



SHAMANIC POET

Song of Light & Other Poems: A Review

This latest collection of poems from the Indian poet, D.C. Chambial, runs to forty-five new works and is all the more impressive for being written in English, the poet's second language. There are some big themes here, too, such as the inequality between the sexes (*The Spirit of the Age*), how low Man has fallen compared with the Divine (*Ordain, Marooned, At the Other End, An Island*), interactions with supernatural beings (*On the Face of Sea*), life and death (*The Imminent*) and the wonders of Nature (*Spirits Spring to Sky*), yet they are mostly handled with a delicate lightness of touch that leaves this reader, at least, with a sense of Chambial skipping and dancing through his passions, like a frog jumping from lily-pad to lily-pad, exploring as he goes.

This is not to say that this is a light work by any means. There are some very moving poems in here, such as *Lamkhohao: An Elegy on a Massacre* that recounts the mass killing of almost the entire population of a village only thirty years ago, and *The Bullet*, which tells of the poet's grandfather who was shot four times in WWI and lived to tell the tale. Others are deep in a different way, less immediately accessible yet very evocative and deserving of several visits. *Balla Ground* mourns the sight of long-abandoned buildings meant for the education of undergraduates and finishes with, "By the little stream where lie together / poison, wounded puddles, stinking water; / frogs fear to croak; look at the hills aflame". Then there's this delight, from *Flowers*;

*The aroma takes one
to the seventh heaven
of joy*

There's real variety here in terms of structure, rhyme and rhythm, not to mention length; while most sit easily on a single page, some run over several. Chambial deploys internal rhymes occasionally, where a rhyming word appears somewhere other than at the end of a line, and they are a delight to spot. Here's a nice example from the very first stanza of the very first poem, called *How to Tear Away the Self*;

*How beautiful the emotive tea plants
And the half-tilled field that awaits the hands,
The cluster of papers in hands, and twice
The swell of them on stand. All with one voice*

*Remind the priority they demand
In the midst of the heavy day's errand.*

Notice how 'hands' at the end of the second line finds an internal partner in the middle of the next two lines, before moving back to the end for the final two lines. Here's another, a late verse from the aforementioned *Lamkhohao: An Elegy on a Massacre*;

*The poor Lamkhohao stood there stunned
To see his home burned as those of others.
His senses benumbed, his eyes turned to stone
He stood there, the poor Lamkhohao.*

Chambial sometimes works in a rhyme on the same word;

*To amuse, what's with me, the world.
I have no attachment with it.
Open to be enjoyed by the world
Before I die, I give my all to it.*

Two examples in the same stanza! This feels like a brave move but, since it is done sparingly and – that word again – with a light touch, it mostly works.

What works less well is the occasional poem that appears to have a rhyming scheme which falls apart towards the end, as if the poet has lost interest in that element of the structure. The stand-out example of this is actually *Flower and Bee*, from where the above stanza comes. The first five verses follow the abab scheme seen above (and that is the only example that rhymes on identical words). Then, the final three are aaaa, blank verse, and aabb. I'm all for mixing it up at times but, in my view, the mix should either be a feature throughout or, alternatively, a change in rhyming scheme is used to signal a shift in mood, in pace, in emphasis. In *Flower and Bee*, and in a couple of others in this collection, the changes feel random at best, and a sign that the poet is running out of steam at worst. As poets, our job is to create a structure within which the reader can navigate, and changes such as these leave this reader floundering somewhat.

Such issues are few and far between, though, in what is a strong collection from an experienced and accomplished poet. In some of the later poems, Chambial seeks to inspire us, lift us up to greater things and shift our perspectives. *Thorns* are seen here as a proxy for problems, barriers, painful issues that crop up in all our lives from time to time and, rather than seeing them as wholly negative, they are presented as gifts to keep us awake, alive, alert and striving for greater things; "*True friends, / indeed*". *Brain* is a celebration of that mysterious and amazing lump of grey matter that lives in our skulls and that allows us to journey (should we choose) far beyond what is physically possible for us in any given moment;

*It can dive deeper
than the bottom of the deepest seas;
scale new heights
beyond the outmost limits
of known and unknown galaxies*

in dark and light alike.

The final poem is called *Birds of Peace*, and I feel moved to quote it here in full, as it's a beautiful celebration of the poetic art, an art in which D.C. Chambial clearly revels and excels;

*Caught the words
gyrating
in the sky.*

*Tried hard
to pin them
on paper.*

*Escaped
my hands,
flew into sky.*

*Great revelation:
changed into
birds of peace!*

June, 2020

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