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BOOK REVIEW

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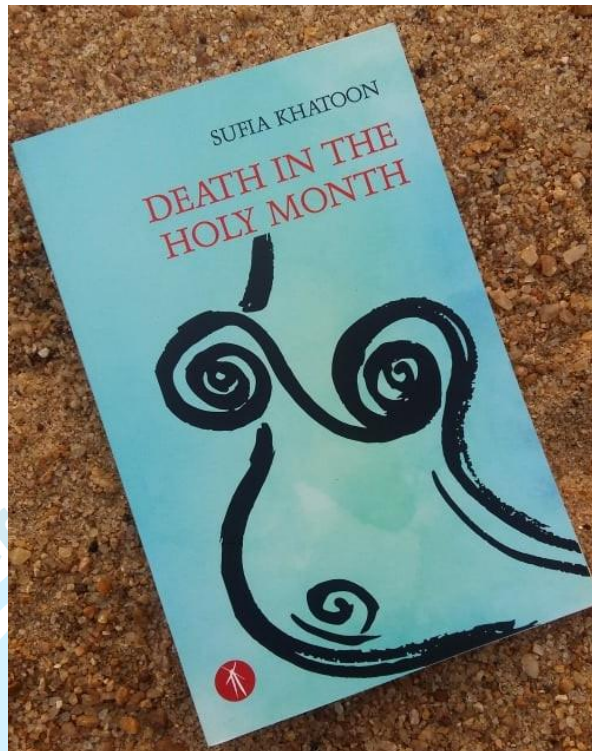
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Death in the Holy Month By Sufia Khatoon

Reviewed by Naina Dey

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Title: *Death in the Holy Month*

Author: Sufia Khatoon

ISBN: 978-93-87883-43-7 (Hardbound)

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INR 300

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The title could have come straight out of an Agatha Christie murder mystery. But when one delves inside there is a rush of passion in every line as the poet tries to grapple with myriad emotions that are at once deeply introspective and highly emotive. The book is preoccupied with death experienced through the physical reality of bereavement of loved ones, the memories of childhood and of those who have passed away with time. As if to substantiate I.A. Richards's view that 'the bulk of poetry consists of statements which only the very foolish would think of attempting to verify', the debutante intertwines death, love and the smells of the soil using unusual metaphors and vivid

images often fusing the concrete with the abstract (e.g. 'cauliflower clouds) to convey the palpable and the commonplace. Thus, Sufia reminisces about her mother 'adding seeds to soil and some care too' ("October Hibiscus") or her dying baby brother whose 'hands moved in the little box of thoughts':

I had written a letter to God once,  
asking for a miracle,  
a baby brother –  
his hands moved in the little box of thoughts  
distinctively visible in the gloomy barricaded glass wall.  
("Season of Death and Mangoes")

The combinations are highly complex and very special, so as to connect reality with the impalpable. However, if there is a purgation of personal loss, there is also an acknowledgement of the greater scheme of things – the loss of lives within the domestic circle merging with the loss of lives due to senseless conflict. In "God is Not For War", Sufia recollects her mother counting her beads and saying 'God is not for war', whereas in "Letters To The Self", she herself bitterly refers to humans as 'termites hiding behind/ made up images,/ waiting to wage war.' There is nevertheless a streak of optimism in "Perceive" through a call for personal liberation – 'My mind though perceives something beyond/ colours and creeds of deeds/ it looks for a space to be as it is.' But the futility of war and its irony manifest themselves again in the very next poem "White Flower":

War is a game of fools  
death is a flaw of fate  
claiming only the innocent.  
The world slept in peace  
as we, humanity, died at war.

But if humans are tearing God's 'world apart' through conflict and malice ("God is Falling"), 'azaan and arati find the same voice' ("Circle"). In "My Paper Dolls", one finds a pre-Oedipal state when a paper doll to a child 'doesn't have a gender, a caste, a colour/ but later the sexist pour inside her being something/ and the child changes with the doll.' A particularly disturbing piece is "How I Killed Love" in which the narrator separates two love birds as a physical enactment of his/her voluntary/involuntary seclusion and feels nothing at their pining away:

Days, weeks, months pass,  
screaming gives way  
to longing;  
submission gives way to  
cries,  
love gives way to sorrow.

I still wait for something  
to stir my heart,  
to separate the dead emotions with hate or love.

I feel nothing to see

them suffer,...

Finally, when loneliness gives way to insanity, it is concretized in the figure of the 'madman' (in "Insanity") who 'paints Christ on the unpaved roads':

A mad man paints Christ on the unpaved roads,  
on a high he overlooks  
the ogling disgusted eyes.  
Marijuana mixed in his pee –  
a high dose to forget.  
In his palms the world appears,  
one deep drag and the illusionist disappears.

He forced his insanity on me,  
to take it and throw away.

