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Letters from Adelaide and Prayagraj

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Arnis Silvia and Susheel K Sharma

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Abstract:

The collaborative work consisting of corresponding poems between an Adelaide-based poet Arnis Silvia and a Prayagraj-based poet Susheel Sharma deals with anthropological phenomena like identity, ecological awareness and social justice. Taking the geographical background in both resident cities, the six pairs of poems reflect on how both the poets understand the world around them along with its impact on them personally and socially. The poets have employed some principles of duoethnography in their poetic conversations by dialoguing themselves with another self, with another context of culture, tradition, values, histories and meaning-making (Sawyer & Norris 2012). The authors have attempted to put themselves in someone else's shoes and have tried to see the world through their and others' eyes to better understand the reality(ies) that were portrayed in the poems. The authors have discovered that despite their geographical and cultural differences, they share many similarities in terms of the issues they deal with daily; they struggle with their selves to make sense of the world and they reflect on realities in their surroundings to understand them better.

Biographical notes:

Arnis Silvia is an Indonesian-born bilingual poet who is currently undertaking a PhD programme in Language and Linguistics, University of South Australia. She tutored English for Creative Writing. She writes poetry in both Indonesian and English and has published two books of poems in Indonesian: *Titi Kala Mangsa* (2017) and *Niskala* (2019) and one in English, *Behind the Closed Door* (2017). She has participated in some poetry open mics in Adelaide. She is a member of some literary groups and has published her English poems in *Verse Magazine* and *HLT Magazine*.

Dr Susheel Kumar Sharma (b 1962) teaches English at the University of Allahabad, Prayagraj-211002, the fourth-oldest university of modern India. Prof. Sharma has three collections of poems in English viz. *From the Core Within* (1999), *The Door is Half Open* (2012) and *Unwinding Self* (2020) to his credit besides several research papers, interviews and book reviews. Some of his poems have been translated into Assamese, French, Lithuanian, Polish, Sanskrit, Serbian, Turkish and Ukrainian languages.

Keywords:

Poetry exchange – duoethnography – ecological awareness – identity – social justice

Introduction

The following poems by the two authors based in Adelaide and Prayagraj explore the themes of identity, ecological awareness, and inequality. The settings of the poems occur in some places in Australia (e.g. Adelaide and Sydney) and some places in India (e.g. Mumbai and New Delhi). Some key points portrayed in the poems arise from the reflection of some landmarks in both countries – their history and the values which they convey for both individuals and society. There are six sections presented in this article: the first three sections are poems written by Silvia followed by the responses from Sharma. The last three sections are poems written by Sharma and responded to by Silvia. Each section is concluded with the poets' brief reflections on the poem, splitting into two parts for both poets. Finally, thoughts on this exchange are presented, pinning down some similarities and/or differences in the perspectives.

'Adelaide Arcade' poem and responses

'Adelaide Arcade' by Arnis Silvia

For Karen Pangestu

There are arms of majestic Carrara marbles
Might be as grand as we dreamt to be: an icon
of longstanding endurance, patience, wisdom
peacefully aged in style and beauty
travelling through the years
of excitement and boredom

This chess-board floor – elegant and humble
capturing steps for more than a hundred years
as we printed our shadows here
these tiles are busy counting our fears
our young souls are wary
we carved our years in anxiety

A throat: a long pageant of timeworn shops
narrates a story of a long back
whose bones were thousands of bricks.
We have bricks too, my dear
We put them on our back
and we call them jobs
a long pageant of our working hours
narrates a story of a long suffering

Before this marvellous fountain of green curved bowls
No one skips their gaze, no one falls

in love with dreams and shadows
even if beauty costs our backbones
even if patience is just a loan
We wanted what we see
We keep dreaming despite being wary
We will age with our hard-earned wisdom
We will sail the ocean of excitement and boredom.

‘The Fountain Square’ by Susheel Sharma
Responding to ‘Adelaide Arcade’

The fountain of the city square
Oozing out dreams with coloured water
Under the shades of the tinged lights
Stands erect endearing songs
Celebrating environmental protection.

