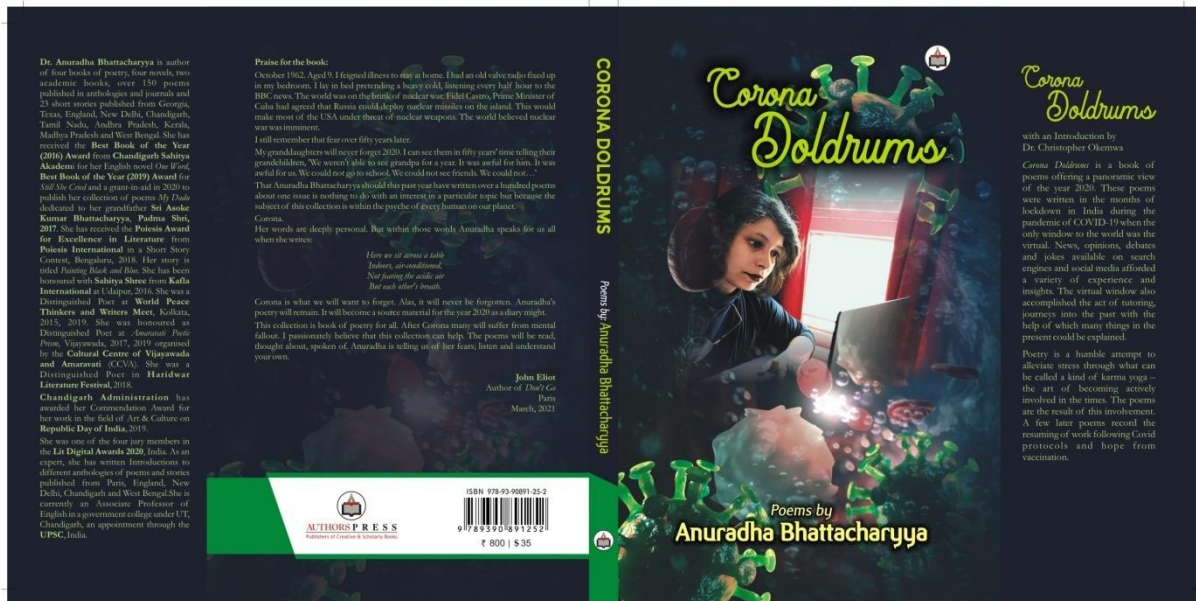


BOOK REVIEW

Anuradha Bhattacharyya's *Corona Doldrums*

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Corona Doldrums

By Anuradha Bhattacharyya

Publisher: Authors Press, New Delhi, 2021. Pages: 165. ISBN: 978-93-90891-25-2

Anuradha Bhattacharyya's recently published poetry book *Corona Doldrums* (2021) is a collection of poems which at once captures our minds due to its relevance and pertinence of tumultuous situation. In this book Bhattacharyya has shed enough light upon the complexities,

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colour, and emotional anxiety of the people throughout the globe. Anuradha is very much aware of the current politics, suffering of the people, relationship of the people and the like as she has portrayed them in her other writings. This book has documented the aspects that CoViD has struck in Indian life, especially the urban section with a few strokes of poetry on happenings in other countries. Bhattacharyya is very much concerned with the traits and development of the burgeoning of corona virus. The poems “The Rampage”, “A Droplet”, “The Fittest”, “Black Fungus”, “Vaccination” etc. frequently speak of the very ‘microbe’, ‘infinitesimal particle’ which instil fear of death. Bhattacharyya has hinted at the pervasive destructiveness of other micro-organisms like ‘Black Fungus’. Its function has jolted the human pride of being superior organisms. Here, helplessness of humans against the tiny particle is embarrassing when we perceive that ‘no amount of play/is defence against a virus’.