Sufia entwines the body with the fear of death, and the desire to live with a sensuality that is reminiscent of Kamala Das, while her sensuousness is as potent as Sudeep Sen and Imtiaz Dharker. Especially striking is the poem "Diseases Unknown" which becomes reminiscent of Menka Shivdasani's use of vivid body images:

My body is an abode of diseases unknown –  
a mouse tail runs in my breasts,  
a nerve swells up my brain,  
a ligament thickens the spine  
and my legs freeze in wild dreams.

In poems like "The Neighbour's Burnt House", even the commonplace is made simultaneously poignant and realistic, a commendable artistic feat:  
*Fazar azaan* bellowed – *Allah O' Akbar*...

Brought the flavoured sounds of the fire wagon  
wooooouuun, woooouuun  
cutting through the smog.

The neighbour's house was burning  
while time engulfed its fragments – of dolls  
play dates and war machines.

Sufia's poems therefore, record the most important judgements that can be possessed as to the values of experience. While they form a body of experience, they show how the mind can transcend those experience not through rejection but by acknowledging human limitations. The experiences as by themselves simple, yet complicated as they stem from constricting social conventions or terror of the loneliness of the human situation. As I.A. Richards says: 'The separation of poetic experience from its place in life and its ulterior worths, involves a definite lop-sidedness, narrowness and incompleteness...' Indeed, while being reflective of our traumatic times, Sufia's poems refute the complacent statement that "Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds." (*The Defence of Poetry*) However, impulses

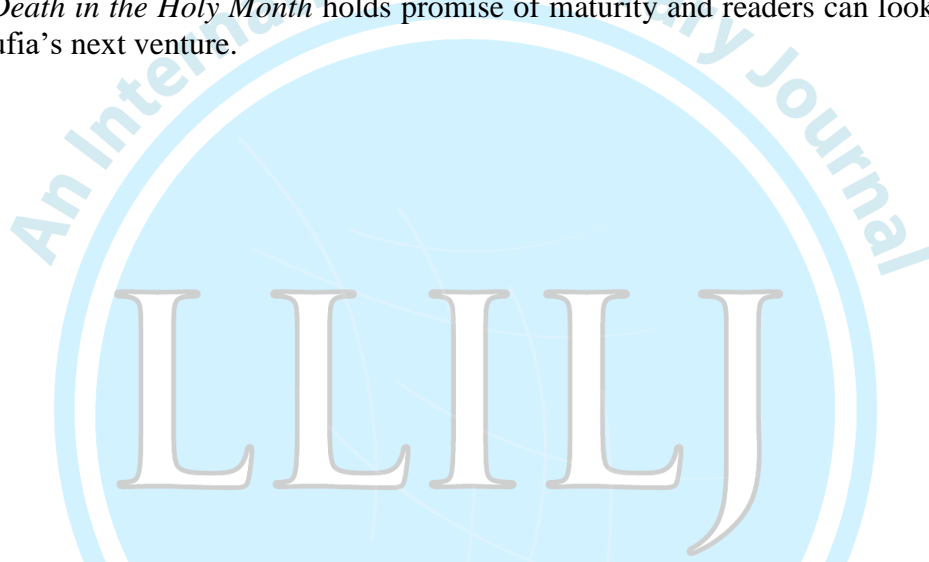
which commonly interfere with one another and are conflicting, independent, and mutually distractive, combine into a stable poise. The following is a case in point:

Red earth-dusted hands opening the rusty lock  
of *Qamrunkhala*'s door,  
the checkered evening brought  
the blue flower dressed girl  
in the front seat of my table.

The table of a diagonal *Mandala*.

("Diagonal")

Those who will attempt a critical analysis of Sufia's work, will not have to look far for she sums it up herself as – 'A sombre soliloquy of sentiments' ("So What is A Poem"). One among the new breed of upcoming young poets, Sufia's openness of style and frank confessions may offer a fresh outlook towards modern Indian poetry. All in all the *Death in the Holy Month* holds promise of maturity and readers can look forward to Sufia's next venture.



#### BIO-NOTE

Dr. Naina Dey is Associate Professor at Maharaja Manindra Chandra College (University of Calcutta) and guest lecturer in the P.G. Dept. of English, University of Calcutta. She is a critic, translator and creative writer. Her books include *Macbeth: Critical Essays*, *Edward the Second: Critical Studies*, *Real and Imagined Women: The Feminist Fiction of Virginia Woolf and Fay Weldon*, *Representations of Women in George Eliot's Fiction*, *Macbeth: Exploring Genealogies* and a book of poems *Snapshots from Space and Other Poems*. She was awarded the "Excellence in World Poetry Award, 2009" by the International Poets Academy, Chennai and twice won the Heart Bytes poetry contest organised by Sacred Hearts College, Kochi. Her recent publication is a translation of Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury's "Gupi Gain O Bagha Bain".

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