The white marble around the fountain
has come from Dungri where
The mother is tracing her lost
Arm and the leg in the quarry.

The fountain is no match to
The burning sun that changes
Colours at different hours
Like the marble in different
stomachs of the continents.

The game water and marble played
In the Pandava’s palace made Draupadi smile;
The Pandavas were thrilled and enthralled;
Duryodhan was hypnotised and deluded.
Water helps in cutting marbles.

The wishes exuberantly dancing
by the water in the musical fountain
look for the drummers, pianists,
bass players and guitarists. Krishna
with his flute strapped to his hip
smiles and smiles. Will he play
or won’t he? Radha conjectures.
The guessing game is on.

Mahabharat is taking shape.
A dice will be thrown
to decide the date
for cutting the marble.
The palace may turn desolate
The fountain may dry up.
Is someone bothered?
Does it matter to me?

Reflections on 'Adelaide Arcade' and 'The Fountain Square'

Arnis Silvia:

The architecture of a monumental Adelaide Arcade inspired me to create a reflective poem with the details of shapes, materials and age as the departing point for the metaphors. I put some life-like characters to a building in order to give it a life beyond a building. A building records stories and histories, as do the humans. Personifying Adelaide Arcade has helped me deliver a message that humans too can learn making meaning from architectural works around them. Old buildings, like aged people, could teach some wisdom to the younger minds.

Susheel Sharma:

Arnis's poem begins with particulars as is clear from the title of the poem. She goes into reflection mode and starts contemplating on the time spent at different places with different people. She moves from one memory to another and talks about the dreams and hopes that had been created together and that have stayed with her (along with her partner/lover). Many of those plans can neither be changed nor destroyed at this stage. They have to be accepted as others are watching them curiously. My two readings of Arnis's poem catapulted me to imagine myself before a musical fountain. The fountain, a metaphor, will not be there without water (soft) and marble (hard) yet they coexist to produce different results in different situations. This generated a lot of ideas and I started meandering through them, pondering over the poor lives of the quarry workers, environmental concerns, impending social conflicts and wars, social injustice and inequalities and remembering stories from the vast repository of *anima mundi* as well as *spiritus mundi*.

'Central Market' poem and responses

'Central Market' by Arnis Silvia

I wish I were a Central Market
friendly to everyone
intimate to the loyal ones
Like this lady at Stall No.5
with her accent that sounds like mine

She asks me how my day was
and smiling wide while waving goodbyes
Like this Mohamed at the butchery
He greets me with Salaam
reminds me of home and serenity

I wish my heart
were as warm as this market
as pleasant as croissant at Les Deux Coqs
as nice as the lady's smile at Sun Mi's
as cozy as the laughter at Zuma
They are rebels
for when the weather is intimidating outside
they offer warmth and comfort in the inside

I wish I were persistent as this market
over 150 years of serving
through summer sun and winter wind
through the falling leaves and budding trees
my spring soul is still a baby
everything irritates me
everything becomes allergy
O, market please teach me
How to thrive at my age
with such consistency

I wish I could love like this market
Freely, unconditionally
On the land where visa is a key to its door
I want to be a window opened for everybody
On the land where language tests are a price to stay
I want to be an open book evaluation essay
You can stay for anytime you want to stay
As I am for you
a home when your home is far away.

'Connaught Place' by Susheel Sharma
Responding to 'Central Market'

The Georgian architecture of CP
reminds me of the imperial glory
But I don't wish it to be pulled down
like the disputed structure in Varanasi.

Hanuman is the oldest inhabitant here;
CP keeps on expanding to make room for
The refugees after the Partition and
The Tibetans after the Chinese invasion.
The inner circle and the outer circle
have a centre where people of all hues
throng to bargain their wares for love.

It is not averse to the Metro station or
to the Heritage Festival or the musical
Concert for dissent and blasts; the tricolour
Flutters here beckoning the locals.

The white does not oppose the red here;
The Jeevan Bharti is no threat to
the buildings that are majestic as in
Royal Crescent in Bath. Like a lover
Enter it, anywhere without a protest.
All roads lead to the circular central love.

