese Peoples’ Liberation Army.

In Pakistan, however, the military had pride of place in the national consciousness. The armed services were, in fact, pampered and spoilt. They became, in effect,

Continued from page 17: **No Other World**

that endures infinite dreams,
a restless consciousness that, in a frenzy,
takes language to be fact, breaks it up
and strews it upon its solitude;
and then like a sobbing child turned coy
gathers the same scraps of language again
in its spent mind, orders them again,
and locates life with a new meaning.
(Medium)

The poem resides in the realm of universal thought, if not consciousness – the poem transcends the poet’s personal limitations as a human being. It is not surprising to learn that one of his main themes is about how to be human. In “He Never Slept,” he says: “There begins the search of man,/ .../ to stay alive amidst those many battles/ that are not his.../ only goes on enacting his duties/ with honesty...” Becoming human is among the greatest challenges one can face. Narain is far from being a lonely poet; on the contrary, his poems connect and resonate universally in their quest for faith in a world of disintegrating values.

One encounters in Narain a profound humanism. In a section titled, “Humanesque,” in the poem, “When One Can’t Remain Human,” Narain writes about the limits of being human: “If times are bad, one can’t remain human.” Yet all he aspires to is to become a human being. In “A Strange Day” he observes:

I roamed about all day today
and no mishap happened.
I met people all day today
and was slighted nowhere.
I told the truth all day today
and no one took it wrong.
I trusted everyone today
and got swindled nowhere.

And the strangest miracle was
that coming home I found not another
but myself come back there.

It is powerful in its simplicity, reminding us how every day our world is threatened. Whether we return more complete or return home with our self intact, “we are those mortals/ who need a world each instant.” (pg 25) We often read about bad things happening—news bulletins thrive on such stories. How often do we sit down and appreciate the miracle of a day that is ordinary? As Confucius reminds us, “a common man marvels at uncommon things; a wise man marvels at the commonplace.” Great poetry too marvels at the commonplace. Narain’s poems too begin in the ordinary and end in wonder.

In a preface, Narain alludes to a “*scientific* view on poetry; to the relevance of thought, not just sentiment—the relevance of a liberal sensitive intellect that precludes prejudice and intolerance—and some of his

poems have indeed been noted for their intellectually elegant, clinically controlled, classical tendencies. But it is not just a modernist notion of science he alludes to. Instead, it is an informed, human notion of it that recognizes its own fallibility. In being dispassionate, passion is not compromised. In questioning blind faith, faith is only reaffirmed.” (pg 24)

Asked by an interviewer what the role of thought and intellect should be in poetry, Narain is reported to have said: “Pretty much the same as in our life, namely, to enhance a better understanding of life, sensitivity and a sense of justice.” Narain’s faith in thought seems to be exceeded only by his faith in poetry, for which we may save “within ourselves a corner/ where the gap is the narrowest/ between the earth and sky/ between man and God.” (pg 13) The connection between life and poetry comes across succinctly in “Off Centred”: “I do not wish to flee life, / I wish to connect to it –/ to jolt it/ on its imaginary axle/ at that very point where/ it is most vulnerable to poetry.” In “Amir Khusro,” his wish is: “Let me live my remaining life/.../ free like the thoughts of a poet.”

Shanta Acharya was born in Orissa; she won a scholarship to Oxford, where she completed her doctoral thesis before going to Harvard as a Visiting Scholar.

