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NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE

Indian Poetry in English

Lecture: 38 Jeet Thayil

BINOD MISHRA

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



Socio-Political Conditions

- Individualism
- Scepticism
- Drugs and despair
- General Disillusionment
- Alienated from family and religion



Introduction

- Born in 1959…, in a Syrian Christian family, Kerala,India.
- Masters in Fine Arts from Sarah Lawrence College, New York.

- Recipient of grants and awards from the New York Foundation for the Arts, the Swiss Arts Council, the British Council and the Rockefeller Foundation.

- Poet, novelist, librettist and musician.
- *Narcopolis* (2012): Shortlisted for Man Booker Prize in 2012.
- Sahitya Akademi Award 2012 for *These Errors are Correct*.
- Literary cosmopolitan
- Personal Poems
- 2012 Libretto: *Babur in London*

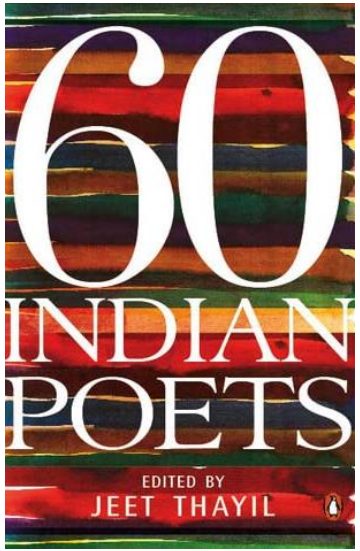


Poetry Collections

- *Gemini* (1992)
- *Apocalypso* (1997)
- *English* (2004)
- *These Errors Are Correct* (2008)

Edited Works

- *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets*, Bloodaxe UK, 2008
- *60 Indian Poets* (2008)
- *Give the Sea Change and It Shall Change: 56 Indian Poets*, Fulcrum, 2005



"works his feelings out with care, through colourations of mood rather than through explicit statements.“ (Dom Moraes)

Characteristics of Poems

- Surreal humour
- Satiric and intense
- Dense texture of sound and echoes
- A widening capacity to embrace the Dionysian.
- Attractions of drug, drink, sex and death.
- Concerns about corruption in life

Poetry is like a very specialized language spoken only by the practitioners of a lost art; poets are priests of a religion who have been washed up on a dead planet. Poets speak only to the converted [those who appreciate poetry]; they make very few new converts. Poetry is also more difficult to write than prose, and you have to deal with things like structure. Even free verse has a certain formality. Each word has to do a lot work; it is a loaded language.

from *Gemini* (1992)

Growing up in that strange place we learned
to laugh silently for fear that laughter too loud
would bring about its own swift end.
We learned a dread of Sundays. If days had colours,
we used to say, Sunday's would be black. I learned
to sing in the dark, quietly, without joy, not
without fear, modulating my tones so he would not
hear, the big man sleeping with my mother in
the back. They sleep there still. Housebroken now,
I make token sounds in a large unnoticed hand,
gone to ground, as you said, in a loud and leprous land. ("House of Silence")

What demon stalks this arid land,
how can you live here my poor soul?
Slipping in semen, blotting his snot,
What demon stalks this arid land?
Slot in the slip, slip in the slot,
Even the sun steps like a thief.

("A Circular Song")

from *Apocalypso* (1997)

People die in circles. The thing to hate
Is learning what you'll have to unlearn…
People die heedlessly. The nuns you like
Reek of hollow heaven, stubbed or frayed,
Mentholated in grievance…
Children die, predeceasing parents. Odd
That we eat birds and animals growing
Like us. Look closely at rivers, trees.
People die, that's what they do. ("Life Lessons")

Characteristics of Thayil's Poems

- The *ghazal* (Asian origin) is a poetic vehicle ideally suited to express pangs of love and separation.
- Thematically unrelated.
- Structural unity - patterns of rhyme, repetition and rhythm.