Driven like the sun by seven horses
The Regal cinema leads the people
Through seven roads. Here, I bargain
for a dress for my daughter, a belt for my
Father and a handkerchief to keep me carefree.

The State Emporiums on one side and the
shopkeepers lined up like curios on the
Queen's Way, rightfully the Janpath,
Breathe life into the stately buyers
and the popular budget shoppers.

A business centre spreading the *batik* designs,
jootis, *mojris*, *kohlapuris*, drums, horns,
stamps, coins, postcards, trinkets, necklaces,
earrings, books, wall-hangings, carpets;
No discrimination between high and low,
Indian and foreign, male and female;
Each one has to bargain.

I see a world of humanity here
Each vying to help each other
In their efforts to survive even in the

competition to hook a customer
Hoodwinking is a game that everyone
plays and enjoys like the pets do
on the return of their masters.
Novelty is the key word pasted on
tradition. Like a vagabond I have
wandered here year after year
looking for lessons, home and friends.

Reflections on ‘Central Market’ and ‘Connaught Place’

Arnis Silvia:

Adelaide Central Market for me portrays inclusion and a warm welcome; an irony in the middle of a quite exclusive and self-centred city. In a country whose people mostly speak one official language, this market is a door to another world. You could hear many accents here – Chinese, Malay, French, Italian, Spanish and Urdu. The market is also symbolising a resilience (through the changing seasons and economic situation) and equality (where everyone is welcome equally despite the ethnicity, home languages and appearance)

Susheel Sharma:

Arnis’s ‘Central Market’ is a wish poem as the persona in this poem is wishing to be as useful as the market is to different kinds of people with different aspirations and needs. The poem indirectly talks about the alienation one feels in a foreign land, the longing for love and homeland and expresses a desire for a home away from home. These outer realities lead one to introspect within and one realises how sharp one’s edges are and wishes to do them away with to be a part and parcel of one’s environs by becoming more useful to the people around.

My poem describes a parallel to Arnis’s experience, knowledge and equally important reconciliation. The Connaught Place, a market in New Delhi, represents all sorts of equality, egalitarianism and mingling with dignity. There is no conflict whatsoever between the old and new or the Indian and foreign. Co-existence and not the monopoly of an individual is the principle in the market. The poem, though not didactic in tone and tenor, talks about the value of plurality and acceptance of divergent ways on the life on surface for the survival of humanity.

‘Harbour Bridge’ poem and responses

‘Harbour Bridge’ by Arnis Silvia

For Arskal Salim

When morning becomes a mirror
The old autumn puts on lipstick and powder

Who knows where it goes?
Day is far from ends and it still rolls

Motion: a cost for a life
The beam of pedestrians' steps, passing
Idle musicians moving on their static axis
Everything is rushed, left to the right
Right to the left, above to below, below to above

A wandering mind, trapped
In such a tornado of movement
Can do nothing but follow
A hand that holds her in such enthusiasm
Convincing that today will be special

Puzzled, baffled, bemused
The wandering mind immerses into the motion
That brings her to the lips of the harbour
Fences freshly painted green
And seagulls squawking under warm sunbeam

When water becomes mirror
Harbour Bridge reflects her face on the water
Who knows what she sees?
A man is there on his knees

With a diamond ring he offers a bridge
To come across a soul that makes his rich
Two souls separated by distance
Now being tied in a coexistence
A proposal for a friend of life
To seek for peace, to survive the strife

The wondering heart is now home
No more reason to wander,
No more reason to roam.

'Ram Setu: Remembering Prof APJ Abdul Kalam' by Susheel Sharma
Responding to 'Harbour Bridge'

The chain of shoals, the creation
Of nature but the eye-sore of a few
Draws me from Rameswaram and

Invites me to take a bath in serenity.

Standing at the Bridge of the Sea
The creation of Nala and Neela,
I ponder over the past and think
Of Ram, Ravan, Sita and the vanars

The land's connection with Sri Lanka
Unfolds ignorance, jealousy and hatred.
How can one welcome light and love
When thorium outshines the glory of Ram?