The simple daily routine has also not escaped the attention of Bhattacharyya. Abhimanyu, the vendor who supplies daily vegetables; the teacher who teaches the green-minds are depicted beautifully. The most pathetic pictures are those of the workers, those homeless people, those disorganised community who have no fixed address. The question of ‘home’ becomes relevant then when the US government can draw little trust from the people. Their demands seem to the US Government ‘irrelevant, inhuman, unanswered’ with naked existence. It is akin to the newspaper reports on how NGOs viewed the homeless in the US. Simultaneously, the most trifling section of the society has found proper depiction in Anuradha’s poems; “The Thieves”, “The Dogs” aptly illustrate the many dark sides of society. The satirical poem, “The Maoist” laughs at the rebels who now seek help from the government during the pandemic. She focused on the middle class section in the poem, “The Difference” as they can reap little benefit from the Government, ‘We in the middle/ Have tasted neither dirt/ Nor silver spoons’. During this pandemic, health workers and administrative workforce were considered as front liners embodying the most sensitive spirits. The poem “Nursing”, shows how the front workers are chafed in their work, ‘Sandwiched between the saviour/And the saved’. Loss of jobs, lives etc have become marked feature in this depressing moment. Bhattacharyya has penned down its harsh side by pointing out the unemployment that the migrant workers had to undergo. “The Writers” castigates the writers who sit comfortable at home and just write books. Anuradha waxes true sympathy in the line, ‘those sights of a labourer walking miles’ with children on the head stirs up the hearts of the nation.

Anuradha's search for psychological anxiety of the people has found proper manifestation in some of her poems. This pandemic has jolted the sacrosanct frame of mind of the general public. The poems "Rage", "The Wretched", "How Long?" build up the psychological wounds. This psychological wound intensifies the meaningless and desolation of life, irreparable loss that the people have to undergo. "The Inessential" evokes the realisation how fear of death instils passivity and wretchedness within human mind: 'We realize/ How inessential/ The elite are/ In this world'. The entire world reeks of anxiety, confusion, pain, decay. "Depression" tells about the 'untold uncertainties', psychological battering that has invaded the humans from times immemorial. Still it has injected energy, positivity within the individuals. Bhattacharyya has probed into this human psychology from different perspectives using a dramatic mode in her poems. "Vaccination" reveals the human taboo and orthodox frame of mind. However, the trouble, fever, coughs and quarantine compel people to accept vaccination. Rumour, ill-feelings, deep-venom welled out of human mind.

The monotonous routine filled with digitalisation has been evoked through the poem "Work". It shows how work exploits a person to the level of 'eerie compulsion'. "The Webinars" specifies virtual mode popularised during this time. The physical distance has necessitated 'The need to strengthen ties with others/Across the length and breadth / Of this wonderful planet'. It helps in spreading, analysing and reforming knowledge through 'virtual exchange'. She is not here castigating technology; rather, she is commending the advancement of technology from the wheels of wood to the age of hi-tech and internet. Similarly, "Virtual Classes" imagines people to be lost in 'quantum space with floating heads'. Students are there but a teacher feels 'paranoid chatter'. This virtual space has kept alive the daily routine unhindered. "Online Orders" succinctly points out this matter. 'Home delivery', 'work from home' have resisted the disruption of social life. "Online Examinations" celebrates new mix of technology, albeit with its associated disadvantages.

CoViD has emphasized the need of a pristine atmosphere as it has been connected with rampant attack upon the natural world. CoViD has reminded people of lessons that they have always ignored. The poem "Coronavirus" captures the uncontrollable universal power with its mysterious activities. She has expressed doubt if nature's revenge has played havoc on the earth. "The Dolphin" depicts the uncorrupted, gleeful nature. "The Unrest" speaks about the precedence of a safe environment, of an uncorrupted nature for future generation. But this incorruptibility is associated with a tinge of sadness, tragic death because on a mode of 'cleansing spree' many are taking earthly departures. Her evocation of "Unlock" is remarkably vivid. It

elucidates the struggle of the common Indian to eke out livelihood in an unhygienic atmosphere. The ending reminds one of the hope and expectation during pandemic time-

Men may come and men may go
But Pandora's jar of germs is never closed.
So long as men breathe and hope for relief
So long lives the virus and still we succeed.