- Thayil boldly experiments with the structure.
- Rues the loss of the native tongue.
- Humorous
- Biblical references

“Malyalam’s Ghazal”

Listen! Someone’s saying a prayer in Malayalam
He says there’s no word for ‘despair’ in Malayalam

Sometimes at daybreak you sing a Gujrati garba.
At night you open your hair in Malayalam.

To understand symmetry, understand Kerala.
The longest palindrome is there, in *Malayalam*.

When you’ve been too long in the room of English,
Open your windows to the fresh air of Malayalam

Visitors are welcome in The School of Lost Tongues,
Someone’s endowed a high chair in Malayalam

I greet you my ancestors, O scholars and linguists.
My father who recites Baudelaire in Malayalam.

Jeet, such drama with the scrapes you know.
Write a couplet, if you dare, in Malayalam.

“Spiritus Mundi”

I was born in the Christian South
of a subcontinent mad for religion.
Warriors and zealots tried to rule it.
A minor discipline carried his doubt
like a torch to temple and shrine.
I longed for vision and couldn’t tell it.

The cities I grew up in were landlocked.
One, a capital, buff with architecture,
the other lost for months in monsoon.
One was old, one poor, both were hot.
The heat vaporized thought and order,
drained the will, obliterated reason.



Contd...

I settled, 20 and morose, is a town
built by a patricidal emperor
whose fratricidal son imprisoned him,
for eight years, with a view of the tomb
he built for his wife, to remember her.
I was over conscious of my rhyme,

and of the houses, three, inside my head.
In the streets, death, in saffron or green,
Rode a cycle rickshaw slung
with megaphones. On the kitchen step
A chilli plant grew dusty in the wind.
In that climate nothing survived the sun



Contd...

Or a pickaxe, not even a stone dome
that withstood 400 years of voices
raised in prayer or argument. The train
pulled in each day at an empty platform
Where a tea stall that served passers-
By became a famous fire shrine.

I made a change: I travelled west
In time to see a century end
And begin. I don't recall the summer
Of 2001. Did it exist?
There would have been sun and rain.
I was there, I don't remember

Contd...

a time before autumn of that year.
Now 45, my hair gone sparse,
I'm a poet of small buildings:
the brownstone, the townhouse, the cold water
walkup, the tenement of two or three floors.
I cherish the short ones still standing.

I recognize each cornice and still,
the sky's familiar cast, the window
I spend my day walking to and from,
as if I were a baffled Mughal in his cell.
I call the days by their Hindu
names and myself by my Christian one.

Contd...

The Atlantic's stately breakers mine
the shore for kelp, mussels, bits of glasses.
They move in measured iambs, tidy
as the towns that rise from sign to neon sign.
Night rubs its feet. A mouse deer starts across
the grass. The sky drains to a distant eddy.

Badshah, I say to no one there.
I hear a koel in the call of a barn owl.
All things combine and recombine,
the sky streams in ribbons of colour.
I'm my father and my son grown old.
Everything that lives, lives on.

Characteristics of the Poem

- “Writes about how he lived and with whom, where he went and what he ate, how he spent his childhood and so on.”- Mishra
- Autobiographical poem –places he visited
- Structured
- Urban life and nature

“Premonition” (*for Shakti*)

Gone and *gone* doesn’t mean a thing-
The world and we continue to be.
Happy to eat our pig and live, we sing
their names against the shame. We know
Someone waits where the sky and sea
are tilted. She leans on light as on a floor.

The bridge between *is* and *was* descends
too soon, sweeps them up like chimney dust,
whose lips we loved, who were friends
when hands were hands that held us fast.

They reach to us, lost among the lost,
Their shared minds stretched to the past,

Inconsolable mouths slack with loss,
Not able, not yet, to let go of us.