The son of a boatman ferrying pilgrims
Diving deep into the calm sea learnt
To catch the huge fish and dig out pearls
Newspapers alone don't supplement income.

Who would believe the son of an Imam
The boat maker, will hold a Veena
And will give wings of fire to India?
Dissatisfied Dean's threat did the trick.

Smiling like the Buddha he mastered
The art to ignite minds catching
Them young in schools and colleges
Removing all heart clots in one go.

The luminous sparks he created
In his valiant vision forged the future
Of the wandering devilish souls trapped
In the middle of tornadoes and earthquakes.

The bachelor to occupy the Bhawan
Coming from uninhibited Dhanushkodi
Conquering Prithvi with spirited Agni acts
On a common code to dispense justice.

If every Sita is to be rescued and saved
Should the People's President, our Ram,
Listen to the pleas of the rapist Dhananjoy?
Does the kidnapper Ravan deserve mercy?

Ram was left alone in serene Ayodhya.
Abdul was deserted by friends in Delhi.

Defeat corruption is a slogan of the frothy
Waves striking the slippery rocks hard.

Leaving his books, a CD player and a laptop
The soul seeks release of the diamond ring.
Born to blossom, bright Chhotu, surviving the
Strife, renames himself Kalam seeking victory.

Puzzled, baffled, bemused, besotted
I, wandering under the warm sunbeams,
Look at the waves coming from eternity.
Seeking peace Lingam becomes Ramalingam.

It is time to return home; the train is calling;
Interfaith respect and dialogue are waiting;
Is it so difficult to make stones float and
Create a liveable and loveable planet earth?

Reflections on 'Harbour Bridge' and 'Ram Setu'

Arnis Silvia:

I see a bridge both as a structure and as a metaphor. Two unconnected lands are tied by the bridge. I wonder how a bridge could be extrapolated to personal connection – two different characters, cultural backgrounds, dreams and aspirations are then being unified by a proposal (metaphorically, a bridge). On the other hand, I also chose Harbour Bridge as a paradox of tranquillity amid the city's hustle bustle. It symbolises our awareness to ourselves, to reconnect with our own mind amid the hectic quotidian life.

Susheel Sharma:

Arnis's poem led me to view some of the pictures/ images of the Harbour Bridge before it made me spin. This poem of Arnis oscillates between present, past and future. She seems to be more concerned with past which cannot be reclaimed except in terms of memory. The beautiful scene from the bridge is not simply described by Arnis like Wordsworth did in his 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802'; Wordsworth has just noted down his impressions while Arnis contemplates.

In my poem I have made use of my experience of visiting Rama Setu or Adam's Bridge. After a brief description of the sight and its mythological importance the poem moves towards the contemporary politics and history. It then concentrates on the life and works of Dr APJ Abdul Kalam, the 11th President of India, who hailed from the same area. An indirect comparison between the *vanars* who supposedly created the bridge and a man from the same area, who modernised India's defence systems, is made. In both the cases the objective was to attain peace through technology.

‘Akshya Tritya’ poem and responses

‘Akshya Tritya’ by Susheel Sharma

The father is waiting for this day
He wants to unburden himself.
The boy is waiting for this day
He wants to bring his love home.
The girl is waiting for this day
She is waiting for a new address.
The jeweller is waiting for the price to go up
The customer is waiting for his turn;
The shops are abuzz;
The doorman is panting
pulling the gate every minute.
Outside a woman is begging
For some money to board the
Bus to reach her village;
She had come to help in the kitchen
at a wedding near the hotel.
The salesgirl says, ‘Hurry up, please.
Others are waiting, please.
Please wait for your turn.’
The coffee man is doing rounds.
The manager is quite encouraging;
He shows diamond jewellery
Necklaces, chains, rings one by one;
He is selective in choosing his clients.
The husband is standing at the back
With a cheque book in his hand
Waiting for his turn to be called out.
This day someone will dance;
Someone will beat the drum;
The GDP may go up on this day;
Even, Budia and Maina are able to
Eat to their fill; Panditji can blow his
Conch shell with full might.
Outside, somebody is asking for votes;
Somebody is urging others to vote.
I shall vote for *Akshya Tritya*.

