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BOOK REVIEW

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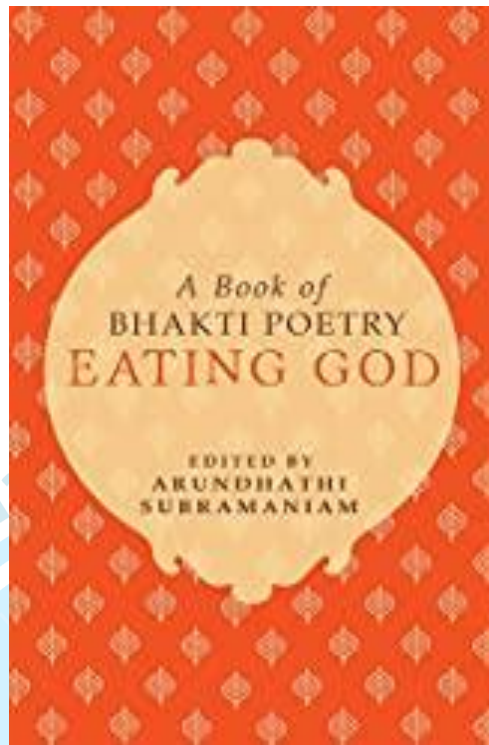
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Eating God: A Book of Bhakti Poetry Ed. by Arundhathi Subramaniam

Reviewed by Pulkita Anand



Title: *Eating God: A Book of Bhakti Poetry*
Edited by Arundhathi Subramaniam
ISBN: 978-0-670-08759-4
Edition: 2014
Publisher: Penguin Random House India

Key words: Bhakti, divinity, joy, love, celebration, mysticism

Like sun and rain, poems of Bhakti poets are enjoyed by all and sundry. The book opens with the introduction by Arundhathi Subramaniam. Arundhathi is a poet and seeker-though not always in that order. She has worked over the years as critic, poetry editor and curator. She is the author of four books of poetry. Her prose works include biography of contemporary mystic and yogi. She elucidates, the poems as having an effect from hypotonic to resonating. However, she refrains from delineating the origin of Bhakti movement, its shaping, various cults and sects. She wished that readers should not be fettered by anything. Readers indulge in savouring and relishing the flavour of each poem offers. Various poets and translators, like A. K. Ramanujan, A.K. Mehrotra, Dilip Chitre, Gieve Patel, Rahul Soni, Ranjit Hoskote, Arundhathi Subramaniam, Priya Sarukkai and others have enriched, flourished and nourished the rich soil of this book. These translators and poets are acknowledged and described, after the section of poems. The title of the anthology is intriguing, conveying God, to be eaten, savoured and relished. It is difficult to choose a few best poems as each is best in its own sense. The book accommodates poems spanning from the eighth to eighteenth century. The journey through poetry is of inner self, soul, heart, gut. . .It throbs for everything. "Bhakti, as a series of popular cults, celebrating devotion as the supreme road to divine.." Poets in their songs praised, cursed,

lamented loudly, lustily, sometimes even embarrassingly. The book is a spiritual journey, like Glibert's *Eat, Pray and Love*. It creates a harmony of the body with the mind and soul. While reading it, I feel it helps me to scrub my thoughts. For Bhakta, God is everywhere, in pot, in speck of dust, in cloth and clay and where not. Bhakta, A.K. Ramanujan says, "is not content to worship...nor is he content to grasp...he needs to possess him, possessed by him...embody him in every possible way." The tone of the poems ranging from, rebuke, banter, humour, lust, entreaty to rage. "God was sublime, exalted, beautiful, but he was also family." Often abstruse concepts of Bhakti from scepticism of Kabir, Nanak, Lal Ded, Nammalvar, Tukaram, Andal, Tukaram to wild abandon of Mirabai, and the approach of poets are explained in a lucid manner in the introduction. Divine grace is seen as egalitarian, impartial and democratic. The anthology encompasses a vast array of poems across India, catering to the needs of every palate. The edition has poems from acclaimed poets as well as budding poets. Poetry is a mysterious terrain and we saunter with God in meandering elliptical language and get carried away with the cadence like *Pied Piper of Hamelin's* Pipe. Poems remain in the collective unconscious of Indians and poets are recorded in history.

The poems are not sequential, and arrangement is eclectic, with varied fabrics and textures in the mosaic, having "Voices in unison". The section of the anthology has a line of the poem as its title. The first in line, entitled, is 'Only someone struck by it knows the pain: That Strange Disease Called Bhakti. It begins with a poem of Basavanna: "bhakti/like a saw/it cuts when it goes/ and it cuts again/ when it comes". Likewise, "I Cannot Fathom Your Love of Form: Wonder", every title is annexed with a subtitle. The inclusion of the poets across time and space, reflects the editor's efforts to take into account various voices, not for cacophony but melody. It is a treat to read these poets in translation. The section, entitled, "God Is Visiting You: Derailment" has many poems, among them one is by Appar (translated by Indira Viswanathan Peterson):

When I board the boat of the mind
and strike out with the oars of my wit,
when I load the cargo of anger,
and row into the deep sea
when, dashing against the rocks of lust,
the boat capsizes,...

The poems have power to transfigure and transport readers. The image of the body recurs in many poems, as a locus of wisdom "If menstrual blood makes me impure/ Tell me who was not born of that blood". In contrast to this, other poems despise the body too as: "This body that you're fussing over, / this body that you're dolling up, / this body that you're wearing to the party, / this body will end as ash". They are our existential and psychological journey. The democratic and impartial spirit is imbued in the poem:

Death has them in its sights,
Both beggar and king.
Man's life is a dancing shadow,
Amounting to nothing,

But the body's a lake,
The soul a swan,
If the chemical on your tongue,
Says Kabir, is called Rama.

How lord controls the mind, is beautifully depicted in the lines by Annamacharya:

Lord, it's up to you
To discipline my mind.
You live in me

The poems enchanted me and compelled me to ponder over life. It is a commendable initiative on the part of the editor to bring together poems of different poets and seek their English translation to present a canvas of art which embodies multifarious shades of what we call India. They enlighten, solace, illumine and accompany us in our journey of life and remind us that we are not abandoned. This book quenches the thirst of all souls at one point or other. It provides an anchor to homeless, desolate, dislocated or despairing souls.



BIO-NOTE

Pulkita Anand is a student of literature. She often reads fiction as it helps her to understand human condition. She is interested in reading varied genres, from spiritual to scientific, to enrich her limited understanding of the things around her. Her work has been published in LangLit and Ashvamegha. Recently, her paper has been published in Rupkatha Journal. She likes to listen to music and play badminton. She loves to absorb life to the fullest. At times, she loves to write too.

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