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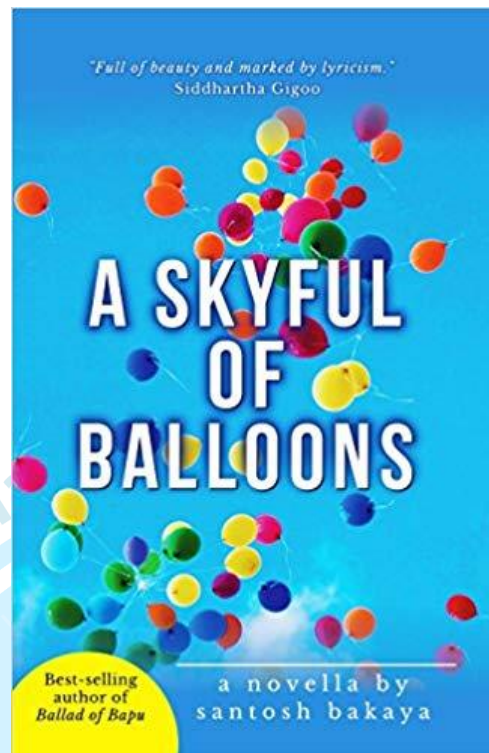
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A Skyful of Balloons By Santosh Bakaya

Reviewed by Sutanuka Ghosh Roy



A Skyful of Balloons

By Santosh Bakaya

ISBN: 978-93-87651-49-4 (Paperback)

Pages: 147

Edition: 2018

Published by Authors Press, New Delhi (India)

When I started reading Santosh Bakaya's *A Skyful of Balloons* (2018), I felt as if I had set out on a voyage which will change me irreversibly. The novella is outstanding and I can unarguably claim that I have not come across anything like it before. The title of Bakaya's poetic novella, *A Skyful of Balloons*, seems to embody an extended metaphor of life. The book is a pioneer venture by Authors Press, blending both prose and poetry. It is a refreshingly unique look at life through the lens of literature. The novella covers a variety of interesting topics in prose and captures their essence through interspersed poetry. *A Skyful of Balloons* is a profound exploration of life, its experiences, and the invaluable lessons learnt from those experiences. The novella is a volume of spiritual poetry infused with pure magic. Bakaya's novella is designed as a waltz and tango to every whim of life.

The book is divided into two parts. The first one, slightly bigger, tells us how love is enough to deal with everything in the world. The second part, a bit more eventful, introduces us to the new beginnings and shows us how life surprises us at every nook and corner. The story is that of a boy (Vivek) and a girl (Preeti), extremely close friends, whose daily conversations veer around poetry and literary allusions, painting and Russian writers. They banter in good humour as they spout lines from *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Ancient Mariner*, and Alfred Tennyson. Nursery rhymes run into fairy tales, and even the Cheshire cat makes an unusual appearance. It is these wonderful moments of camaraderie that hint at the deep enduring love and romance that they share. At one moment, Preeti is petulant, and at the next, she smiles with mischief as Vicky throws a Shakespearean repartee at her that she cannot resist.

Bakaya is a wizard of words. Gifted with resplendent vocabulary ('nimiety' was a revelation!) the author just glides along making her readers waltz to Frank Sinatra, listen star struck to John Lennon, muse at the all-time favorite scene of Dead Poet's Society, meet an inspiring Robin Williams standing on the classroom table. In the first chapter of the novella, she describes the incident where the young lovers had a narrow escape as their Shikara caught a storm in the Dal Lake:

"While the lovebirds in the shikara chirped on, the birds in the many trees fringing the lake also broke into chatter. The feel of love in the air always sends them into a frenzy of chirps. In the distance, the clouds played touch – and – run with the majestic mountains. The gray of the mountains, the white of the clouds and the blue of the sky merged to form new hues". (p. 35)

The author, thus, sets out on a never-ending journey. The chapter ends with a bewitching escape bringing back an extraordinary smile on the lips of the readers:

"They had just grappled with death, and were suffused with relief when they felt firm ground under their feet, at last. They hugged the boatman, thanking him profusely for having managed to bring them back to safety. He smiled loftily at them and began fixing the canopy on the shikara with the help of the other boatmen. They looked back, to find the boatman relating their brush with death the other boatmen with elaborate gestures, his pheran going up and down with his frantic gestures". (p 16)

Thus, Bakaya's exploration of life is always a journey from the personal to the universal. The Dhars and the Rainas come along as wonderful parents indulging their offsprings from the sidelines, providing all the support to their children's joyful celebration of life, two young souls so much in love with shikara ride, with theatrics, with Literature, with painting, with people, with blue eyes, with birds and geese, with idyllic nature of Kashmir in abundance around, with Pahalgam, with Lake Nageen, with river Lidder and with dimples and above all, infused in mutual love!