‘Akshya Tritya 2’ by Arnis Silvia

Responding to 'Akshya Tritya'

Today, the sun and the moon
are exalted to their brightest lights
today, our luck is tripled
whatever planted will live forever
whatever bought will always prosper
whatever invited will stay no matter.
I have been waiting for this day
I will give a rebirth to myself
I will buy a gold necklace from the jeweller
will have it engraved with 'you are enough'
will ask Panditji to bless it with his prayers
Today, I will plant a Banyan tree
and when it grows, I will invite everybody
be it God Shiva, be it Buddha
under its shade, there will be Havana
or if I may
I will buy myself and these children a pen
we will write our stories
that will stay in eternity
that will live in the memory
Stories that keep us alive
even after everyone dies.

Reflections on 'Akshya Tritya' and 'Akshya Tritya 2'

Susheel Sharma:

Akshya Tritya, a festival celebrated across India, is basically a wish for unending prosperity. The poem begins with the anxiety of a father who is waiting for this auspicious day to marry off his daughter (in India, largely, arranged marriages take place and marrying a daughter with all pomp and show and gifting her as many items as possible are a father's sacred duties). Shopping for jewellery is an essential part of preparation for a wedding. The hectic business activity in the shop indicating joy, elation and euphoria (of the rich) associated with the festival, contrasts with those of the poor who struggle to earn their livelihood somehow on this day.

Arnis Silvia:

I learnt through secondary sources that Akshya Tritya is believed to be a day of 'never-ending prosperity' in which any business happening on that day brings triple luck. I tried to locate something similar to this unique Indian celebration in my Indonesian traditional culture but I could not find anything so precise. If there is anything close enough to Akshya Tritya, it will be 'petungtukukewan' (the calculation of day for buying cattle) in Javanese Indonesian culture which is related to a person's birthday. This day is believed to be the day where the cattle could

bring more luck and prosperity than does any regular day. My response to the original poem was inspired by my imaginative reflection on how such particular moment could be generating multiplicity of a person's impact on others.

'Rechristening the City' poem and responses

'Rechristening the City' by Susheel Sharma

I shall keep you on your toes
You may call me by whatever name
you wish to, I am the consciousness
I am the reality, I am the water,
I am the land. Where are the boundaries?
I have followed the rules of expansion
You have to change your rules
You have to change your books
You have to change your atlases.
The rains will fall as ever
The hot winds will blow as ever
Winters will be severe as ever
Men won't dissolve as ever.
The bridges between the roads
And over the mighty rivers
Make the trains move quickly
Over to the other side; people
Use boats as well to connect themselves.
The big fish in the net is making all efforts
To slip into the river again.
It can survive in water only,
And not in the fort, can't you see even this?
Stand up like the Akshya Vat
Against all venoms and poisons.
Creating unbreakable walls
Will write your name on the sands of history.
Deserts need camels not planes.
Don't you understand even this?
Water alone does not make watermelons
They need some pulp, some sugar
Some stripes and colours too.

'The City Which Rewrites Her Name' by Arnis Silvia *Responding to 'Rechristening the City'*

I am the consciousness

You people carved your stories on my skin
You whisper your pain into my ears
You write your fear on my eyes
And by the time I need to breathe
I inhale your desperation
And exhale your burden
My body is full of tattoos
Like a temple with too many statues

I am the reality

This city womb gives birth to
too many souls for its arms could hold
Railways claim more victims than guns do
As the trains pass, death is in queue
I am the reality, *donc je me suis promis*
I would change you
before you could change me

I am the water

And you are just floating
Your outside looks shining
Your inside is empty
I am the water and I am me
You either would sail or you would fail
Go across and make a toss
Because nothing else could this land
Offer you a place to stand.