“The Heroin Sestina”

What was the point of it? The stoned
life, the chased, snorted, shot life. Some low
comedy with a cast of strangers. Time
squashed flat. The 1001 names of heroin
chewed like language. Nothing now to know
or remember but the dirty taste
of it, and the names: snuff, Death, a little taste,
H—pronounce it etch—, sugar, brownstone,
scag, the SHIT, ghoda gaadi, #4 china, You-Know,
garad, god, the gear, junk, monkey blow,
the law, the habit, material, cheez, heroin.
The point? It was the wasted time,

Contd…

which comes back lovely sometimes,
a ghost sense say, say that hard ache taste
back in your throat, the warm heroin
drip, the hit, the rush, the whack, the stone.
You want it now, the way it lays you low,
flattens everything you know
to a thin white line. I'm saying, I know
the pull of it: the skull rings time
so beautiful, so low
you barely hear it. Itch this blind toad taste.
When you said, 'I mean it, we live like stones,'
you broke something in me only heroin

Contd…

could fix. The thick sweet amaze of heroin,
helpless its love, its know-
ledge of the infinite. Why push the stone
back up the hill? Why not leave it with the time
keep, asleep at the bar? Try a little taste
of something sweet that a sweet child will adore, low

in the hips where the aches all go. Allow me in this one time and I'll give you heroin, just a taste to replace the useless stuff you know. Some say it comes back, the time, to punish you with the time you killed, leave you stone

Contd…

sober, unknowing, the happiness chemical
blown from your system, unable to taste
the word heroin without wanting its stone
one last time.



“Separation’s Sonnet”

What are you doing, what improvised thing
In a borrowed room your cell phone rings
each ring measures the floor, the rungs
of your dream. Holding, I ask how you sing,
and for whom. To imagine the bed you’re in,
the vertiginous smile that will break him,
the man whose roses bleed at your window.
To want is to wait, as I do in the place I know,
my breathing loud and single as the room,
its smell of spider dust and old perfume.
Each small thing lasts longer than the shiver
that is life. I fix the remembered instant:
you on your feet, singing, shaking a river
of salt from our shared overheating skin. (1-14)

from *The Book of Chocolate Saints*

"Saint Gandhi"

of Porbunder, in darker South Africa,
saw the light when travelling by train;
wore only homespun;
gave up salt & sex; so tragic a man,

who would split a nation
in two; befriended apocalypse;
died with the name of God on his lips;
shot by a man with God in name.

"Saint Antony"

of Egypt; born in Coma
to Christians; at twenty,
his parents died & left him plenty;
he gave it away; summered

two decades alone in the desert;
then; followers, a garden, baskets;
patron of weavers, domestic animals, pets;
healer of those poisoned by the ergot.

“For Agha Shahid Ali”

Who among us will escape the hand of water?
No cheek, no eye is dry in the land of water.

Bolt tight the windows, the wind is fierce tonight.
Read the collected works, unsigned of water.

Tomorrow, my love , we’ll walk our bereaved city.
We’ll see what the streets understand of water.

Someone is singing a widower’s song in Malayalam.
I ‘m reaching for your hair, beribboned , of water.

When the starlings return to the streets of Manhattan,
Wake me. Till then I a man, unmanned, of water.

In the almanac of Rain you will find all my lines,
Each rhyme and refrain, each ampersand of water.

Jeet, meet Shahid, your guide to the future.
He’ll teach you to play a baby grand of water.

Critical Comments

- Thayil's poetry leaves the readers with a sense of danger, of language teetering wildly on the edge of some precipice, between centuries, between continents, between fleetingly improvised realms, suspended somewhere between history and invention, reality and nowhereness." (Arundhati Subramaniam)
- Thayil writes with a powerful voice and density of language and makes me think, even work , to understand his poetry. (Bruce King)
- Thayil writes controlled verse, well-crafted, never obscure…

  (Keki Daruwalla)
- Thayil's poems refract his vibrant, unique and far-flung experience through the prism of a tremendous lyric intellect. (Philip Nikolayev)

Summing up

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down

in still waters.

He leads me to green pastures.

He restores my soul and helps me walk

in the path of righteousness, for his own sake.

And, yea, though I walk in the valley

of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil. He

comforts me with staff and rod,

provides me with wine and bread.

In the presence of mine enemy

goodness and mercy enter me.

You anoint me with oil, my cup

overflows. You lift me up. (“Found Poem”)

Thank You

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