Shakespearean tone of human longevity is noticeable here. In a similar vein Anuradha invokes a transitional phase of struggle for survival. "Mortality" calms down the human invincibility and acknowledges the struggle throughout the history. Anuradha's ingenuity and inventiveness can be seen in apt choice of historical precedent situations of the world to capture the dread of present human crisis. We can take the poem "The Sorrow". The images of 'Black Death' and 'Hart Land' bring to us horrendous evocation of deadly picture of mass burial of disease victims. The homeless, the rich, the forgotten, the famous all alike fell victim to this pandemic. The elegiac mood here reaches its acme in "The Unknown Citizens". Huge numbers of unclaimed, unnamed lives have fallen victim in their fight against CoViD. But irony is that they lost their lives against an invisible enemy in the form of a microbe. No gravestone would match the enormity of loss. The historically known memory haunts human lives.

Amidst the gruelling picture one can discern that hope springs eternal even during the pandemic time: 'The spirit of compassion reigns/In the hearts of ordinary men' ("Cohesion"). Doctors, volunteers, nurses, 'thousands of selfless men' have tried their best to ward off the pestilence. She has seen fear as something tinged with positive elements. Thus, in "The Scavenger" she states: 'Fear has taught us self-control,/ Work with civic hygiene./ This I thought was training sure/ For life in quarantine.' Similarly, in "Control" she teaches us the struggle to live without anxiety and phobias. The poem "Laughter" gives us a striking picture of optimism, of future hope and procreation: 'Work and play go hand in hand/ Create, procreate..'. "Our Donations" underlines the humanitarian duty performed, especially for Child Care. Thus, hope is what one has to live with. "The Monsoons" has taught us to fight with renewed vigour, welcoming all forms of life on earth: 'Rains may come and rains may go/ But life goes on forever'. "Poetry First" highlights the evocative power of poetry to fight a pandemic by providing a bit of hope against ghastly time. However, the mood of "The Delusion" is contradictory to other poems as it begins

with hope and ends with Arnoldian sense of sadness and crisis of faith. Always an optimist, Bhattacharyya's last two poems depict the confidence of human existence. "Covishield" shows how the vaccination will save the multitude from viral ravage. Ironically, it is a weapon but it is armour for saving humans: 'Covishield will protect the rest'. The book ends with a positive note of resistance against CoViD. "Herd Immunity" inspires the idea of cosmopolitanism because 'our society is one organism'.

Together we survive
And that's our
Dependability –
It's called herd immunity.

This is robust hope that a poetess can show to the fellow inhabitants of this earth.

Anuradha has employed different rhetorical flourishes which are not gorgeous but controlled to describe the stern condition. The invincibility of the corona virus within the body has been marked as building 'a fortress/In our lungs, freezing everything' ("The Invisible"). Sometimes, this virus has been personified as colossal demon: 'She devoured cities with frozen alacrity/ With caprice she snuggled into slums'. "The Lover" metaphorically deals with the tumultuous situation of the time and isolated anxiety felt by the lovers. The helplessness of the men and the freedom of the birds accentuate the irony that within the plentiful resources of this world people are but trifling. A few poems evoke topsy-turvy situation, ironic perversion of our familiar sense. "Scoreboard" which reminds us of the increasing points in cricket proves to be harrowing to us because the blood curdling death image that it addresses sends a shiver down the spine. Anuradha's use of irony to dig at the political blockheads is noticeable. She has employed remarkable anti-thesis of life which pertinently points out the crisis moment: 'We win if we stand apart;' Indeed, 'The roads are perhaps safe enough/But not the place of work'. Sometimes, it has taught people to resort to 'passive resistance' which can prove itself as strength. The masks which generally symbolize deceit, disguise, comedy, masquerade and mime bring to us the mark of protection resisting the bit of venom between hand and the infected air.

Thus, the readers will feel drawn to read the poems time and again, finding a new bond with the author in fresh understanding of time. Dr. Christopher Okemwa rightly observes in the Introduction, "This is what we refer to as poetry of commitment, written in moments of war, apartheid, outbreak of diseases or bad times in the history of her community. *Corona Doldrums* is an example of such poetry." Anuradha's book becomes an important gem to understand not

just the pandemic but the society, psychological phobia, optimism to get over the crisis. The expressiveness and its sensitiveness find and explore the suffering, angst, irony, and agony of the common mass. The depth she portrays in her multidimensional layers of poetic imagination shows her power of observational awareness of humanity. The richness and depth of emotion is quite exhilarating.

BIO- NOTE

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