Reflections on 'Rechristening the City' and 'The City Which Rewrites Her Name'

Susheel Sharma:

Naming and renaming, like ebb and flow of the sea-water, indicate the continuous flow of life. It is a universal process related to the (pro/re)gress of civilization. People do not easily accept rechristening as it requires a lot of adaptations. Its implications are far more than perceived. Even the supposedly non-humans are affected by it as they too have feelings. Men have to accustom themselves to their new environs for human history is narrated through spaces, times, buildings, stories, mythologies and books. Renaming affects all this and is affected in turn by them.

Arnis Silvia:

I interpreted 'Rechristening the City' as a duality of consciousness and power of change. The environment claims its meaning to people's lives and it requires the human/people to have awareness about this nature. The poem also depicts how human beings could be both helpless and hopeful in making changes ecologically. I responded to this poem by addressing to the similar messages. I used textual intervention by taking some lines from the original poem and improvised from there.

'Distancing' poem and responses

'Distancing' by Susheel Sharma

When I tried to locate Bombay
in my atlas it gives me
19.0760⁰N, 72.8777⁰E
When I look for Mumbai
In my neighbour's it yields
me the same results.
Why is Mumbai far from Bombay then?
The boy from my village
had gone there two years ago;
He has now returned home
with his bandaged arms.
How will he earn his food?
The train to Mumbai is as crowded
as it was when it went to Bombay.
Why did the boy then return to his village?
The atlas does not answer the question.
I silently watch the crowded train
from Mumbai every evening
from my balcony.

'What's in a Name' by Arnis Silvia

Responding to 'Distancing'

Whenever I mentioned my name without its spelling
to baristas who always wrote me wrongly
'To whom this coffee is for?' they asked
'Arnis' I replied
My cup was named Alice or Annese
neither of whom has ever existed for me
If I were Alice
my skin would be white

my hair would be blonde
and my body would be tall
my mouth – a tennis ball machine
shooting out balls of swears
to anyone and anything bothering my mind
I would eat pasta instead of rice
I would drink soda instead of tea
I would go to church instead of mosque
I would wear a hairclip not a hijab
And I...would send my mom to an eldercare
Instead of having her under the same roof as I was.
And they would ask me
'what is a name'?
Ask Bombay which changed to Mumbai
Ask Madras which changed to Chennai
How would it be like?
Would I be the same person?

Reflections on 'Distancing' and 'What's in a Name'

Susheel Sharma:

The poem is sparked by some real events that took place: the metropolis Bombay was rechristened as Mumbai and certain incidents of violence took place there in which people from north India were targeted. Though the geography of the place remained unchanged its ethos changed. The dreams shown by the metropolis keep on attracting the young people for different reasons and some people wish to have them realised at any cost. Distancing oneself from the scene gives clues to the identities, stories, histories, places and dreams.

Arnis Silvia:

In reflecting upon 'Distancing', I tried to make a metaphorical link between the change of a city name to the change of a person's name. I understand name as a representation of identity which is an embodiment of our entire self (our characters, history, story, behaviour, dreams, spaces, places). Therefore when a name of a city or a person is changed, their whole identity is altered. I have utilised textual intervention in the last part of my response poem to create the linkage to the original one.

Concluding thoughts

In our poem-exchange, we made a dialogue in a poetic form about each other's cultural artefacts, historical sites, stories, and finally made our reflection upon our dialectics. We utilised textual intervention (Pope 1995) to resonate the original poem with the other poet's personal experience, values and stories. We created a parallel text to our partner's poetic work.

We tried to make meaning of our poet-partner's stories, relate them to our own experience, and reproduce this two-way conception in our response poems. We practised a principle in Duoethnography method where we 'untangle our perceptions of our narratives and reform their proportional impact in our life' (Sawyer & Norris 2012).

As we both learnt from each other's perspectives, we discovered that we had more similarities than differences. We shared perceived experience of co-existence in plural society, alienation and acceptance, social justice and inequalities. This exchange of accounts has contributed to the literature of literary study where poetry was utilised as a tool of Duoethnography to create a space and dialectic for both the poets. Further study could be conducted between poets from more diverse cultures, histories or geographies.

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