"They had been next door neighbours ever since they could remember, and Preeti and Vivek had grown up, taking their first steps together, lispng their first words together, using each other's pencils, erasers and sharpeners, slithering up and down trees, bursting balloons on each

other's birthday parties, gobbling up the remains of each other's birthday cakes and getting in and out of scrapes, mutually admonished by each other's parents". (p 23)

Love in the midst of idyllic Kashmir is depicted with a strong cinematic effect. The author's skill in using limericks in dialogues in the right proportion to bring out the different moods in the characters makes the novella a unique one. The intricately etched characters come out refreshing, brushing us with their exuberance for life and the world around. Minute observations woven meticulously make the scenes flit in front of the eyes as one reads page after page, the emotions pulling one right into its vortex. Newer elements get introduced foiling the intrigue, thwarting any chance for ennui to creep in. The author pulls the chord strings of our heart and mesmerizes us with her writing. As someone who experiences 'love' often, Bakaya's exposition of the same is a wonderful reminder that one is indeed fortunate to experience it.

It is perhaps the most poignant tale, and the author reveals an uncommon human sympathy and kindness in her warm, completely non-judgmental depiction of life itself:

"Life itself is a charade, a pompous fantasy, a pretentious drama, we keep improvising, adding, subtracting, and multiplying, forgetting our cues, waiting to be prompted." (p 63)

Life then brings its own twist into the tale. The author keeps the reader engrossed with references to Preeti's hallucinations, a nightmare signalling turmoil in the future, and her new life without an iota of joy. "The sea growled, stretched two watery arms towards the bundle in her arms, and snatched it from her hands, roaring with triumphant glee. She ran towards the railing of the deck, screaming madly, trying to fling herself in the turbulent waters. The thunderous tumult of the gale seemed to be enjoying this orgy of destruction.

In a corner of the deck stood a rosy cheeked seven year old, who dashed towards her, flinging his tiny arms around her trying to restrain her.

"She looked down at him, her eyes meeting a pair of the bluest eyes she had ever seen in her life." (p 99).

In the second part of the novella we meet a different Preeti, Preeti is now metamorphosed.

"The cold winter desolation seemed to have settled permanently in her heart, the frost on the trees also seemed to have found a place in her heart. She smiled sadly, waving back, turning away from the window.

The windows of her mind and heart were clamped shut, not a whiff of fresh air was allowed to penetrate.

The door to her heart was rusted with disuse." (p. 110).

Bakaya dexterously sums up the essential teachings from Life, which provides its readers with the ultimate philosophy behind life and living. Preeti overcomes her grief by her inherent love for Vivek. The cathartic climax brings about a smooth shift from despair and depression to hope and faith in love. The spark rekindles and she finds joy in the blue eyed child, coincidentally named Vicky, the son of her next-door neighbor.

“A mellow sunlight was peeping through the window of her room, falling on her writing table, and on Vicky’s photograph on the mantel piece.

She smiled at her Vicky, and he seemed to be smiling too”. (p. 147)

As I reached the end of the novella, I seemed to have woken up from a beautiful dream-like trance. Yet, the memory of the dream clung to me like the fragrance of a rose. The words of Caliban in *The Tempest* whispered in my ears,

“...and then in dreaming
The clouds methought would open and show riches
Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked
I cried to dream again.”

We live in a world where language is ever-changing, and, to use it effectively, it has to be viewed as a code and its metalanguage uncovered. Bakaya is a leprechaun who uncovers it and takes us beyond the mundane terra-firma.



BIO-NOTE

Sutanuka Ghosh Roy is Assistant Professor in Tarakeswar Degree College, University of Burdwan, West Bengal. She is currently engaged in active research and her areas of interest include Eighteenth Century literature, Indian English literature, Canadian Studies, Post-colonial Literature, Australian Studies, Dalit Literature, Gender Studies etc. She has published widely and presented papers at National and International Seminars. She is a regular contributor of research articles and papers to anthologies, national and international journals of repute. She is also the editor of the journal, IJLL (ISSN 2278-9170).

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